CONSTABLE GUARD THYSELF!

by

HENRY WADE

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CONSTABLE GUARD THYSELF!

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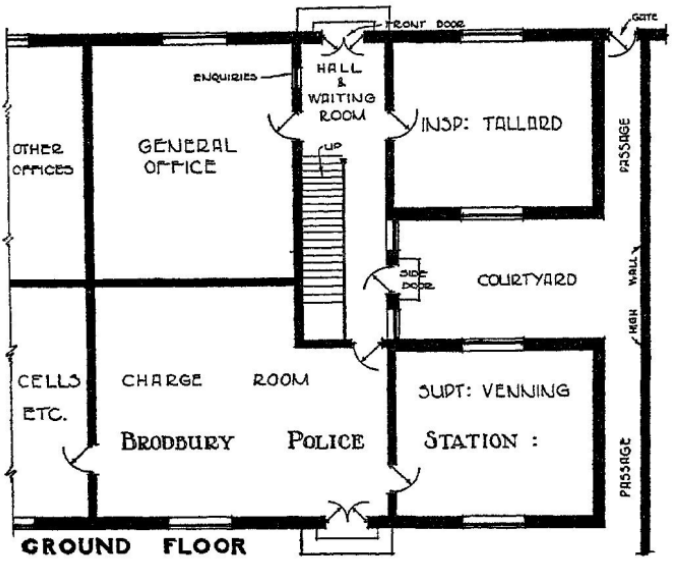
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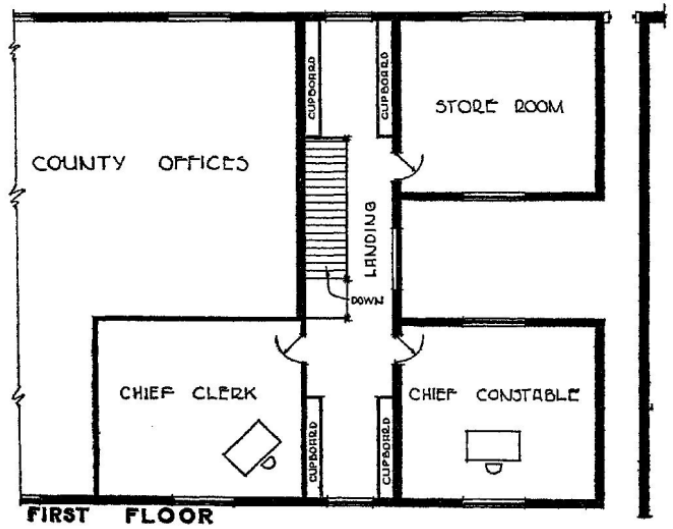
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CHIEF CLERK
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FIRST FLOOR

CONSTABLE GUARD THYSELF!

A Detective Story

by

HENRY WADE

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The circumstances and characters in
this book are entirely fictitious.

H. W.

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Chapter

CONSTABLE GUARD THYSELF!

CHAPTER I

AN OLD STORY

"THIS is my Chief Clerk's office, General."

Captain Scole, Chief Constable of Brodshire, threw open the door of a small ill-lit room, lined with shelves and filing cabinets. A uniformed police-officer, who was sitting at the big roll-top desk, rose quickly to his feet and stood to attention.

"Ah, it's you, Inspector; I'd forgotten Mr. Jason was going off this afternoon."

Captain Scole turned to his companion, a rather short, military-looking man with brushed-up moustache too large for his body, and bright blue eyes.

"This is Inspector Tallard, who acts as deputy to the Chief Clerk. Superintendent Jason is away for two or three days for his sister's wedding. I'll introduce him to you some other time. Wretched room this; I'm hoping to persuade your Committee to build us some new headquarters when things get better."

The General, however, was taking less interest in the room than in its occupant.

"Have we met before, Inspector?" he asked. "Were you in the Brodshires? I'm General Cawdon; I commanded the 7th Battalion in '18."

As General Cawdon spoke, a quick flash of recognition had passed over the Inspector's face. He was a well-built man of medium height, with a firm mouth and close-clipped moustache. After that one flash his face settled again into the rather wooden expression that was evidently habitual to it.

"Not in the Brodshires, sir," he replied, "but I did serve under you for a few days in '18—on the Somme."

Captain Scole pricked up his ears.

"That's interesting," he said. "You never told me that, Tallard. I was in the County Regiment myself, before I became a policeman, as I expect you

know. General Cawdon and I were in the same battalion in . . . what was it, General . . . '05, '06?"

"1906; I joined you in India, you remember, from the 1st Battalion. That was just after poor Jack Smiley and little Patterson were killed on the frontier."

"That's right, of course; I remember. General Cawdon has just joined the Standing Joint Committee, Inspector, so we must pull ourselves together or we'll be in the book."

General Cawdon gave a short, hearty laugh.

"It would be a change for me, Scole," he said. "I was your junior by four or five years. But look here, Inspector, I want to hear more about this. How did you come to serve under me if you weren't in the Regiment?"

"It was after the German offensive had started, sir—the March show. I'd joined the London Fusiliers at the end of '17 and I was sent out with a big draft the moment it began. The base camp was packed with reinforcements, all in an awful muddle, and we were pushed off anywhere we were wanted, regardless of regiment—at least, that's what it looked like to us. Anyway, I and about a dozen other Fusiliers found ourselves with a draft going up to the 7th Brodshires, and we landed in the middle of it and nearly all got scuppered before we were straightened out."

General Cawdon's face had for the moment lost some of its bird-like exuberance.

"Yes, yes, I remember now," he muttered. "Poor devils, we hardly got their names on the books. Where was it? Beauchamps?"

"That's right, sir. Beauchamps-sur-Somme."

"My God, Scole; it was an awful time, that," said the General. "We'd been cut to pieces behind St. Quentin and were pushed back—what was left of us—day after day for what seemed like weeks. They sent us up a big draft that joined us on the Somme, a bit east of Villers-Bretonneux—men from several different units as well as Brodshires—I'd forgotten for the moment. We had no time even to sort them out into companies; the Huns attacked us again that very night and we had to put them straight in. These fellows fought like veterans for three days and then the line broke on our left and the Germans got behind us. Damned few of us got back. You, I take it, were one, Tallard?"

Inspector Tallard shook his head.

"No, sir; I was taken prisoner."

"You were? Then how the devil do I remember your face, if you were only with me those two or three days?"

Again Tallard shook his head.

"Don't see how you could, sir; not possibly."

"Extraordinary . . . must have . . . by Jove, I remember. I put you in for an M.M.! I remember you well now. You're the fellow that bombed a German machine-gun that had got behind us . . . knocked 'em out. I put you in . . . Good God, did I? . . . or did I only mean to? I remember meaning to, but we were so much disorganized . . . I got a bit knocked out myself . . . that I can't remember whether it ever went through."

Inspector Tallard had stiffened.

"No, sir; you're mistaken. I never bombed any German machine-gun. I fired a good many rounds at a lot of them, like we all did. Then when they got behind us nearly all our platoon were killed and I was taken prisoner."

General Cawdon shook his head.

"Well, you ought to know", he said. "I seem to remember. May have been some other fellow. Anyway, I'm glad to have met you. You must tell me all about yourself another time. I must be getting back, Scole. Very good of you to have shown me round."

He turned on his heel and walked out of the room. Captain Scole saw that his face was rather grey, his carriage less erect, as if the memory of that nightmare on the Somme had sapped his vitality. The Chief Constable followed him out.

"Very good of you to come, General. You'll be a great help. . . ."

His voice died away down the stairs. Inspector Tallard stood for a time staring at the closed door. Even his expressionless face seemed to reflect some memory of the hideous past. With a stiffening of the shoulders he sat down and pressed a bell. A young constable appeared.

"Take these notes about Albert Hinde. Got your book?"

"Yes, sir."

The constable pulled forward a chair and sat down, an open note-book on his knee.

"Released from Fieldhurst 14th October '33 on expiration of sentence, three months remission only. Gave his address as 13 Park Road, Woolham, Chassex. Chassex Police report he arrived there on 15th but left again on 5th inst, reporting no change of address. As he was convicted in Brodshire it is thought . . ."

The young constable looked up.

"Hinde? Isn't that the chap that killed a keeper, sir?"

"You attend to your shorthand, young fellow, and leave me to do the talking", said the Inspector, shortly. "It is thought that he may . . ."

A bell buzzed gently.

"That's the Chief. Hold on", said Inspector Tallard, rising to his feet. "No, you better get down; I may be some time."

He collected some papers and crossed the passage to the Chief Constable's room. Captain Scole was standing with his back to the fireplace, looking at a telegram he held in his hand. He was a big man with crisp, grizzled hair and a stubble moustache. His jaw was square and his tight-shut mouth gave an impression of stubborn determination which was in no way lessened by cold, very light grey eyes. He was fifty-nine years old but showed no signs of losing grip.

"There's a telegram from Mr. Jason. His sister's ill and the wedding postponed. I've wired him to stay till Sunday night in any case; glad to be with her, I expect."

"Yes, sir. Will you sign now, sir?"

Captain Scole moved to his desk.

"Interesting your having been attached to the Regiment. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I did, sir, when I joined the Force. This is the car mileage return; South-Eastern Division are up a good bit this month, but they've had all that Foot and Mouth."

Inspector Tallard's voice maintained an expressionless level, whether he was talking about himself, or a murder, or a clothing indent. The Chief Constable thought him a dull fellow, though quietly efficient.

"Your father was a Brodshire man. Why didn't you join his regiment?"

"I was working in London as a lad, sir, and had been at school there. Everyone was joining The Londons; it seemed the natural thing to do."

The Chief Constable grunted but made no comment. There were a good many papers to be signed and for ten minutes he was busy. But the subject seemed to be rankling, because presently he put down his pen and, leaning back in his chair, looked at his subordinate.

"Your father was the smartest Company-Sergeant-Major in the battalion; he taught me most of what I knew. That was why I was glad to take you on

in the Constabulary. You never thought of following in his footsteps?—long service, I mean, and promotion?"

"I always wanted to be a policeman, sir. Seemed to me more useful than soldiering—peace-time soldiering. I'm grateful to you for taking me on, sir. I know there can't have been many vacancies then, with your own men coming back from the war."

"There weren't. I don't think we took anyone else—no recruits, I mean —till well on in '20."

"I was lucky, sir. There's that question of young Wastable . . . cattle-maiming, you remember, sir. He was up before the Looseley Bench this morning. They wanted to send him to a reformatory, but under the new Children and Young Persons Act they can only send him to an approved school. They want to know if we can tell them of one that'll do him good."

The Chief Constable grunted.

"Not our job; the Magistrate's Clerk must see about that. Perfect nonsense, of course, about the police keeping out of it; we're the only people these young scoundrels are afraid of. The cat's what they want."

"Yes, sir. That's all to-night, sir."

Inspector Tallard gathered up his papers and made for the door. The Chief Constable fidgeted with his pen, then looked up quickly, as if he had come to a decision.

"Half a minute, Tallard", he said. "Mr. Jason was saying something to me this morning about a man called Hinde who's just been released from Fieldhurst. There was some question of the Chassex police having lost touch with him. I take it he's on licence. Do you know anything about it?"

"Only what we got from the Chassex police, sir. The man reported to them on release and said he was going to stay in Woolham for a bit. Now they say he's left home without notifying his change of address in accordance with regulations. They think that as he was convicted here he may have come this way. I understand he had a bad record at Fieldhurst, sir, and only earned three months' remission. Violent, I believe he was."

The Chief Constable frowned.

"Yes, a dangerous fellow, I should think. Can't think why the Home Secretary wanted to interfere with the sentence. The Governor told me some time ago that he seemed to be deliberately making trouble so as not to get remission. Didn't want to have to report, I suppose. No doubt that was why they did give him the three months, in spite of his behaviour."

"Looks like it, sir", said Inspector Tallard, his hand on the door.

But Captain Scole appeared disinclined to let him go.

"Case was before your time, of course", he said, leaning back and filling a pipe. "Murdered a keeper and was sentenced to death, but the Home Secretary advised His Majesty to commute—God knows why—something about possible grounds for doubting premeditation. Hinde's brother, a youngster, and another man got five years as accessories. They were both killed in the war, I believe. Funny sort of justice that this fellow, the real murderer, should be the one to survive and now be able to go about making more trouble."

"I expect he's had his lesson, sir", said the Inspector, patiently. He had more work to do before he could get off duty.

"I doubt it, but we'll hope so. You're sending out an information? Better keep tabs on him if he comes this way. Well, I'll be off now. I shall be going straight home in case you want me again. Good-night."

"Good-night, sir."

After the door had closed, Captain Scole sat for some time, staring at the blotting paper in front of him. Presently he pulled open the drawer on the right of his desk and took out an automatic pistol. After examining the charger he half slipped the weapon into his pocket, hesitated, pulled it out again and, with a muttered 'Pah!', threw it back into the drawer, which he shut. Probably he felt the half-shamefaced dislike of the melodramatic which is common to the normal Englishman, but he was conscious of doubting his own wisdom as he walked downstairs and out into the November night.

There are still left in England some men and women who prefer driving a horse to a motor-car. Captain Anthony Scole was one of these. For duty, of course—for the huge mileage that he had to cover in the course of his work—a car was essential, but for pleasure—and in this he included the five miles to and from office and home, and for which he charged the County nothing—he kept a smart bay mare and a low rubber-tyred dog-cart, which for years had been a well-known feature of the Brodbury neighbourhood. The mare, of course, changed from time to time, but her name remained; the present occupant of the shafts was Bessie III, as like as a pin to the two Bessies that had in the past twenty years preceded her, so that many people believed that the Chief Constable's stables possessed the secret of perpetual youth.

It did not take George, the ostler at the ‘Bampton Arms’, many minutes to ‘put in’, and while he bustled about he talked and ‘the Captain’ listened. Ostlers are still a feature of the bigger inns in market towns and the Chief Constable was not above picking up stray bits of gossip that always found their way into the stable yard; more than one useful hint had filtered through to Police Headquarters by this channel.

With a cheery good-night to George and a ‘Come up, lass’ to Bessie, Captain Scole turned out into the square and, answering the salute of the constable on traffic control duty, drove quietly through the crowded streets till he was clear of the town. Out in the open country only a touch of whip on shoulder was needed to put the mare into her top speed and the hedges soon began to fly past in the deepening twilight. Soon there appeared ahead the dark masses of the Brodley Woods, and the sight of them brought back to Captain Scole the details of the twenty-year-old story he had just been discussing with Inspector Tallard.

When he was appointed in 1912 Brodshire was suffering from a severe epidemic of poaching. Gangs of men from the big neighbouring port of Greymouth were in the habit of ‘working’ the well-stocked coverts for which Brodshire was famous, becoming each season more daring and even violent. It was largely to fight this growing menace that the Standing Joint Committee of Brodshire—landowners almost to a man—had decided that the time had come to appoint a younger and more vigorous man to the Chief Constableship, in place of dear old Colonel Breddington, who had served the County so well and so tactfully in the more tranquil days of Victoria and Edward.

Captain Anthony Scole had owed his selection in no small degree to the reputation for fearlessness and determination which he had built up for himself during his five years’ police service in a by no means tranquil corner of India. His stubborn jaw and hard mouth were in themselves guarantee that he would deal faithfully with disturbers of the peace of Brodshire. On taking up his duties he had soon realised that the poaching problem needed not only firmer handling but better organisation. It did not take him long to get to know the various keepers who were suffering from overwhelming odds and inadequate support; these gallant men quickly responded to encouragement and were only too willing to co-operate with the police in an organised campaign, and before long this was working smoothly and poaching became a much less easy and profitable business. But it did not stop, and Scole soon realised that a fine or a few days’ or weeks’ imprisonment was not enough to deter men from a pursuit that combined

profit, sport, and the exhilaration of risk. What was needed was an example, and the Chief Constable was determined to get it.

Twenty years later, with years of experience and mellowing age behind him, Anthony Scole did not feel quite so happy as he had at the time about the circumstances which led up to the death of Keeper Love and the passing of a death sentence upon his slayer. Then he had been overwhelmed with delight at his own cleverness and at the luck which made such a sentence possible. Love had been a pawn in the game; his death meant little to a man like Scole. The death—the execution—of the poacher Hinde would have meant much; even the life-long imprisonment to which the sentence had been commuted was enough to bring the poaching epidemic to an abrupt end, though Scole, for reasons of his own, would have preferred the man out of his way altogether.

Now the whole thing, so long almost forgotten, had been brought back to the forefront of his mind by the release, after nearly twenty years, of Albert Hinde, and the suggestion that he might be making his way back to the neighbourhood in which his tragedy had happened. Here, in these very woods whose trees now formed a tunnel over his head, Hinde's gun had blown Keeper Love's head into a bloody pulp and the Brodshire police, rushing out from their ambush, had had easy work in overpowering the three horrified and bewildered men who stood looking down upon the still quivering body. Luck for the police that had been, luck that he himself had been present and able to give the damning evidence that had defeated the attempt of the defence to whittle murder down to manslaughter. That evidence. It had needed courage—moral courage. He was risking his whole career . . .

With a sudden swerve, Bessie flung herself to one side of the road as a figure jumped out from the other with uplifted arms. Instinctively Scole reined back, pulling the mare almost on to her haunches. As he did so, the man in the road seized the bridle.

"Let go that rein!" exclaimed Scole sharply.

The man peered up at him, shading his eyes with his free hand against the glare of the candle-lamps, bright in the deep blackness of the woods.

"Just a minute, Captain. I see it's you all right."

"Who are you? What the devil d'you want?"

The man removed his hand from his eyes.

"Have a look at me, Captain. P'raps you'll know me again."

The lamplight fell upon a coarse, brutal face, with thickened nose and broken teeth. A week-old stubble on cheeks and jaw blurred the outline, but Scole realised that this must be the man of whom he had just been thinking. With a beating heart, he cursed his folly in not bringing his pistol.

"I've no idea who you are. Let go of that rein at once."

"Twenty years inside may have spoilt my beauty a bit, but I reckon you know me, Captain. I've not forgotten you, anyway; you can bet your life on that . . . if you think it's worth a bet!"

The man's tone left no doubt as to the meaning of the last words. Captain Scole felt the tightening at the throat which had always come to him before when he was in an awkward corner. This might be just talk, but it might well be more—and he was defenceless. With a quick movement he transferred his whip to his left hand and thrust the right into the pocket of his driving coat.

"Put your hands up!" he snapped, tugging at an imaginary weapon in his pocket.

For a second the man hesitated, then jumped back off the road and disappeared into the gloom of the wood.

Captain Scole gave a short laugh.

"Damn' funk", he exclaimed aloud, then whipped up Bessie and drove on without a glance behind him.

CHAPTER II

GONE AWAY

A LITTLE before nine on the following morning,[1] a boy wearing the red and yellow cap of Brodbury Grammar School, leant his bicycle against the outer wall of Police Headquarters and looked doubtfully at the closed door. His heart was beating a shade faster than usual, but he concealed his nervousness even from himself and, seeing no bell, turned the handle and walked in. The waiting-room in which he found himself was empty, but there was a small window marked 'Enquiries', and on this he tapped. Through the glass he saw a constable rise from his desk, approach the window, and throw it open.

"What is your trouble, my lad?"

"No trouble. A man gave me this note to give to the Chief Constable."

The constable took the rather grubby envelope and turned it over with faint signs of disgust.

"What sort of a man? Does it want an answer?"

"I don't know. He just stopped me and asked if I was going into Brodbury. I come from Petsham. I'm going to the Grammar School. I ought to go on, please; it's nearly nine."

"Half a mo. You don't know who this chap was?"

"No."

"All right. You'll have to wait while I give it to the Inspector."

The boy began to look anxious.

"But I shall get into trouble if I'm late."

"I shan't be a minute. Sit down in there."

The constable shut the window and presently re-appeared in the waiting-room on his way upstairs. In a minute he was back.

"Inspector says you can go if you leave your name and address."

The boy sprang to his feet.

"Jack Wissel, Grammar School, and Ivy Cottage, Petsham."

"Right; hop it."

The red and yellow cap whisked out of the door and was presently flying through the streets at a pace worthy of a police tender in pursuit.

Upstairs in the Chief Clerk's office, Inspector Tallard was inspecting the grubby note. It was the duty of the Chief Clerk to open all letters addressed to the Chief Constable, unless they were marked 'Confidential' or addressed to him personally. This note showed no outward sign of being either confidential or personal, but the first glance at its contents caused Inspector Tallard to press his thumb firmly on the electric bell.

"Where's the boy who brought this?" he asked sharply when P.C. Leith re-appeared.

"Gone, sir."

"Fetch him back, sharp. Wait a minute, I'll telephone."

He picked up the receiver and put a call through to the Grammar School. In a minute he was speaking to the headmaster.

"You've got a boy called Wissel, haven't you, Mr. Boulding? Yes, that's the lad; Jack Wissel. He brought a note in here just now and the Chief Constable will want to see him about it. He'll be in any time now; could the boy come back and report? We shan't keep him long, I don't suppose. Thank you, Mr. Boulding."

Replacing the receiver, Inspector Tallard picked up the note and read it through again. Then he remembered that Leith was waiting.

"You said the boy came from Petsham, didn't you? Go down to Superintendent Venning and ask him if he can send his patrol car up the Petsham road to try and pick up that man Hinde we had an information about last night. He's got the description. Look sharp, and send Sergeant Pitt up to me."

A few seconds later the sergeant in charge of the general office appeared.

"Pitt, that fellow Hinde has sent a threatening letter to the Chief. Gave it to a boy on a bicycle somewhere this side of Petsham. Get on to all stations and let them know the man's about. Get . . . no, I'd better do him. Look sharp with it."

While Sergeant Pitt clattered downstairs, Inspector Tallard put a call through to Looseley and was soon speaking to Superintendent Ladger of the South-Eastern Division, in which Petsham lay.

"Inspector Tallard speaking, sir. Mr. Jason's away. That man Hinde we sent you an information about last night has been seen near Petsham. We

want him rather badly. Could you send someone to Petsham? Ought to try the railway station there, I think, sir. Thank you, sir; if you will."

Again he hung up the receiver and was on the point of taking it off again when he heard heavy steps coming up the stairs. The Chief Constable had arrived.

"This note's just come, sir. I thought you ought to see it at once."

Inspector Tallard stood beside his chief's chair and laid the grubby missive, in its envelope, on the blotting-pad. Captain Scole picked it up, opened it, and sat up in his chair.

"Howd' you get hold of this?" he asked sharply.

"A boy brought it, sir. Said it had been given him by a man on the Petsham road. The boy was in a hurry to get to school, so I let him go, unfortunately, but he's on his way back now."

"You've read it, of course?"

"Yes, sir."

Again the Chief Constable ran his eye over the sheet of common paper. The words on it were by no means common:—

> *Sir, twenty years ago you got me a life sentence, it wasnt your forlt it wasnt the drop. You new the keeper was shot accidental but you swore it was deliberate. I done twenty years and I havnt forgot you for five minits in all those years. Next time the judge puts on the black cap for me it'll be for something I have done.*
>
> *ALBERT HINDE.*
>
> *P.S. I thort you might think this letter a kid so I let you have a look at me last night but not your cops.*

The handwriting was shaky and sprawling but the letters were not ill-formed. It was much what might be expected from a man of elementary education who had done little or no writing for twenty years.

"What does he mean by that last bit, sir?" enquired Inspector Tallard. "You didn't see him last night, did you?"

For a fraction of a second the Chief Constable hesitated, then:

"Yes, I did", he said, with a gruffness which suggested that he was rather ashamed of himself. "At least, it looks as if it must have been him. I ought to have rung you up, but the whole thing seemed so ridiculous—a lot of fuss about nothing. Anyway, I suppose we must do something about it now. This letter is a definite threat. We can charge him on that."

The Inspector opened his mouth as if to speak, but apparently thought better of it. The Chief Constable's assertion was arguable, but the occasion was not one for argument.

"What have you done? Warned the stations?"

"Yes, sir, and Superintendent Venning has sent a patrol car out to look for him. I was just going to ring up Greymouth when you came in. He was a Greymouth man originally and it seems a likely place for him to make for."

"Yes. Let the neighbouring counties know too. You needn't say anything about this letter; just say he's wanted for not reporting change of address. They'll guess there's something behind it."

Inspector Tallard smiled. The Chief didn't want his neighbours to think he'd got the wind up.

There was a knock at the door and P.C. Leith appeared, to report that the boy Wissel had returned.

"Send him up", said Captain Scole curtly.

Desperately assuring himself that he had done nothing wrong, Jack Wissel followed the policeman upstairs and advanced a few feet into the lion's den. The sight of Inspector Tallard, whom he had seen playing cricket on a village green, slightly reassured him, but the harsh voice of the big man in the chair soon dispersed such reserves of courage as he had collected.

"Where did you meet this man?"

"I . . . he was . . . it was on the road, sir."

"I know that. Where? Stop twiddling your cap, boy; put it down."

The red and yellow head-gear, pride of Jack's heart, flopped down on to the floor.

"It was on the road here, sir, from Petsham, about a mile out, I should say. A mile from Petsham, I mean."

"That's better. Now, what was he like?"

"He was a Tough Guy, sir." The word of approval had restored Jack's confidence. The description was one he had already used to his schoolfellows. "He had a broken nose and a stubbly chin and his eyes . . . well, they were kind of fierce, sir."

"How tall was he?"

The boy thought a minute.

"I couldn't really say, sir, but he had a stoop. Heavy shoulders, he had—looked mighty strong."

“That’s the fellow”, said Captain Scole quickly. “Now you mention it, I remember he had got a stoop. Does that fit the description we got from Chassex, Tallard?”

“It does mention his having heavy shoulders, sir.”

The Chief Constable thought for a minute.

“What was his voice like?” he asked, after a time.

“Hoarse, sir; as if he’d got a cold.”

Captain Scole nodded.

“Same chap, without a doubt”, he said. “Well, we needn’t keep you any longer, boy. Here, take this.” He pulled half-a-crown from his pocket and flipped it accurately across the room. “Buy yourself a . . . whatever boys do buy themselves in these days—toy pistol probably. And if you see this chap again, keep your eye on him till a policeman turns up.”

“I will, sir; thank you, sir.”

Recovering his cap and clutching the silver piece from which nothing would ever induce him to part, Jack Wissel walked proudly from the room, firmly determined to become a policeman as soon as ever the tiresome business of education was behind him.

Captain Scole sat for some time in silence, stabbing at the blotting-pad with his paper-knife. Inspector Tallard turned to go, but the Chief Constable checked him.

“I expect this fellow has made himself scarce now”, he said; “playing for effect, probably, but till he’s traced I think we’d better take it a bit seriously. You get on with the tracing part; notify neighbouring counties and Scotland Yard—just say we want to know where he is—and ask Superintendent Venning to come and see me.”

Superintendent Venning was the officer in charge of the Central Division, in which the County town of Brodbury was situated. He had recently been appointed Deputy Chief Constable, but that office involved no extra responsibility or enhanced status except in the absence from duty of the Chief Constable. He was a man of a little under fifty, with a thick, sturdy figure and a rugged face which was marred by eyes rather too close together. He was of the old-fashioned type of policeman, slow-thinking and stolid, but dogged and fearless to a degree—a bull-dog if ever there was one.

His office was in the same building as that of the Headquarter Staff, connected by a passage on the ground floor.[2] It was not long, therefore, before he was in possession of all the facts of the case. Evidently he

regarded it seriously. He had been closely connected with the Hinde case, and remembered the man's violent character and his fury at the trap which had been laid for him by the police. He remembered, too, the look which Hinde had cast at the Chief Constable as he turned to leave the dock after being sentenced to death; it was a look which, if it had been directed at himself, he felt he would never have forgotten. So now he urged the Chief Constable to allow him to provide a proper bodyguard until the man who had uttered these threats was under observation, even though they were too veiled to allow of his being re-committed to prison—the only fit place for him in both Captain Scole's and Superintendent Venning's opinion.

Finally, it was arranged that for the time being the Chief Constable should do all his travelling in a police car, with a constable in addition to the driver, that two constables should be constantly on guard at Horstings, Captain Scole's house, and that another should always be on duty either in the waiting-room at Headquarters or outside the front door. Except for a side door which was always locked, the only other entrance was through the charge room of the Brodbury Police Station at the back of the Headquarter building, and that would in any case always be occupied by a policeman. More than this the Chief Constable would not agree to, though he consented to carry an automatic pistol himself. Although outwardly unmoved, Superintendent Venning thought that his chief was slightly uneasy—and for that he did not blame him.

In the meantime, Inspector Tallard had returned to the Chief Clerk's room and put a call through to the Greymouth Police. The big port of Greymouth, being a Borough of over 20,000 souls, had a Police Force of its own, much to the annoyance and inconvenience of the County Constabulary of Greyshire in which it was situated. Greymouth was a very likely objective for anyone who wanted to conceal himself, or even get out of the country, and Inspector Tallard was probably right in ringing up the Borough Police before getting on to the Greyshire County Constabulary. But his interview with the Chief Constable had taken an appreciable amount of time and it was 10.15 a.m. before the Greymouth police were in possession of the facts. As the port was only forty miles from Brodbury and less than that from the spot at which Hinde had been seen by the boy Wissel at 8.30 a.m., there was plenty of time for him to have got into the town and tucked himself away before the police started to look for him, provided that he had been lucky enough to get a lift in a car or lorry. On the other hand, if he had had to rely on a bicycle or his feet, he would now have some difficulty in getting into Greymouth unnoticed.

There remained the railway. Tallard reached for his time-table, flicked over the pages, and discovered that a train had left Petsham for Greymouth at 9.27 a.m. If Superintendent Ladger had acted promptly on Tallard's call there would have been plenty of time for him to get a man to the station before that train went. If he had caught Hinde there he would have rung up long ago to report the fact, but it would be worth finding out whether that train had been watched. Again Tallard put a call through to Looseley and soon heard from the South-Eastern Divisional Superintendent that both Petsham and Looseley stations were being watched and that on the 9.27 from Petsham (Looseley 9.41) no one answering the description of Albert Hinde had travelled.

Now it was the turn of the Greyshire Constabulary. Inspector Tallard put his call through and in a short time was speaking to the Chief Clerk of that force. The latter listened without much apparent interest. When Tallard had finished speaking there was an appreciable pause; then a bored voice said:

"Seen at 8.30 a.m., and it's now 10.45; you can't be in much of a hurry for him, Inspector?"

Superintendent Blett knew that he was talking to one who could not well answer back. Inspector Tallard flushed hotly.

"Report didn't reach us till 9 a.m., sir. I've had a great many other calls to put through and a long interview with the Chief Constable."

It was a weak answer, even though a perfectly true one. Captain Scole's instructions as to not mentioning the threats made it impossible for Tallard to explain the affair properly. Superintendent Blett's supercilious: "Really?" down the telephone left him speechless. He realised that the Greyshire Constabulary were unlikely to bestir themselves unduly to find Hinde.

Having notified the other neighbouring Constabularies and also Scotland Yard, Inspector Tallard returned to the Chief Constable's room and asked the latter to reconsider his decision about notifying the full reason for Brodshire's desire to mark down Mr. Albert Hinde. The lack of this, Tallard reported, was handicapping him in his attempt to trace the man; Tallard instanced his failure to impress the Greyshire Constabulary with the urgency of the case (he did not quote Superintendent Blett's remarks) and pointed out that no Constabulary would be likely to send out special patrols in search of a man who was merely wanted for 'failure to notify a change of address'. The Chief Constable saw the point and reluctantly consented, on the understanding that the information was sent under cover and not over the public telephone.

Inspector Tallard at once returned to his room, wrote out a full report, accompanied by a further and more urgent request for help, and despatched copies at once by a constable on a motor-bicycle to the Greymouth Borough Police and the Greyshire County Constabulary. The other neighbouring Constabularies and Scotland Yard could, he thought, have their copies in course of post.

It was by this time nearly mid-day and Tallard, feeling that he had done all that for the moment was possible, turned his attention to his other work. He had suggested re-calling Superintendent Jason off leave, but the Chief Constable refused to interfere with his Chief Clerk's brief but well-earned holiday.

At 1 p.m. the patrol car which the Divisional Superintendent had sent out returned; Sergeant Vale reported that after hunting all the Brodshire roads in the neighbourhood of Petsham, he had gone over the border into Greyshire and followed the road right through to Greymouth without seeing a sign of Hinde. Superintendent Venning sent his sergeant up to the Headquarter office to report his lack of success.

A little later, Greymouth rang up to say that nothing had yet been seen of the wanted man, but that on receipt of the special report they were re-doubling their efforts to find him.

No further news came in until, shortly after three, a call came through from the Greyshire Constabulary. Inspector Tallard, with some misgiving, picked up the receiver and heard the unpleasant voice of Superintendent Blett at the other end of the line.

"That you, Inspector Tallard?" it asked. "If you're not too busy, perhaps you'd like to hear my report on this man, Albert Hinde? You would? Right. A man answering to your description of Hinde left Corsington by the 10.35 a.m. for London this morning. That was ten minutes before you rang me up, you'll remember, and an hour and three-quarters after he was seen near Petsham. Corsington is seventeen miles from Petsham, and the road isn't much better than a cross-country lane. He'd just have time to do it on a bicycle. If you want to find Hinde it might be worth your while to ring the Yard—if you're not too busy."

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[1] Thursday, 9th November, 1933.

[2] See Frontispiece.

CHAPTER III

HEADQUARTERS

"WHAT'S that constable doing down in the waiting-room?" was the first question that Superintendent Jason asked on his return to duty on Monday.[3] Inspector Tallard was waiting in the Chief Clerk's room to hand over to his superior officer, and he now detailed the events connected with Albert Hinde's appearance and disappearance.

"It's quite clear that he left by that 10.35 to London", he concluded. "I went over to Corsington myself that afternoon and saw the stationmaster and the staff. Three of them had noticed him; he's a striking-looking fellow, apparently, and there's not much traffic from there in the middle of the day. The Yard haven't been able to trace him in London, but King's Cross is a different place to Corsington; it would be easy for him to slip through in the crowd."

Superintendent Jason had listened to the story in silence. He had even opened and glanced through some of his letters—a trick that had annoyed Tallard before now, when he was reporting to him. Now he remained silent for a minute, apparently engrossed in a report from the South-Eastern Division on Foot and Mouth Disease.

"You all appear to have got a bit rattled", he said presently, turning over a page.

Inspector Tallard flushed but made no answer. Superintendent Jason looked up.

"This Adelphi melodrama touch—sentries all over the place—was that your bright idea?"

"No, sir; Superintendent Venning's in charge of the case so far as protection's concerned. The Chief told me to see to the tracing of Hinde."

"And you've traced him to London, and London has lost him?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good job, too. What would you have done with him if you had caught him? Charged him with loitering?"

"No, sir; 'threatening to kill', I expect . . . at least, that's what I gathered the Chief Constable had in mind."

"I thought you said he didn't want people to know about these threats?"

"No, sir, he didn't seem to", replied Tallard, doggedly, "but when I showed him the letter he said: 'this is a threat; we can charge him on this'."

"Let's see it, then", said Superintendent Jason, curtly.

Inspector Tallard unlocked a drawer and, taking out the grubby note brought by Jack Wissel, handed it to the Chief Clerk. The latter read it carefully, then put it back in the drawer and slipped the bunch of keys into his own pocket.

"Nothing in that", he said shortly. "Better get on with your work now, Tallard."

With this curt dismissal, Inspector Tallard returned to his own room on the ground floor. His normal duties were of a rather dull, routine character, and it was only during the absence of Superintendent Jason that he got a chance of acting on his own initiative in matters of importance. It had been a surprise to his friends when, as a sergeant, he had been transferred to the Headquarter Staff, but he had laughingly told them that he had applied for the job, his experience in France having taught him that it was there that promotion would most rapidly and comfortably be achieved.

Superintendent Jason's chilling reception of his report did not altogether surprise Tallard. The Chief Clerk was a clever, capable officer, but he had a sarcastic manner and was too fond of snubbing his subordinates, and even his equals, to be much liked in the force. He was young for his appointment —barely forty-three. Dark-haired and clean-shaven, with quick, intelligent eyes, he was more slightly built than the average of the force, though he held himself well. Unlike many of his comrades, he had not been in the army; indeed he affected to look down upon the ex-Service men as being less quick-witted than their civilian fellows. This attitude, again, did not add to his popularity. He had a wife no less clever and ambitious than himself; Mrs. Jason was currently believed to cherish a hope of even higher promotion for her husband, though no Chief Constable of Brodshire had hitherto risen from the ranks.

His short holiday had caused a good deal of work to accumulate for the Chief Clerk, Inspector Tallard having left a good many matters of no urgency for his superior's decision. For four hours Superintendent Jason worked hard, only going to the Chief Constable's room to report his return, and thank his Chief for the leave. He made no reference to the Albert Hinde case and was amused to notice that the Chief Constable did not mention it either—probably rather ashamed at all the fuss that has been made about it, thought Jason.

At lunch-time he looked into Superintendent Venning's room at the back of the Headquarter office. The Deputy Chief Constable was one of the stolid ex-soldiers whom Jason liked to tease. Venning had indeed commanded a battalion during the last hectic months of the war, and was deeply admired and trusted by his Chief, a fact which probably did not add to Superintendent Jason's love of him.

"Good morning, Venning", said the Chief Clerk, sitting on a corner of the table and swinging a leg. "You seem to have been enjoying a bit of melodrama while I've been away."

Superintendent Venning looked slowly over his visitor, including the swinging leg.

"Good morning, Jason. I was very sorry to hear about your sister's illness."

The Chief Clerk had the grace to flush slightly, but he was not going to be put off his amusement.

"Thanks: she's better. How long are we going to be surrounded by your cordon?"

"Till you've found Albert Hinde and he's put away. I hope you won't be long about it; I've got plenty of work for my men without this."

So far, Jason felt that the *riposte* had been at least as effective as the attack.

"Surely you don't take this fellow Hinde seriously?" he asked. "These old lags never do anything to risk their skins. He's only behaving like a small boy—putting his tongue out and running away."

Superintendent Venning looked at his clock and pulled out a pipe.

"D'you think so?" he asked. "I remember Hinde pretty well. He didn't strike me that way. You don't remember the trial, of course—before your time."

Jason laughed.

"You've missed there, Venning", he said. "I've got twenty-five years' service, though my teeth aren't falling out. I didn't waste my time playing in a red coat before I started work."

Superintendent Venning grunted, and pushed back in his chair.

"Nor in a khaki one either, so far as I remember", he said heavily. "Lunch-time; see you later, perhaps."

He rose to his feet, and picking up his cap, strode through the charge room and out into the yard. He was angry. Jason's reference to his age had

pricked him. But his heavier weapon had been no less effective. The Chief Clerk sat on where Venning had left him, his leg motionless now, and his face white.

* * * * *

As soon as he had finished his mid-day meal, Superintendent Venning made his way to the Headquarter Office and asked if the Chief Constable would see him. He knew that Captain Scole was going to be out for a large part of the afternoon and he wanted to catch him before he went. He was not at all sure how the suggestion he was going to make would be received and it was with some nervousness that he entered the Chief Constable's room.

"Ah, it's you, Venning. Sit down. I've got a letter I must finish, if you don't mind. Got to be over at Blything at three, but I needn't start for another quarter of an hour."

The Chief Constable's fountain pen flashed quickly over the paper. Superintendent Venning watched it with fascinated interest. He himself was a slow writer and an inky one; this ink seemed to dry as it flowed from the pen. As if in confirmation of the phenomenon, Captain Scole folded his letter without blotting it, pushed it into an envelope, and fastened it up with a bang.

"That'll keep him quiet for a bit. Now, Venning; anything troubling you?"

"Yes, sir." Superintendent Venning never beat about the bush. "I want to ask you to take up your quarters here for a bit."

"Take up my . . . ?" Captain Scole stared. "Do you mean live here?"

"Yes, sir—till we've got our hands on this fellow Hinde. You know, sir, two men at Horstings aren't enough to protect you properly—not at night—and you won't let me send any more."

"Can't spare them," said Captain Scole grimly. "We want another twenty men as it is, to do our ordinary work properly, but these County Council members start a howl if I so much as ask for five. As for protecting their own Chief Constable . . . well, I don't know what some of them would say if they knew about your two men."

Captain Scole spoke bitterly. It was a long-standing grievance and one for which Superintendent Venning felt the utmost sympathy.

"All the more reason for doing as I ask, sir. Do away with the two men—one of them at any rate—if we had you here, and make sure at the same

time."

"What's your idea? That we should come and live in a hotel in the town?"

"No, sir. If you'll excuse me, sir; it's a liberty, I know, but I thought that perhaps if Mrs. Scole and Miss Scole could go and stay with friends, perhaps, or relations, for a while—it can't be for long—then you could come and live right in the quarters."

Superintendent Venning eyed his chief nervously.

"I wondered, sir . . . well, of course, we could make you up a bedroom in the store-room; it's a big room, not too full. But what I'd really like, sir, if you'll consider it, would be for you to have the spare-room in my quarters, sir. Mrs. Venning would be very proud to look after you, sir; she's a good cook and . . . well, I'd have you under my own eye then, sir, and I'd *know* you were all right."

Captain Scole's hard grey eyes softened. He leant forward and patted his companion on the arm.

"Thank you, Venning; I appreciate that," he said. "I'll talk it over with my wife. Now I must be going."

He rose to his feet.

"I gather you're taking this seriously," he said. "You think Hinde means business?"

"I don't know about that, sir; maybe he doesn't, but I'm taking no chances. Think what fools we should look if we had our own Chief done in under our eyes—and after we'd been warned, too!"

Captain Scole burst into a loud laugh.

"So that's what's worrying you," he exclaimed.

* * * * *

The Chief Constable returned at twenty minutes past four and, putting his head in at Superintendent Jason's door, told him to bring along the letters for the evening post. The task of signing them was partly automatic, the Chief Clerk keeping up a running commentary of explanation while he blotted the sheets as his Chief signed them. Some of the talk was not even about the papers before them, but about events of the afternoon.

"No more news in about this fellow Hinde?"

"Nothing, sir, except that Greymouth rang through to say they were pretty sure he wasn't there."

"You know of Superintendent Venning's suggestion?"

"Suggestion, sir?"

"That I should come and live at Headquarters till you've put your hands on him."

Superintendent Jason raised his eyebrows.

"Really, sir?"

The Chief Constable frowned, quick to suspect criticism.

"You think I'm making an unnecessary fuss about my own skin?"

"Oh, no, sir; I don't think that at all. I understood that it was Superintendent's suggestion."

"So it is. You don't think much of it?"

"I expect I should suggest just the same myself if the responsibility of protecting you was mine, sir," replied the Chief Clerk tactfully.

Captain Scole grunted.

"Anything more?"

"I understand that Inspector Tallard has the motor-patrol schedules ready for your inspection, sir."

"Right; tell him to bring them up. I shall leave as soon as I've done that; I want to get home early to-night."

One of Inspector Tallard's special duties was the preparation of schedules, routes, etc., for the motor-patrols, and reports on their work. On this subject he had direct access to the Chief Constable—a form of decentralisation strongly disliked by Superintendent Jason. This branch of police-work was of special interest to the Chief Constable, who found that he could get motor-cars out of the Standing Joint Committee more easily than he could get men, and who looked to mechanization to solve some of his man-power problems. He had allotted the staff-work of the business to Inspector Tallard, thinking that he would get more enthusiastic support from the subordinate than from the already over-burdened Chief Clerk. The idea was sound enough—but Superintendent Jason didn't like it.

Every Monday Inspector Tallard prepared schedules of the proposed work of each of the patrols during the week, varying the routes and times and arranging points of touch and call. By this means, while Headquarters knew exactly—or almost exactly—where every patrol car would be at any

fixed time, the public—the criminal public—were prevented from guessing, by observation of past patrol movements, where the danger from this source would come. Reports on the work of the past week were sent in to Headquarters on Monday mornings, and these were used in compiling the new week's schedule. For the purpose of this work, the week ran from Tuesday to Tuesday, so as to avoid having any sort of 'break' during the criminally-important week-end.

These reports and schedules always interested the Chief Constable. He had indicated to Superintendent Jason that he was in a hurry, but it was a good twenty minutes before Inspector Tallard left his office and put his head in at Superintendent Jason's door to say that the Chief Constable wanted to know if there were any more letters for him to sign.

"Nothing," said Superintendent Jason. "He told me he was in a hurry."

"I think he is, sir. He's just going."

"Right. I've nothing more. Look here, Tallard, did you come to my door just now?"

"Your door, sir?"

Inspector's Tallard's wooden expression and habit of repeating questions always irritated the Chief Clerk.

"My door; yes. Did you open it and not come in?"

"No, sir. When do you mean?"

"About five minutes ago. I felt a draught on my neck and looked up and my door was shutting. It had been shut before; somebody must have opened it and shut it again."

Inspector Tallard shook his head.

" 'Twasn't me, sir. May have been one of the constables. Or it may have been the wind."

"Wind doesn't shut a door quietly", replied Jason irritably.

Inspector Tallard looked anxiously at his senior.

"You're not getting worried about this man Hinde, are you, sir?"

"Oh, be damned to Hinde; I don't believe he exists. Look here, I've got work to do even if you haven't."

The injustice of this remark did not seem to worry Inspector Tallard. Outside the Chief Clerk's door a broad grin spread over his face. One can get away with a good deal of leg-pulling if one cultivates a stupid expression. He stumped down the stairs and re-entered his own office. For

five minutes he worked at his schedules, making alterations suggested by the Chief Constable. Then he pressed his finger five times on a bell beside him. A few seconds later the door opened and one of the police-constables from the general office appeared.

"Take these schedules and type six copies of each, Hookworthy. Look through them and see if they're clear."

The tall, clean-shaven young constable ran his eye rapidly over the sheets, shifting them from hand to hand.

"Right, sir. You want them at once, I expect."

"Yes, please."

Hookworthy turned on his rubber heel and left the room, shutting the door quietly behind him. In the waiting-room he paused for a moment to speak to a constable who had just come in from the street.

"Posted the letters, Charlie?"

The new-comer nodded and shut the front door with a bang. The ramshackle old building shook, and immediately after it was shaken again by the muffled crash of a shot, followed immediately by another.

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[3] 13th November, 1933.

CHAPTER IV

A VACANCY OCCURS

For a second the two young constables stared at each other; then the doors on each side of the waiting-room were flung open and Inspector Tallard dashed out from his room, while Sergeant Pitt and P.C. Leith came tumbling out of the general office.

"Where was that?" "What the devil . . . ?" "That's a shot!"

Everybody was speaking at once, excited and nervous. Inspector Tallard was the first to pull himself together.

"Upstairs, I'm sure", he exclaimed, and ran quickly up the staircase, followed by the others.

On the landing he checked. Superintendent Jason was standing at the open door of the Chief Constable's room, staring into it. He was leaning with his hand on one of the jambs, and the expression on his pale face was enough to show that something startling had occurred. Inspector Tallard hurried forward and stared over his senior's shoulder. The Chief Constable was sitting at his desk, his body slumped down in his chair, his head resting on the blotting-pad. His face was turned towards the door and the small black hole in the forehead, together with the acrid smell of gunpowder which filled the room, left no doubt in the police-officers' minds as to the tragedy that they were looking at.

"Is he dead?" whispered an awe-struck constable.

"Better have a look at him, sir, hadn't we?" urged Inspector Tallard.

Superintendent Jason, whose war-work had not accustomed him to the sight of death, looked as if he was going to faint, but with an effort he pulled himself together.

"Yes. Yes, I suppose we'd better", he said. "Better send for a doctor, Tallard; no, you do that, Sergeant Pitt. Come in with me, Tallard."

The sound of heavy footsteps stumbling up the stairs checked them. Superintendent Venning appeared, red and panting.

"What's this? What's happened?" he panted.

"Chief Constable's shot, sir," said Inspector Tallard, seeing that Superintendent Jason was still too dazed to answer.

Superintendent Venning joined them in the doorway, drawing in his breath with a hiss as he saw the dead body of his chief.

"Man must be in the building, sir, or on the roof; shall I search for him?" asked Tallard.

Superintendent Venning gave him a sharp look.

"What man?"

"Hinde, sir. That is . . . if you think it's him."

Venning looked back into the room.

"My God", he groaned, the full force of what had happened seeming to strike him. It had been Superintendent Venning's business to guard his Chief . . . and he had failed. Failed, in spite of warning and with all the power of the police force at his command.

"Yes, you search the inside", he said; then, turning to a Sergeant who had accompanied him from the Police Station: "Bannister, get up on to the roof; take these constables with you."

Another uniformed Inspector came bounding up the stairs.

"Mr. Parry", barked Venning, "get a cordon round the building in case this fellow comes down off the roof, though it's hardly likely. Then get every man you can find out into the town and hunt this fellow down—you all know what he looks like. Get the cars and 'combinations' out and all the bicycles and search every road. Then warn all stations and get their patrols out. Get a move on."

Inspector Parry hurried away. Tallard and Bannister, with the Headquarter constables, had already disappeared into the store-room, which gave access to the roof. Superintendent Venning turned to the Chief Clerk.

"For God's sake, don't stand there like a stuck pig, Jason", he exclaimed irritably. "Get on to the Yard and ask them to get particulars into the Metropolitan Police Information, with photographs if possible. If they've only got the ones taken on admission it should be made clear that they were taken twenty years ago. We must have copies of the photographs for our own informations. And ask them to get on to the B.B.C. and see if they can get a description out on the First News."

He looked at his watch.

"Hell! it's nearly six. Ask the Yard to do that first and do for heaven's sake *stir yourself*!"

Superintendent Jason flushed a deep red. It was a long time since he had been spoken to like this, and by a fellow Superintendent! He opened his

mouth to snarl back . . . then he remembered . . . Venning was acting-Chief Constable now.

He turned sharply on his heel.

Superintendent Venning turned to enter the Chief Constable's room but his eye was caught by Inspector Tallard coming along the passage, followed by P.C. Hookworthy.

"Well?" he asked.

"He's not in the store-room, sir, and both the windows are shut. Sergeant Bannister's gone up on to the roof, but Hinde could hardly have got there, because the ladder was leaning against the far wall. He's not in the cupboards in the passage, either."

"Beg pardon, sir; that window's open."

The two seniors turned to stare at P.C. Hookworthy, who was pointing to the window on the landing facing the stairs.

"So it is. What of it? Think he got out that way?"

"More likely came in, sir. May have got out through the Chief's window." Hookworthy pointed into the room. "Mr. Jason must have seen him if he'd come out on to the passage."

"Oh? Where was he?"

"Standing at this door when we came up, sir, and that wasn't many seconds after the shot."

Superintendent Venning crossed the passage to the Chief Clerk's room. Jason was sitting at his desk, impatiently clutching a silent telephone instrument.

"Where were you when the shot was fired, Mr. Jason?"

"In here, sir. I went straight out into the passage and opened the Chief Constable's door. There wasn't a sign of anyone."

"How long did that take you? Could the man have got out of the passage window, or the Chief's window?"

"Hardly the passage, sir. I might have been five seconds recovering from the surprise and getting out into the passage—hardly more. He might possibly have got out of the Chief's window."

The telephone buzzed.

"The Yard, sir. Hullo. Brodshire Constabulary. Can I . . . ?"

Superintendent Venning turned back into the passage, where Inspector Tallard was still waiting.

"Get on with it, then, Tallard. He's not in there. Try downstairs. By the way, anyone called Dr. Pugh?"

"Mr. Jason told Sergeant Pitt to, sir, just before you came up."

"Right; then get on with your search."

Followed by Hookworthy, Inspector Tallard ran down the stairs. At the bottom he stopped to try the side door which gave on to a small courtyard between the wings of the building.

"Locked", he said, "—and bolted. He couldn't have got out that way."

"Couldn't have anyway, sir", commented Hookworthy. "Tupple and I were standing at the foot of the stairs when the shot was fired."

Inspector Tallard stared at him.

"Were you?" he said. "You didn't see anything . . . upstairs?"

"Nothing, sir; I don't think we looked upstairs; we stared at each other. Then you ran up and we followed you."

Tallard nodded.

"Anyway you can't see much, because the stairs turn and the balustrade hides most of the passage. He must have gone out of the window; he's not on that floor and he couldn't have got down to this with you standing here. It isn't much of a drop. We must search down here as a matter of form."

At this moment the Divisional Surgeon arrived in response to Sergeant Pitt's telephone call. Inspector Tallard took him straight up to the Chief Constable's room, where they found Superintendent Venning standing at the window, staring out into the gathering darkness. As he turned to greet the Police Surgeon, Dr. Pugh saw that his face looked haggard and old.

"Oh, there you are, doctor. I've not moved him. He's dead, of course."

"My dear Superintendent; this is a terrible thing, a terrible thing!"

Dr. Pugh was a small, tubby man, with a red, cheerful countenance that just now he was trying to screw into a semblance of gloom. He himself had felt no particular affection for Captain Scole, but he believed that Superintendent Venning had been devoted to him.

His preliminary examination was soon over.

"Instantaneous death", he said. "Any idea how it happened?"

Superintendent Venning hesitated, then asked:

"Can you tell how far the shot came from, doctor?"

Dr. Pugh again examined the wound.

“There’s no powder burning”, he said, “but there is a smell of powder on the flesh. Got a magnifying glass and a torch?”

A glass was lying on the Chief Constable’s desk; Venning produced a small spotlight torch from his pocket. With the help of these the police surgeon closely scrutinized the dead man’s forehead.

“Yes; there are minute particles of powder in the flesh”, he said. “The pistol can’t have been far away—say two to three feet, probably not more than two. Nor, I should say, closer than one foot.”

The Superintendent nodded.

“And fired from straight in front?”

“Seems to have been. I can tell you that for certain after the P.M. As you see, the bullet is still in the brain.”

“Thank you, doctor. You asked how this happened. You won’t let this go any further, of course. We think he was killed by a man called Hinde, who’s just been released from Fieldhurst and has been uttering threats to the Captain. He was sentenced to death for the murder of a keeper in ’13—sentence commuted. I don’t know whether you remember the case, sir?”

Dr. Pugh’s blue eyes had opened wide.

“Indeed I do”, he said. “A very tragic case. I always thought . . .”

He checked himself, throwing a quick glance at the Superintendent.

“However, I mustn’t stop here taking up your time. You’ll let me have the body up at the hospital mortuary?”

“In half an hour, sir. But please don’t go yet. There’s another point I’d like your opinion about.”

He walked across to the window which faced the writing-table, and pointed to a hole in the plaster just above the frame.

“There were two shots”, he said; “one that killed the Captain and—apparently—this. I haven’t got the bullet out yet, but it looks as if the Captain had fired it. As you see, he’s got an automatic in his hand. He always kept one in his drawer, and after the threats I persuaded him to keep it on his desk under some papers. It looks as if he’d got his shot off first—and missed. But it’s very high, even for a man sitting down. Hinde was a bit above your height, doctor; would you mind standing the other side of the table, about where you think the shot was fired from?”

Dr. Pugh did so, and Venning bent down to the position he judged Captain Scole would have been in when sitting upright.

"The bullet mark's well above your head, doctor. You wouldn't think he could miss at that range."

He paused in thought.

"Of course", he added with a smile, "not one army officer in twenty could ever hit a haystack with a revolver. And when they missed, they missed high. But this automatic hadn't got anything like the kick of the old Service revolver, and in any case you'd think that a man doing police work in India would learn how to protect himself."

"There's another explanation", said Dr. Pugh. "He may *not* have got his shot in first. That may have been fired after death—muscular contraction as the bullet struck him. It would be liable to jerk his arm up."

Superintendent Venning considered the point.

"That's an interesting suggestion, doctor. I'll remember it."

Dr. Pugh's curiosity was now thoroughly aroused.

"How did the man get in here, though?" he asked. "I suppose you were on the look-out for him?"

Superintendent Venning flushed.

"We were, sir", he said shortly. "At present we think he must have come off the roof, got in by the landing window, and walked in at the door. We hadn't got a man there—the Chief wouldn't have it—only downstairs or outside the front door."

"But if he came in through the door, Captain Scole would hardly have let him walk right across the room to the front of his table? You don't think . . . ?" the police-surgeon's eyes glistened with excitement. "You don't think he was trying to get in at *this* window and Scole shot at him and missed, and was shot before he could fire again?"

"I thought you said not more than three feet, sir?"

Dr. Pugh's face fell.

"So I did. So I did. I must look up that point. I may be mistaken. I'll let you know."

He bustled out, giving a word of cheerful greeting to a uniformed police-inspector whom he passed at the top of the stairs. The interest of the problem had already banished the shadow of gloom from Dr. Pugh's mercurial spirits.

The Inspector knocked at the Chief Constable's door and went in.

"Ah, there you are, Parry. Any signs of him?"

The Inspector shook his head.

"Not so far, sir. He's not on the roof, and it's too dark to see if there are any marks of his being up there. I didn't let them scramble about too much for fear of confusing things."

"Quite right."

"None of the motor-patrols are in yet. He's not been seen in the town."

Venning frowned.

"You'd think somebody'ld spot a chap like that . . . in a hurry. He's fairly distinctive—heavy shoulders, stoop, criminal type. We must get bills round the town as quick as possible and meantime pass word round."

"I've done that, sir. There's not many people in Brodbury now don't know who we're looking for and what he's like. He's bound to be seen, sir."

Inspector Parry, of the Central Division, was a phlegmatic, unimaginative west-countryman. His fresh complexion made him look younger than he was, but Superintendent Venning knew that he was absolutely reliable and a cool hand in times of trouble.

"Well, you must keep on hunting for him, Parry. I must leave the details in your hands. By the way, you're in charge of the division for the time being. I'm acting-Chief Constable now and I shan't have time for both—not with this job on my hands. I know things'll be all right with you."

Parry flushed with pride.

"Do my best, sir", he muttered. "Sad business, this."

He glanced calmly at the Chief Constable's body. It seemed strange that that strong, virile personality should lie quietly there, as if asleep in his chair, oblivious to all that was going on around him.

Superintendent Venning pulled himself together with a jerk.

"I must get ahead", he said. "Before you go, Parry, give me a hand with this bullet."

He pointed to the mark above the window.

"I want to fix the exact line that bullet went in at", he said. "I can't get at it without the plaster crumbling, but if you'll give me a hand I think we can fix it."

With the help of two drawing pins, a thin piece of string was fixed to cut horizontally across the centre of the hole in the plaster. A second piece was then fixed vertically, the bisecting points of the two strings thus marking the approximate point of entry. The hole was then enlarged till the bullet was

found, almost flattened out against the brickwork. A deep scar in the brick showed the exact spot at which the bullet had struck it, slightly above the point of intersection of the two pieces of string. This did not satisfy Superintendent Venning, however; taking a longer piece of string he held one end of it on the brick-scar while Inspector Parry held the other end just above the dead man's hand. The string, tautened on that line, touched the point of intersection of the other pieces.

"That's the line all right. He was sitting there when he fired it."

Parry looked at his chief with mild interest.

"Did you doubt it, sir?" he asked.

Venning did not answer; he was examining the flattened bullet.

"Difficult to make much of that", he muttered.

About a quarter of an inch of the base still retained its shape. Venning carefully fitted this into the mouth of the dead man's pistol, twisting it slightly to follow the rifling. Parry watched with smiling admiration.

"You're not taking any chances, Super", he said.

"Chances!"

Venning looked up, a flash of anger in his close-set eyes.

"I've had my Chief shot dead under my nose—after I've set out to protect him! I can't undo that, but I'm going to get the man that did it. No, I'm not taking any chances!"

CHAPTER V

FIVE PER CENT

As Inspector Parry turned to leave the room, he felt something hard crumple under his heels. Stooping, he picked up a crumpled brass cartridge-case.

"One of the shells, sir", he said, handing it to the Superintendent.

Venning looked at it blankly.

"I'd forgotten those", he said. "There should be another one . . . unless . . ."

He paused, looking at the open window.

"Just exactly where was that?" he asked.

"Under my heel, sir; here."

"Between the writing-table and the window, rather towards the door. H'm. These pistols eject to the right, so that was the one that shot him. Wish you hadn't trod on it. Never mind; I expect we can make out what calibre it is. The other should be this side; have a look for it."

Parry hunted about on the carpet to the right of the Chief Constable's chair and soon picked up a second case. Examining it, he said:

"Looks much the same as the other, sir."

"What's that?"

Venning took the case and compared it with the first. Without further comment, he slipped them into his pocket.

There was a knock at the door and Superintendent Jason appeared.

"Can I have a word with you, sir, please?"

He glanced at Inspector Parry and Superintendent Venning dismissed the latter to his own duties, telling him to arrange for an ambulance to take the body up to the mortuary.

"In the excitement of the moment, sir, I forgot to tell you something that may have a bearing on . . . this."

Venning noticed with approval that the Chief Clerk was addressing him as acting-Chief Constable and not as a fellow Superintendent. Under the

circumstances, it would probably be best to maintain that formal note.

"What was that, Mr. Jason?" he asked.

"Some time—about half an hour, I should think—before the shots were fired, the door of my room was quietly opened and quietly shut. No one came in. I asked Inspector Tallard whether he had done it, but he said not. I don't know who else it can have been . . . unless . . ."

"Unless it was Hinde, you mean?"

"That did occur to me, sir."

"When was it you asked Tallard about it? After the murder?"

"No, sir. When he came to ask if there were any more letters for the Chief Constable to sign. That would have been about five or ten minutes after the door opening and about the same time before the shots."

"We'd better get these times exact", said Venning. "Let's have Mr. Tallard up."

Superintendent Jason pressed his finger twice on the Chief Constable's bell and in a short time Inspector Tallard appeared.

"Shut the door, Inspector", said Superintendent Venning. "We're trying to fix times. To begin with, Mr. Jason tells me that he asked whether it was you who opened and shut his door this afternoon without coming in. I understand you said it was not."

"That's so, sir; and I've since asked Sergeant Pitt and the constables in the general office and the constable on guard outside the front door, and they all say it wasn't them."

"That's worth knowing. Now what time was it when you *did* come into Mr. Jason's room? When he asked you that question, I mean."

"Just after five, sir", responded Tallard promptly. "I'd been doing the car-patrol schedules with the Chief Constable and I kept my eye on the clock because I knew he wanted to get away. I went straight across to Mr. Jason's room. I should put that at 5.5 p.m., sir."

"Good. And your door was opened, Mr. Jason, five or ten minutes before that?"

"I should say so, sir."

"You said five minutes at the time, I remember, sir", remarked Inspector Tallard.

"Did I? Well, perhaps it was. Say between 4.55 and 5 p.m., sir", said Superintendent Jason, with a slight note of sarcasm in his voice. Venning

took no notice of it.

"That would be when you were with the Chief Constable, then, Inspector. And you saw nothing unusual either when you went across to Mr. Jason's room or when you left it? And what did you do then?"

"Went straight downstairs, sir, revised my schedules, and gave P.C. Hookworthy orders about typing them. He had just left me when the shots were fired."

"And what time would that be?"

Inspector Tallard pondered.

"Can't tell you exactly, sir", he said. "I suppose I was five minutes over my notes and five minutes talking to Hookworthy. Say a quarter past five, sir."

"Nearer half-past", said Jason. "You were five or ten minutes in here talking to me. I remember telling you I had some work to do."

Inspector Tallard flushed, but held his tongue.

"You've no other reason for saying half-past, Mr. Jason?" asked Superintendent Venning. "Didn't notice the clock or anything?"

"Can't say I did, sir."

"Then we must try further afield. Get your office staff up one at a time please, Mr. Jason."

By this means the time of the shots was fixed fairly exactly at 5.20 p.m., the most definite evidence coming from P.C. Tupple, who had been out to post the letters and had looked at the clock in the square to make sure he was in time. The shots had been fired directly he got back, as he was talking to P.C. Hookworthy in the waiting-room.

By the same process the problem of the window on the landing was probed. It seemed fairly certain that the window had been shut all the morning and that no one on the Headquarter staff had opened it unless it was the Chief Constable himself, which seemed improbable.

The problem of Superintendent Jason's door remained a mystery. The general, rather flippant, opinion of the juniors in the office was that 'the cat' had done it.

By the time these enquiries were over it was past eight o'clock and the body had been removed. Realising that, though he had a lot of work still to do, he would do it better after some supper, Superintendent Venning was on the point of locking up when it occurred to him that the news of the Chief Constable's death ought not to reach the Chairman of the Standing Joint

Committee in the morning paper. Accordingly he rang up Sir George Playhurst and broke the news to him as gently as possible, excusing himself for not doing so in person by the distance (thirty miles) to Culton and the pressure of work. The old man was evidently deeply shocked at the tragedy, but on learning that the acting-Chief Constable was not at the moment in need of his presence, promised to come in to Headquarters in the morning.

Venning appreciated the consideration. Many men would have rushed in at once and insisted on hearing all about it and generally wasting the acting-Chief's valuable time—even if they did not actually summon him out to their own home. But Sir George, though slow-thinking, was eminently sound.

Returning to his house for a hurried meal, the stout and motherly Mrs. Venning laid a plate of soup before him with one hand and hurled a bomb with the other.

"Poor gentleman", she said, "and you asking him only this morning, Willie, to come and stop with us. I can't hardly believe it. But there; it's 'poor lady' I should be saying. How did Mrs. Scole take the news?"

'Willie' clapped his hands to his head with a smothered curse.

"Lord, what'll I be forgetting next?" he groaned. "I'm not fit for this job, mother. There seem a hundred things all to do at once—and I forget the first of them. Here, I must be off at once."

He pushed back his chair, but Mrs. Venning held him firmly in his seat.

"Ten minutes won't make any difference", she said, "and you need your food. I'm sure it's no blame to you, dear—with all you have to do. Why shouldn't that doctor go and tell her?"

"No, it's my job, mother", returned Venning, doggedly. "It was my job to guard him—and I failed. It's my job to break the news to Mrs. Scole; I'm late, but I'll do it—if it isn't done already. Then it'll be my job to find his murderer, and I'm damned if I'll fail there."

He struck the table with his fist, making the soup jump dangerously in its plate.

"You've no call to swear, dear", remonstrated Mrs. Venning mildly. "Eat it up, now, there's a good boy."

Thus admonished, Superintendent Venning ate his supper and, sending for his car, drove out to 'Horstings' and enquired for Mrs. Scole. A word with the maid reassured him; it was evident that the news had not preceded him. Sending in his name, he waited uncomfortably in the hall, feeling guilty and ashamed at his remissness.

He had not long to wait. A small, faded woman came hurrying down the stairs, followed by a tall girl of about twenty-four, handsome but dowdy and listless.

"Is it my husband? What is it, Superintendent? We expected him back long ago. He is often late, but not for dinner as a rule. We would have telephoned, but he doesn't like our worrying the office."

In her nervous disquiet Mrs. Scole rattled on, not waiting for an answer to her questions. There was an appealing note in her thin voice that touched Venning's heart; he felt more than ever a brute.

"I'm very sorry, madam", he said, "but I have bad news for you. Captain Scole has met with a serious accident."

"Oh!"

The little stifled cry was all that Mrs. Scole seemed capable of uttering. She stared at the Superintendent beseechingly.

"Is he dead?"

The question came from her daughter. Venning looked at her and realised with a shock, that there was less of distress than excitement in her voice and expression. Her dull eyes had a gleam in them that was not due to tears.

Venning nodded.

"Yes, miss, I regret to say that he is." He paused, at a loss to know what more to say. "I . . . we . . . the force would like to offer you our most sincere sympathy, madam. Captain Scole was a good friend to all of us and we shall miss him deeply."

Mrs. Scole sank slowly into a chair and stared straight in front of her with dry eyes and trembling lips. Her daughter sank on her knees beside her and put one arm round her mother's shoulders.

"I'll wait in the back in case you want me, miss", muttered Venning, moving to the green baize door which he knew led to the servants' quarters. Miss Scole thanked him with a nod.

For ten minutes the Superintendent was kept busy answering the eager questions of cook and house-parlourmaid. He took the opportunity of learning a little more about the family than he already knew. The servants were loyal enough, but Venning had no difficulty in guessing that no love had been lost between father and daughter, the latter being passionately devoted to her mother, whose life was none too easy. 'The Captain' had kept his womenfolk pretty close in the matter of money, and Miss Kitty, besides

resenting the poverty of her own wardrobe, was always struggling with her father for opportunities of greater happiness for her mother. Through it all, Mrs. Scole had striven feebly to keep the peace, grateful to her daughter, but never joining her in open revolt.

After a time the Superintendent was summoned to give a fuller account to Mrs. and Miss Scole of what had occurred. As gently as possible he broke it to them that Captain Scole had been shot, apparently murdered, and as soon as they had recovered from this further shock, he asked leave to make a formal examination of the Chief Constable's papers, explaining that he did not expect to find anything of significance but that such an examination was a matter of routine.

'Horstings' was a large, old-fashioned house, with more reception rooms than could conveniently be managed by the staff which the Scoles were able to keep. The 'boudoir'—relic of Victorian days—was therefore closed, used only as a lumber room, but Captain Scole had a fine oak-panelled study looking on the garden. The thick red carpet was probably the only post-Victorian one in the house, and a modern roll-top desk enabled the Chief Constable to keep his confidential papers from prying eyes without the labour of tidying up every time he left the room. Superintendent Venning had brought the dead man's keys, and it was to this desk that he first turned his attention.

On the writing part of the desk, under the roll-top, there was nothing of special interest. A typed paper with the official description of Albert Hinde, together with some notes in the Chief Constable's handwriting on the steps to be taken for finding him, indicated that that matter had not been forgotten when Captain Scole left his official atmosphere. A drawer-full of private letters, of no apparent interest; another of pass-books, cheque book, etc., of which a glance showed that there was no apparent financial stress; pigeon-holes with neatly docketed bills and receipts; all these were cursorily examined without doing more than confirm Superintendent Venning's expectations.

In the locked drawers below the writing-table, Venning found a file of papers which sorely tempted him to linger—papers concerning police matters in the county so confidential that they were probably not even seen by the Chief Clerk. These chiefly concerned the affairs of county families, which sometimes received the attention of the Chief Constable to an extent that would have surprised and shocked the subjects of them. There was even an indexed *dossier*, kept by the Chief Constable himself, which, had its existence been realised, would have caused a scandalised fluttering of

patrician dove-cotes. The acting-Chief Constable assured himself, not without qualms of conscience, that when time allowed it would be his duty to place himself *au fait* with the affairs of his temporary office.

Reluctantly locking that drawer, Venning turned to the last, the centre one above the knee-hole. Here were note-books, scribbling pads and odd sheets of foolscap, many of them covered with the Chief Constable's sprawling calligraphy. Glancing mechanically through these, Superintendent Venning suddenly checked and stared at a sheet on which only one line was written, again in Captain Scole's hand.

The single line ran:

Brancashire Contract £1,660. 5% = £83.

For nearly half a minute Venning continued to stare at the words in front of him, his rugged face turning first to a deep red and then the colour fading till it left a haggard white mask. Mechanically he folded up the paper, slipped it into his pocket-book, and buttoned it away into his breast-pocket.

CHAPTER VI

PUBLIC OPINION

FROM an early hour on the following, Tuesday, morning, Superintendent Venning had been at work in his new office—the room in which Captain Scole had been murdered. The large table had been cleared of its paraphernalia, and its top was now covered with an assortment of calipers and lenses, a microscope, a watchmaker's glass, some plasticine, a spot torch and other instruments, together with an automatic pistol, a matchbox containing three spent bullets, two cartridge-cases, and a number of sheets of paper covered with notes and figures in the Superintendent's laborious handwriting. To the automatic pistol was attached a small label, marked 'Exhibit 1. X.'

At the moment, Venning was holding in the palms of his two hands two bullets; that on the left hand was of almost normal shape and was in fact the bullet which Dr. Pugh had extracted from the dead man's head—'fired', he had reported, 'from practically straight in front'. To this bullet also there was attached a label: 'Exhibit 2. X'. On his left palm lay the crumpled bullet which he and Inspector Parry had extracted from the plaster on the previous evening. It bore as yet no label, but on the desk lay a label marked in pencil: 'Exhibit 3. ?'.

As a young Inspector, Venning had attended an advanced course in 'Firearms, their use and identification'. Ever since then he had cultivated the subject as a hobby and had always looked forward to the day when his knowledge might help to solve some problem, perhaps even bring a murderer to the gallows. The conviction of Browne and Kennedy, the murderers of P.C. Gutteridge, on evidence of this character had moved him profoundly, and it seemed as if the time had at last come to put his knowledge to the test.

In spite of this, however, his expression did not reflect the eager interest that he might have been expected to feel. His normal colour had returned, but the haggard look on his face seemed, if anything, to have deepened. He laid the whole bullet back on the table and turned his attention to the crumpled one, scrutinizing its base carefully through the watchmaker's glass. Before he had completed his examination an interruption occurred;

Inspector Tallard knocked at the door and announced that General Cawdon wished to speak to him.

"I showed him into my room, sir", he said; "I knew you were busy with all this and I thought you might not want it to be disturbed. Will you see him down there, sir, while I keep an eye on this?"

After a moment's hesitation, Superintendent Venning nodded.

"Thank you, Tallard, I'll do that", he said. "Don't touch these things."

Downstairs in Inspector Tallard's room, Venning found the brisk, rather pompous little General in no way subdued by the occasion.

"Morning, Superintendent," he exclaimed. "We met last week. Little thought what a tragedy was hanging over us, eh? I hear it said that poor Scole was shot by some released murderer. That true, eh? What's capital punishment for if murderers are to be let out to commit another?"

Superintendent Venning waited quietly for the spate to subside.

"It seems possible that the crime may have been committed by a man who is known to have had a grudge against the Chief Constable, sir. He uttered threats last week and we have been looking for him since then."

"And he got through you, eh? Bad business that, Superintendent. What were your sentries doing? Asleep? Death penalty for a sentry who sleeps at his post; you know that—an old battalion commander. War time, of course; but the police are always at war—or should be."

Venning remained silent. As an old commanding officer he knew brigadiers; they'd got to be allowed to run themselves down. Not enough to do; that was the trouble with most of them. Tiresome waste of time, though, with a hundred and one things waiting to be done.

"Scotland Yard sent a man down yet?"

"No, sir."

"What? Why not? Don't they know about it? Haven't you reported?"

"They know, sir; yes. They're issuing an Information and supplying photographs, and of course helping to find this man if he's gone to London."

"Supplying photographs? Why on earth aren't they sending a man down?"

"They haven't been asked to, sir", replied Venning mildly.

"Not asked to? Why don't they send as a matter of course? Their job to investigate crime, isn't it? C.I.D. That stands for Criminal Investigation Department, doesn't it?"

"Yes, sir, but their authority only runs in the Metropolitan area. They only send officers down to the County and Borough police forces if they're specially asked to."

General Cawdon snorted.

"Ridiculous red tape. Well, why aren't they asked to, then? Whose job is it?"

"The Chief Constable's, sir."

"Well, the Chief Constable's dead, isn't he? What happens then?"

"The Deputy Chief Constable takes on, sir. That happens to be me, in this case."

"They why don't you . . . ?"

But Superintendent Venning's patience was wearing thin. He so far forgot himself as to short-circuit the rising tirade.

"I have to exercise my judgment as to that, sir. At the moment I don't consider it necessary to call in the Yard. You'll excuse me, General, I'm sure, but I've got . . ."

Fortunately, perhaps, he in his turn was interrupted by the arrival of the Chairman of the Standing Joint Committee, the composite body of magistrates and County Councillors whose task it was to administer the police organization in the county. Sir George Playhurst had been Chairman now for nearly twenty years. He was a tall, heavily-built man, slow-moving both in body and mind. As a young man he had been a fine all-round athlete and sportsman, but most of his muscle had now turned to fat and he manœuvred his great bulk with some difficulty.

He greeted Venning with a friendly gesture and nodded to General Cawdon.

"Heard you were in here", he said. "You don't mind my interrupting?"

"Of course, of course. Your job, Playhurst, really. I just came in to see how things were going—see if I could help. It seems . . ."

With a quiet smile Sir George Playhurst turned his attention to the acting-Chief Constable, switching off the current without apparent rudeness.

"I must offer you my condolences, Mr. Venning", he said. "Your Chief will be a great loss to the County and I know he will be to you. He died on duty, as he would always have been ready and proud to do."

Superintendent Venning murmured his thanks, grateful not so much for the words as for the absence of recrimination or reproach which lesser men might have uttered.

"I don't want to keep you many minutes", continued Sir George; "you must be overwhelmingly busy, but I should be grateful to have an outline of what occurred and what steps you are taking—so far as is not indiscreet to tell me of them."

Briefly but clearly, Superintendent Venning ran over the events of the past week and particularly of the previous day. He recounted the steps which had been taken—unsuccessfully so far—to find the ex-convict, Hinde, both before and after the murder.

"You're satisfied that it *was* Hinde who did it?" asked Sir George.

"There doesn't seem much doubt about it, sir. He uttered the threats and, so far as we can see, he carried them out, though it's not yet clear how he got into the Chief Constable's room."

"Bad work there. Idle sentries", muttered the irrepressible General.

"You think he can be found?" asked Sir George.

"Almost bound to be, sir. Every police force in England is looking out for him—most of them since Friday. The ports are being watched. He's not a type that could easily escape notice. The Chassex police . . . that's where his wife lives, Woolham . . . say he left there on the 5th and hasn't been seen or heard of since. Of course, we know he's been here and it's hardly possible he could get far without being spotted. There are bills out for him everywhere, with photographs, and the B.B.C. have broadcast his description. Every man, woman and child in the country's as good as a policeman where he's concerned. It's my belief he's lying up somewhere not far away—probably in Brodley Woods. I'm organizing a drive of them in conjunction with the Greyshire police this morning."

"Then I mustn't keep you any longer. You've thought of Greymouth, of course? Port, lots of shipping of all sorts. Likely place."

"The Greymouth police have been on the look-out for him since Thursday morning, Sir George, when we first started to look for him ourselves. They've combed the whole place twice. It's almost impossible that he can be there."

Sir George nodded.

"Come on then, Cawdon", he said; "we must leave these busy people to do their work."

But General Cawdon was not to be so easily put off.

"But Playhurst", he said, "Superintendent Venning tells me that no steps have been taken to call in Scotland Yard. Surely it's essential to get the best

brains on to this business. Our own force no doubt are very fine, splendid fellows—many of them soldiers, thank God—but they can't have the experience of criminal investigation in the big sense, such as Scotland Yard have."

Sir George Playhurst looked from one to other of his companions. He was quick to sense that there had already been a discussion—probably a heated one—on this point.

"What does Superintendent Venning say?" he asked.

"In my opinion, sir, it is not necessary to call in the Yard. They are helping us in many ways, but we know all the history of this case better than anyone else can. If I want help I shall, of course, ask for it."

"That settles it then. Have you got your car here, Cawdon, or can I give you a lift?"

"But surely the last word doesn't rest with a . . . with Superintendent Venning? Can't you exercise your authority, Playhurst?"

"I have no authority . . . in that respect", replied Sir George quietly. "The Standing Joint Committee, as you know, are responsible for the administration of the County Constabulary, but responsibility for the maintenance of the peace and for the detection of crime lies upon the shoulders of the Chief Constable alone. At the present moment, and until a new Chief Constable is appointed, that means Superintendent Venning."

Without more ado, Sir George Playhurst got himself into motion and General Cawdon had no alternative but to follow him. It was easy to see, however, that he was far from being satisfied.

* * * * *

At eleven o'clock Superintendent Venning and Inspector Parry motored out to the Brodley Woods. A force of some two hundred police had been collected from the two county constabularies, and these were supplemented by keepers, woodmen, and other men of known reliability, specially picked by the police. The vast Brodley Woods, nearly two thousand acres in extent, were fortunately divided into 'beats', for shooting purposes, by straight rides. These beats were now flanked by watchers, while the woods as a whole were surrounded by motorists and horsemen, including farmers and the neighbouring gentry. It would seem practically impossible for any living creature, from a weasel upwards, to escape unseen, let alone a wanted man.

When all was ready the drive began, each section of the wood being beaten by a line of men advancing shoulder to shoulder until the end was

reached, when a fresh section was surrounded and beaten. The work was carried out methodically and thoroughly. A pair of lovers were discovered in hiding, to their great embarrassment and the delight of everyone else; the skeleton of a man who had been missing from Greymouth for a year was uncovered from a heap of leaves, and excited but little interest; by four o'clock in the afternoon every inch of the woods had been searched and not a trace of Albert Hinde found.

Back at Headquarters, the acting-Chief Constable was asked by Superintendent Jason whether he had thought of trying to trace the bicycle on which it was thought that Hinde had gone to Corsington on the morning he had given the threatening letter to the Grammar School boy. If he had parked or hidden that bicycle in the vicinity of Corsington it was possible that he had made for it on the night of the murder and got sufficiently far away by daybreak to be able to lie up in some other effective hiding-place.

Venning thanked the Chief Clerk for his suggestion and put Inspector Parry on to the task of conducting the search. He himself had other and more delicate work to do—the interviewing of Albert Hinde's wife. She had already been questioned by the Chassex police but Venning felt that it was his duty to satisfy himself that the woman knew nothing of her husband's whereabouts. Accordingly, with the permission of the Chief Constable of Chassex, he motored over to Woolham and had a long talk with the unfortunate woman who had been for twenty years to all intents and purposes a widow and now found herself once more under the shadow of a crime.

Mrs. Albert Hinde was a quiet, respectable woman, astonishingly young-looking—Venning thought—considering all that she had gone through. She assured the police-officer that her husband had only been at home for a bare three weeks, that he had seemed restless and uncomfortable under the curiosity of his neighbours, and that on the 5th November he had suddenly disappeared, without giving her a hint of his intentions or plans. Personally she believed that he had returned to his old life of sea-faring, where a man's past history was of no interest to his fellows. She was firmly convinced that he had had no hand in the death of Captain Scole; was it likely that a man who had just finished the appalling punishment of twenty years' penal servitude but was still a young man, would at once again put his neck, this time irreprievably, into the halter?

Mrs. Hinde shed no tears, but there was a dry bitterness in her tone which told Venning, better than words could have done, the agony which she

was suffering. The Superintendent returned home convinced that, so far as her knowledge went, the wanted man's wife was telling the truth.

On his return to Headquarters, late at night, he found two interesting reports awaiting him. In the first place, Sergeant Bannister had carried out a careful examination of the roof, which had been impossible in the darkness of the previous evening. Although the results of this search were not conclusive, they definitely supported the theory which had already been formed as to the murderer's line of approach and escape. The low-pitched roof of the old building was almost hidden by a brick parapet, about four feet in height, which ran all the way round the walls. Behind this it would have been a simple matter for anyone to lie hidden, or even to move about, in daylight as well as dark. Access to the roof was another matter; normally it would be obtained *viâ* a trap-door in the store-room, but that would hardly have been possible to an intruder such as Hinde. A careful examination of rain-water pipes, however, disclosed that one which actually ran down the wall beside the Chief Constable's window, discharging into a gutter in the little courtyard, was rubbed and scratched all along its length, just as it might be expected to be if someone had swarmed up or down it. To do so would have required a considerable amount of agility and strength, not to mention nerve, but Hinde—Venning remembered—had in his young days been a sailor. It appeared as if this rain-water pipe had been both the means of access to the roof, probably on Sunday night, and the line of escape from the Chief Constable's room after the murder.

The other theory, of entry to the building *viâ* the landing window, was less easily supported. Here there was no convenient water-pipe. It was just conceivable that, by means of a strong doubled cord run round one of the chimney stacks, the murderer had lowered himself to the level of the landing window, opened it, and let himself in, releasing one end of the rope and pulling the whole in after him. But that seemed to demand a great deal of luck, and there was no evidence in support of it—except the open window. There remained the alternative of Hinde having carried out his attack actually from *outside* the Chief Constable's window, thrusting his arm into the room (to account for the shell found inside) and making an extraordinarily accurate shot. But how could this be reconciled with the doctor's theory of a shot fired at a range of not more than three feet? And if the man had not entered the building, what was the explanation of the Chief Clerk's stealthily-moving door?

Altogether it might be said that Sergeant Bannister's report supported the general theory of access from the roof but added confusion to the particular problem of how it was done.

Inspector Parry's report provided no less tantalising evidence. After an exhaustive and fruitless search in the little village of Corsington, he had gone further afield and, in a disused shed half a mile out, on the road from Petsham, had unearthed an elderly bicycle from underneath a pile of old sacking. All trace of maker's name, number, etc., had been carefully removed from the machine, and this fact, together with the fact and place of its concealment, seemed sufficient proof that it was the machine used by Hinde to make good his escape on Thursday morning, after handing his letter to the boy Wissel.

On the other hand, the fact that it was still there showed that it had not been used by Hinde in his second and more vital escape. The problem of his present whereabouts, therefore, remained as insoluble as ever. The machine had been re-cached under the sacks and a hidden watch mounted over it, but it seemed unlikely that Hinde would dare to approach it now.

On the whole, the day's work had produced some useful evidence, generally confirming the official theory as to the authorship and machinery of the crime. The County police force, as a whole, went to bed feeling that the morrow must see the capture of the wanted man.

But the morrow did not, nor the next day, nor the next. The railways and ports were watched in vain; house-to-house searches in Brodbury and the neighbouring towns and villages produced no result; drives of woods and gorse coverts were as fruitless as the first attack on the Brodley Woods. Albert Hinde seemed to have vanished into thin air.

The inquest was held and, as Superintendent Venning saw no point in making a mystery of the business, the whole story of Hinde's re-appearance and disappearance was revealed, the jury bringing in a verdict of Wilful Murder against the ex-convict. Public interest was redoubled and it seemed impossible that the man could remain much longer concealed. But concealed, none the less, he did remain.

It was not long before the public, and particularly the Press, began to voice its dissatisfaction with the failure of the police to arrest a murderer whose identity was actually known. By some means or other the fact leaked out that Hinde had even been so reckless as to advertise his intentions and dangle himself before the gaping mouths of a woolly-minded, leaden-footed constabulary! What were the Brodshire police doing? What was the acting-Chief Constable thinking about? And inevitably, why had Scotland Yard not been called in?

The public's pathetic and child-like faith in 'the Yard' *before* it is 'called in', and its scorn and distrust after that event has occurred and is not

immediately followed by a sensational arrest, is a source of constant amusement and irritation to all policemen. But it is a natural weakness, and, bearing the full force of popular opinion, carries great and almost irresistible weight. For a time Superintendent Venning struggled doggedly against it, even when he could see that the feeling of his own men supported it. The full weight of responsibility was on his shoulders; after what had already been said he could not look to Sir George Playhurst to relieve him of any of it. He certainly got no moral support from Superintendent Jason, who was correctly subordinate and delicately insubordinate at the same time. Venning's jaw stiffened, the line between his close-set eyes deepened, he shut his ears firmly to public and private comment and criticism.

So the week dragged on. Sunday came and went, with no sign of Hinde—and no sign of official life, said the Press. Then on Monday, a week after the murder, General Cawdon re-appeared and sent up his name to the acting-Chief Constable. This time Venning, firmly established in the dignity of his surroundings, received him in the Chief Constable's room, fully expecting a second tirade and prepared to resist it with a firmness which he hoped would remain polite. But he was wrong. The little Brigadier shook him warmly by the hand, congratulated him on all the fine work he had done, and proceeded to apologise for his brusqueness at their last meeting.

"I'm afraid I made an exhibition of myself", he declared, with engaging frankness, "a combination of ignorance and eagerness is my only excuse and they've got me into trouble before now—and no doubt will again. I didn't understand the position—either your position as acting-Chief Constable, or the status and powers of the Standing Joint Committee. I quite appreciate now that the full responsibility lies on your shoulders and I tell you frankly that I admire the firmness and skill with which you handled a very difficult situation. If it's not impertinent, I should like to add that I admire the thorough and efficient way in which you and your whole force have carried out the work in connection with the crime."

Slightly mollified, Superintendent Venning bowed his acknowledgment of this praise.

"Having said that—and I mean it sincerely and genuinely", continued General Cawdon, "I want to make an appeal to you, Mr. Venning. The Press have been most stupid and irritating; if I had been in your place I should have dug my toes in and sent them to hell. But, Superintendent, there's a strength that is finer than resistance. A wise man may change his mind, and you know what Wellington said about a great general knowing when to retire. Well, I honestly believe that the time has come to retire . . . no, that's

the wrong analogy; it's more a case of doing what Haig did in '18—consenting to serve under a generalissimo. I know I'm risking a snub by tackling you again on this point; you can send me away with a flea in my ear and I shall 'go quietly'—as your people say—but I shall go regretfully. Anthony Scole was a brother officer of mine and a great friend, though he was a good bit senior to me. I want his murderer caught and hung—I want it desperately. I believe that you've done all that, with your resources, you can possibly do, and that the time has come now to call up your most powerful ally to help you, even at some sacrifice to your pride. I beg you, Superintendent, to be a wise man and a great general; change your mind and call in Scotland Yard."

It had been a great effort, the greatest rhetorical effort which George Cawdon had ever made in his life—and he was proud of it—proud even of the bits where he had eaten humble pie. He leant back in his chair and watched its effect upon the big policeman.

Superintendent Venning stared straight in front of him for so long that the General began to fear that his mind was somewhere else and that he had not even been listening to the great peroration. But he had. With a shrug of the shoulders he threw down the pencil with which he had been fidgeting.

"Very well, general", he said. "I'll do what you ask."

That was all—but it was enough. General Cawdon rose to his feet, shook hands warmly, and walked out of the room, his moustache bristling with self-congratulation.

As the door closed, Superintendent Venning sank back in his chair.

"And I hope you damn well like what's coming to you", he muttered.

CHAPTER VII

DETECTIVE-INSPECTOR POOLE

OVER the telephone, the Assistant Commissioner was the essence of tact. Why County Constabularies always elected to sit on a case for a week, until all trails were cold, before calling in the help of the C.I.D., was an eternal puzzle to him, but Sir Leward Marradine knew that expostulation did no good and only soured the atmosphere; so to Superintendent Venning's request he gracefully replied that he would be only too glad to help in the investigation of the problem and that he hoped the officers he sent down would be of use to the acting-Chief Constable of Brodshire. He added that unfortunately he could not at the moment spare a Chief Inspector, but that he would send the best of the younger men, Inspector Poole.

"You may remember him", he said, "in connection with the Duke of York's Steps case, about five years ago. He did good work, too, in the Grayle poisoning case, though he did not shine in the public eye on that occasion. I think you'll find him easy to work with; his head has not got too big for his hat, as sometimes happens with young detective-inspectors who pull off a big case. I think you'll like him. I'll send a detective-sergeant with him too; he may be able to release one of your own sergeants to his normal duties—I know you're not over-strength. Let me know how things go, and how I can help you."

The head of the C.I.D. had expected this call for some days and had given a good deal of thought as to whom he should send if it came. Normally, of course, a Chief Inspector would go, with a Sergeant, but, while it was true that he could not well spare a Chief Inspector at this moment, his principal reason for choosing Detective-Inspector Poole was that a Superintendent, acting temporarily as Chief Constable, would feel his authority more assured with a young Inspector than with an experienced Chief Inspector of standing almost equal to his own. At the same time Poole, for all his lack of years and experience, was, in Sir Leward's opinion, just as likely to get a result as an older man. Moreover, he had tact and good manners, and would not try to 'bounce' Superintendent Venning as might some of the older hands.

Inspector Poole was lucky enough to get Detective-Sergeant Gower as his assistant. The two men had worked together before, understood each

other's ways, and made a very competent team, the sergeant—an older man—providing much of the experience and routine knowledge which Poole lacked. As they travelled down in the train, in an otherwise empty third-class carriage, they talked over the case so far as they had read or heard of it. Poole was not very keen on the prospect before him. The murderer's identity was apparently known; it appeared to be just a case of finding him—routine work which called for more thoroughness than imagination. With the arrogance of youth and success, he would have preferred a case in which there was more chance of spectacular distinction. Sergeant Gower, on the other hand, liked the prospect of a man-hunt; it was rather his speciality.

The two detectives reached Brodbury early in the afternoon,[4] and Poole spent an hour or more going over the case with Superintendent Venning. The acting-Chief Constable told him the facts so far as they were known, answered some questions, and then . . . closed down. Poole realised at once that he had a difficult time ahead of him. Hitherto he had had no great difficulty in getting on with the senior officers of County and Borough Constabularies with whom he had had to work; after a preliminary period of suspicion—suspicion of the 'bright young fellow from London', who might be expected to try and 'come it' over them, they had invariably thawed and become both human and helpful. But this clearly was going to be a different case; Superintendent Venning was polite, officially informative, and . . . nothing more; he might not be definitely antagonistic, but 'passive resistance' was written all over him. It was no good trying to guess at the cause of this attitude; that would probably emerge. Nor was it any good trying to talk him round; he might win his confidence in time, but it would be by deeds and not by words.

After being introduced to the other officers on the Headquarter staff, and the seniors of the Central Division, Poole was sent under the guidance of P.C. Tupple to the lodgings that had been engaged for him and Sergeant Gower. Dismissing his guide, he sat down rather dolefully to think over his position. Five minutes' thought told him that it was no good thinking about it; he had a job to do; he had better get on with it, whether he liked it or not. Telling Sergeant Gower to get out into the town and use his ears, he himself strolled back towards Headquarters in the hope of finding someone to talk to more forthcoming than Superintendent Venning.

He was fortunate enough to meet Inspector Tallard, to whom he had already been introduced, just coming off duty. After an exchange of civilities he invited the County man to come and have a drink with him.

"It's not quite six yet", he said, "but we shouldn't have so very long to wait."

Tallard smiled.

"In the course of my duties I've learnt my way about this town", he said. "I know a place where a little intelligent anticipation can be looked for."

Together they made their way to a modest hostelry entitled *The Jovial Linkman*, tucked away in a quiet street; entering by the private door, they were soon ensconced in a snug parlour, with two pint pots of Invernall's Mild and Mellow on the polished oak table before them. After a long drink and a moment of silent satisfaction, Inspector Tallard pulled out his pipe and began to stuff it with dark golden tobacco.

"You look full young to have got where you have", he said, with a shrewd glance at his companion. "No offence, I hope."

Poole laughed.

"On the contrary, complimented. I'm thirty-three; been a bit lucky in the way of promotion. You're not so much more than that yourself, are you?"

"I'm thirty-eight; old enough to have seen this bit of trouble", he pointed to the ribbons on his tunic, "which I guess you missed."

"I did. I suppose you'll say I was lucky."

"You were", replied Tallard succinctly.

For a moment the two men smoked in silence, Poole not wishing to start pumping too soon. Presently Tallard's curiosity overcame him.

"I don't quite place you", he said. "You're not one of this new officer class they talk of drafting in?"

Poole laughed.

"God forbid", he said. "They weren't invented in my day. I joined the ranks in the ordinary way when I was a youngster. But you rather worry me; don't say I've got an Oxford accent!"

"Something like it."

"I thought I'd grown out of that years ago, if I ever had it. You're quite right in a way; I *was* at Oxford. I heard a talk by the Commissioner up there one day, and then and there I decided that that was what I was going to be—or at least A.C.C. I did a year and a bit at the Bar to learn some law, and then I joined the Metropolitan Police. Hard work and brain-power did the rest."

Tallard eyed him suspiciously.

"And friends in the right place, eh?"

Poole sat up.

"No, damn it!" he exclaimed. "That I swear isn't true."

"Sorry, sorry. Have one on me."

"Yes, I think that's a fair forfeit. I suppose it's a natural suspicion, though. I'd be rather grateful if you didn't tell other people about . . . well, about what I've told you; it might put them off."

"I didn't suppose you told me for publicity purposes", said Tallard drily. "I take it you want *me* to tell *you* things?"

Poole smiled.

"It would help", he said. "I've heard the facts and the official theory, but no one's quite come to life yet."

"Super didn't want the Yard called in", replied Tallard. "They talked him round, somehow—but he doesn't like it."

"Natural enough. Still, if I'm to help I must know something about you all and particularly about this fellow Hinde. It's a queer story—chap coming out from a lifer and stepping right in to qualify again—or improve. Doesn't sound natural to me—more like melodrama."

Tallard was silent, puffing slowly at his pipe. Poole feared that he was going to be disappointed of his inside information, but presently the uniformed man knocked out his dottle and spoke.

"Depends on the provocation, doesn't it?" he asked.

"I suppose so, but after all, criminals don't as a rule harbour a grudge against the police who put them in. They know we're only doing our job."

"Yes, that's so—if we play fair."

"Mr. Venning told me that Hinde had accused Captain Scole of cooking evidence. I take it there's nothing in that?"

Poole paused enquiringly. He was beginning to set some store by what his companion would tell him. Behind the stereotyped military manner and rather wooden expression of the Brodshire Inspector, there clearly lay an alert intelligence. A dull man would not so quickly have spotted the University training; Poole *knew* that his speech was free from any taint of undergraduate affectation.

"The Super will have given you the official story", said Tallard. "He'd be bound to, anyway; he was in the force at the time, and the Captain was his Chief then. But I wasn't, and although I can't speak first-hand, I don't feel the same obligation to varnish facts—as I've been told them. I take it

you're here to help us, and, as I see it, it's our job to help you. If you want to find the truth, you've got to be told the truth, even if it ain't pretty."

He took a pull at his tankard. Poole waited in silence; this sounded promising.

"Captain Scole came here to smash the poaching gangs", continued Tallard. "He had a reputation as a hard man, and the nobs chose him for that. He'd got to start with a big splash and he didn't mind how he got it. That poor devil Love was shoved out to be eaten, like I've heard they do with bullocks when they go tiger-shooting in India. There was a fight and Love got shot. Mind you, Hinde was a hard nut; he didn't mind much what he did and he wasn't going to get caught without a scrap. But Love was shot when they were struggling with him to get his gun—manslaughter, if you like. But that didn't satisfy the Captain; he wanted a hanging. He was there, with a young sergeant and a couple of constables, waiting for the tiger. He swore on oath in the box that Hinde shot Love deliberate—grabbed his gun and shot him deliberate. The young sergeant and the constables didn't dare say opposite to him; the sergeant backed him up and the constables swore they couldn't see exactly what happened. The jury believed the Captain and found Hinde guilty, but mind you, Hinde *knows* it was a frame up and that Scole deliberately swore his life away. Can you wonder that Hinde's had it in for him all these years?"

Tallard spoke calmly, but Poole could see that his sympathy was not all for the murdered Chief Constable.

"H'm. Not a pretty story", he said. "Sure it's true?"

Tallard shrugged his shoulder.

"Told you I couldn't speak first-hand", he said, "—but I didn't get that from the poachers."

Poole realized that this version of the old story, if it *were* true, gave a very decided air of possibility to the revenge theory. Hitherto he had regarded that theory with suspicion; it had seemed beyond all reason that a man should harbour a grudge against a police-officer for twenty years and then, immediately on his release from prison, risk his life to satisfy it. But if Captain Scole had deliberately doctored the evidence so as to bring about the man's death—well, that in itself amounted to something very like attempted murder and Hinde's action assumed a much more comprehensible aspect.

"What became of the others?" he asked. "There were three altogether, weren't there?"

"They got theirs in the War", replied Tallard. "Short sentences and release to serve King and Country and get a bullet in their guts; while the chap who was sentenced to death was kept comfortably at home in a shell-proof dug-out fit for red-tabs. Rum thing, justice."

He pulled slowly at the pipe which he had re-lit. Poole watched him curiously. This man evidently had strong feelings, which probably did not often find a chance of expression. It was a characteristic common, Poole had realised, to many men who had suffered severe nerve strain in the war.

"Yes, I've heard many instances of that", he said, "conscientious objectors, of course, and criminals, and men who shot themselves to get away from the line."

"S.I.Ws!" Tallard laughed grimly. "I saw one of them get something he didn't expect. Shot the top of his finger off the night we were going up into the line for a show. Doc. patched him up and sent him in and his own rear-rank man put a bullet through him when we went over. There'd been an epidemic of it—weak C.O. and M.O. This doctor was posted specially to us to tighten things up and the old soldiers were sick of having to do dirty work for the shirkers; they made up their minds to stop it—and they did. The other S.I.W. candidates heard all about that bullet."

"Example", said Poole. "Yes, it is useful. I suppose that was what Captain Scole thought; 'the end justifies the means'."

Tallard shot a quick glance at him, but made no comment. The pair sat in silence for a few minutes, each busy with his own thoughts; then Tallard rose to his feet and said he must be going. Poole followed him out and the two Inspectors strolled through the streets till Poole was within easy reach of his lodgings, when they parted with friendly 'good-nights'.

Sergeant Gower did not come in for another half-hour, but over their supper he reported to Poole his own doings. He also had made for a public-house, but not with another policeman. His idea was to get in touch with the gossip of the town, and for this he chose a house where he thought the smaller tradesmen might foregather.

"*The Honest Measure* looked like the place I wanted", he said, "so I pushed into the private bar and ordered a pint. It was early and there were only two other fellows in there but they'd got their heads together with the landlord and it didn't take me long to catch the name 'Hinde'. I've got good ears and I kept them pricked, but I didn't hear much. Using my eyes and powers of deduction, same as you've taught me, sir, I placed one of these chaps as a grocer and the other as a tailor. Grocer was a big, hearty-looking chap, with a fruity voice; tailor was older and quieter but it was him they

seemed to be listening to. I heard him say '. . . never been back at all', and the other said: 'Oh, go it mild', but nothing more, so I thought it was time to shove my oar in. I borrowed a match and then let on that I was travelling in bibles—thought that was safe ground with any of those three. Said it was thirsty work and asked them to drink with me. We had a port each—my suggestion—mellows 'em quicker than beer. After you with the pepper, Mr. Poole."

"Don't know that I can pass port", said Poole with a smile. "They've cut us very close on our expenses since '31."

"I'll risk that, sir. Well, I chipped in about the murder. Of course, it's the one thing everyone's talking about now, so it came quite natural. Let on that I fancied myself in the amateur sleuth line and asked what made 'em all so sure it *was* Hinde that had done it. 'That's what Mr. Vardell here was saying', chipped in Grocer. 'He's got an idea . . .' 'Now, Dilling, don't you go airing my ideas', shoves in Tailor. 'Police won't like it if my ideas get about'. 'You're on the same line as I am', says I; 'mighty convenient this talk about an ex-convict, but where's he got to? Who's ever seen him, anyway?' 'Why, Chief Constable saw him himself!' declares Grocer. 'How d'you know that?' asked Tailor, sharp. 'He's dead; for all we know the police are making that up'. 'Well, what about the boy that brought the note?' asks Grocer. 'Young Wissel? D'you know his father? Well, I do; swear his mother was a man if you gave him sixpence to. Likely enough this boy's a liar too.' 'But he brought the note; they can't have invented the note', says Grocer. 'P'raps not, but how do we know who wrote it or who gave it to Wissel? How do we know this Hinde story isn't all cock and bull to hide something else? There's more in this than meets the eye, gentlemen; mark my words'. Well, sir, we talked on for a bit and I tried to find out whether the little man had got any reason for his ideas, but I couldn't make out that he had, and I came to the conclusion that he was just trying to be smarter than the rest. So I said good-night and came home to my supper."

Poole was inclined to agree, but he decided that it would be worth while having a talk to the boy Wissel, who was, after all, the only living witness to Albert Hinde's return. No, that was not quite true; Hinde had been seen at Corsington station, but that identification had only been made after the police enquiries had begun; Poole knew from bitter experience how fertile was the imagination of many witnesses under such circumstances. So far as was known, the only person who had seen—or was supposed to have seen—Hinde on the previous evening, was Captain Scole, and he was dead. The idea that the police had invented that story seemed preposterous, but Poole decided to probe the matter carefully before he accepted it as a fact.

[4] Monday, 20th November.

CHAPTER VIII

TESTING A THEORY

BEFORE going to bed that night, Poole thought carefully over the line which his investigations should follow. Discussing the case with Chief Constable Thurston before leaving Scotland Yard, he had learnt that the routine machinery of the man-hunt was already in full operation; that could be safely left to his superior officers. It was his job to discover whether the local police had missed any clue which might lead to the discovery of Hinde's whereabouts. Still more was it his job to make quite sure that the theory so far officially accepted was the right one. He must approach the case with an open mind, test every link of the evidence upon which it was based, and accept nothing as a fact until he had established it to his own satisfaction. This attitude obviously would require a good deal of tact if it were not to antagonize the police-officers who had already made up their minds, the more so as Poole now realized that his presence was far from welcome to the acting-Chief Constable.

On what then did the theory rest? Albert Hinde had recently been released from Fieldhurst. That was established fact. After reporting his address as his wife's house at Woolham in Chassex he had left there without, according to regulations, notifying any change of address; also established fact. He had then stopped Captain Scole in a lonely spot on the evening of Wednesday, 8th November; statement by the police, but the only witness being dead, he, Poole, must do his best to confirm it. On that occasion Hinde was believed to have threatened Captain Scole, but exactly what the threat had been Poole did not know. On the following morning Hinde had stopped a boy—again in a lonely spot—and given him a letter to deliver at Police Headquarters; the boy Wissel was the only witness, so far as was at present known, and the fact required to be established by careful investigation. Hinde—or someone like him—had then been seen leaving Corsington station, seventeen miles away from the spot where Wissel had seen him, in a stopping train bound for London; that fact again must be established. From that moment he had not been seen again, so far as was known, and his connection with the actual murder on the following Monday, four days later, was largely a matter of assumption.

That fact, which he had hardly grasped until he came to think things over, seemed to Poole a very important point in the problem which he had to elucidate. What was definitely known about that Monday amounted to little more than two bangs and a dead body, together with a pistol—the victim's own—two bullets and two spent shells. There was also the rather vague story of the Chief Clerk's door, which might be pure imagination. The marks on the rain-water pipes might have a bearing on the case, but it was perfectly possible that they had nothing to do with it. The police theory about an ascent to the roof and a descent, either by undiscovered means through the landing window or by way of the same water-pipe, was pure guess-work. Superintendent Venning seemed now to favour the idea of a shot fired from outside the Chief Constable's window.

Poole moved restlessly in his chair. He could not somehow bring that scene to life. Knowing something of pistols and pistol-shooting, it seemed to him incredible that anyone but an expert could shoot a man through the forehead at a range of something like twelve feet, while perched precariously on a window-sill with one hand grasping a rain-water pipe. And what opportunities of pistol practice had Albert Hinde had during his twenty years' imprisonment? But the other theory seemed even more incredible; apart from the difficulty of getting in by the landing window, and the risk of being found in so doing, how could Hinde have got himself from the door to a position between the desk and the window—the line of fire which all the evidence tended to confirm? Surely, if Captain Scole had not instantly fired at him at the door, he would have had time to ring his bell while that movement was taking place.

Again Poole felt that the picture was not true to life. He could not picture the scene. Heaving himself out of his chair, he determined that this theory of access and escape should be his first line of investigation on the morrow.

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Tuesday morning broke in a drizzle of fine rain, but by nine o'clock it had cleared and at that hour Poole presented himself at Headquarters and asked for leave to carry out some experiments on the roof. Superintendent Venning assented, without any great display of enthusiasm, and asked if he wanted any help, but the detective assured him that none was required.[5] The little courtyard, on to which the Chief Constable's window and the landing window both looked, was reached by a passage which was not open to the public, nor was the scene of action overlooked by any window, so Poole did not hesitate to set to work in daylight. Sergeant Gower had provided himself

with a length of strong cord, thin enough not to be bulky but strong enough to carry a man's weight. Gower was an active man and something of a gymnast, but he found it no easy matter to swarm up the rain-water pipe which Hinde was supposed to have used, and he reached the roof in anything but a good temper, having suffered considerable damage to his fingers and clothes. Poole reached it by the easier and more dignified line of the staircase and trap-door. The first task was to search the roof for any clues which Sergeant Bannister might have missed, but this proved fruitless. Then, having located the landing window, Poole examined the parapet with minute care, but could find no signs of recent marks or scratches. He then hunted over the chimney stack from which, if at all, Hinde must have lowered himself, but this was equally uninformative. Finally, the cord was passed round the stack, the two ends lowered over the parapet until they dangled in front of the landing window, and Sergeant Gower gingerly climbed over and let himself down.

The first thing he did was to put his foot through a pane of glass, but Hinde might be expected to avoid that blunder. Having landed on the sill Gower proceeded to climb in, and found this to be a much more ticklish business than he had anticipated, but at last he was safely in the passage, sweating and shaking and in no condition to hold a pistol steady. Then he found that he had forgotten to pull the rope down after him and he had to lean out of the window, tugging at one end till he had hauled the other up and round the stack, when it fell past him in a heap and struck the side door with a sharp smack.

"Nice silent cat-burglar you'ld make", said Poole, when he joined his subordinate *viâ* the trap-door and the store-room. "And a nice mark your rope has made on the chimney and the coping. However Hinde got in, it wasn't that way."

"Thank you, sir", said Gower, "then I've had that little joy-ride for nothing."

"Not at all; negative information is often of the first importance—as you'ld know if you'd studied your Field Service Regulations."

With unexpected tact, Superintendent Venning had announced his intention of going out for the morning and had handed the key of the Chief Constable's room to the C.I.D. man, so that he could carry out any investigations and experiments he liked, at his leisure. Poole unlocked the door, went in, and sat himself down in the Chief Constable's chair. After a couple of minutes' thought he turned to Sergeant Gower.

"As he didn't come in by the landing window, it must have been done the other way", he said. "I'll sit here and be Captain Scole; you hop up to the roof again and come down the water-pipe, perch on the sill, and have a shot at me through the window. I bet I get you first."

Sergeant Gower looked at his damaged knuckles.

"I'll do as you tell me, sir, of course", he said, "but don't you think there's a simpler way than that?"

"Simpler way of what?"

"Simpler way for Hinde to have got into the building, sir."

"How d'you mean?"

"Well, I climbed up the water-pipe, but how did you get on to the roof, sir?"

"In at the front door, up the stairs, and through the trap-door in the store-room. You're not suggesting that a man the whole force were looking out for did that, are you?" asked Poole sarcastically.

"No, sir", replied Gower, with the patience of a governess speaking to a child. "I don't doubt he went up the way I went up, but how did you come down off the roof?"

"Through the . . . good God! you mean he may have come down the way I did! Through the trap-door into the store-room and so into the passage?"

"Yes, sir, easy enough matter coming down. Drop through the trap into an empty room, open the door quietly, peep down the passage to make sure no one's about, only two other doors, open the first one very quietly—wrong room—shut it very quietly, try the other one—there's my man—bang!"

"Gower, you're a genius! Or rather, you're a man of ordinary common-sense and all the rest of us are drivelling half-wits. Just because that passage window was unexpectedly open we thought he must have used it; couldn't have got *out* by it because Jason would have seen him, so he must have got *in* by it. Couldn't have got up on to the roof *viâ* the trap-door, so we have to think of another damn-fool elaborate way of his getting down off the roof. The thing's as simple as kiss-my-hand!"

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir", replied Sergeant Gower gently.

Poole's face fell.

"Yes, but that doesn't meet my principal difficulty about this passage theory", he said.

"Sorry about that, sir; perhaps I . . ."

"No, I don't want any more bright ideas at the moment, Gower. We'll do a bit of reconstruction first. Go out into the passage again, and then come in at that door as quietly as you can and see if you can get in front of the table before I spot you. I'll be writing. Take your time over it."

Taking a sheet of foolscap, Poole bent over the writing pad and started to draft his report to Chief Constable Thurston, trying to concentrate on what he was writing and not think of the door or Sergeant Gower. It was not easy, but he had trained himself to isolate his mind from its surroundings, and in a minute or two he was genuinely at work on the report. His chief would want to know what sort of help he was getting from the County force; Superintendent Venning's attitude was important, in that it might . . . .

A gentle click switched his attention back to his surroundings; he looked up sharply and saw the door slowly opening. . . .

"That's no good, Gower", he said. "You must turn that handle more quietly."

"I've been trying to, sir", said Sergeant Gower putting his head in at the door, "but it's infernal stiff."

"Try again."

Sergeant Gower tried again—with the same result. Poole was no more successful; the handle was stiff and refused to turn without a slight click.

"Perhaps the Captain was deaf, sir?" suggested Sergeant Gower.

Poole grunted.

"Well, leave it ajar, then, and see if you can get in front of the table as I told you."

Again the detective concentrated on his report and in five minutes was deep in the construction of it. Suddenly he looked up with a jerk. Sergeant Gower, murder in his eye, had taken one stealthy stride into the room.

"I didn't *hear* you that time; I felt you. I *knew* there was someone coming into the room."

"I daresay the Captain wasn't so sensitive as you, sir", suggested Sergeant Gower comfortingly; "you were expecting me; Captain Scole may have been hard at work or something, not expecting any. . . ."

"Not expecting? A man whose life's been threatened . . . or who thinks his life's been threatened? A man who's got a pistol under his right hand?"

"Oh, well, sir; he may have forgotten a minute."

Sergeant Gower's voice was soothing—maddeningly soothing, thought Poole.

“Here, you have a try, Gower; perhaps you’re not so ‘sensitive’ as I am. Sit down and write a letter to your best girl.”

“But I’m a married man, sir!”

“Oh, hell; write an application for a month’s leave, then—anything that’ll make you forget what we’re doing. I’ll be Hinde.”

It was no good. Try as he would, stealthily, swiftly, slowly, whichever way he tried, Sergeant Gower had got him covered before he was in line with the window above which the Chief Constable’s bullet had struck. It was not certain, of course, that that bullet had been fired at the murderer; it might, as Dr. Pugh had suggested, have been a completely wild shot, fired at the moment of, or even after, death, by a convulsive muscular contraction. As Sergeant Gower had suggested, too, Captain Scole might have been so absorbed in what he was writing that he really did not notice the murderer coming in until the shadow fell across his page—but in that case it seemed unlikely that he would have got his hand to his pistol at all. It was all inconclusive—this theorising—but . . . all the time, at the back of Poole’s mind there lurked a horrible, growing sense of doubt . . . there was such a hideously simple explanation of the problem.

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[5] See Frontispiece.

CHAPTER IX

IDENTIFICATION DOUBTS

POOLE abruptly broke off his experiments in reconstruction.

"If we want to do any more of that" he explained to Sergeant Gower, "we must get somebody in Captain Scole's place who doesn't know what we're up to."

"You don't want me to come down the water-pipe to this window, then, sir?" enquired his assistant hopefully.

"Not at the moment. We'll leave it till we've been into these appearances of Albert Hinde."

Poole had thought the matter out overnight. He must leave the question of Hinde's encounter with the Chief Constable until Superintendent Venning returned, but the two appearances on the following day could be tackled at once. He sent Sergeant Gower off to make enquiries at Corsington Station, and he himself rang up the Headmaster of Brodbury Grammar School and asked if he might have a talk with Jack Wissel. The Headmaster did not want the boy to leave his class during work hours; still less did he want police-officers appearing at the school and setting up a ferment of curiosity and excitement; so he invited Poole to his own house, where Jack Wissel should be during the mid-day break.

This suited Poole well enough too. He spent the next hour in seriously tackling his report, and then walked down to the school. The Headmaster's house was conveniently situated in a corner of the school grounds, near enough for him to be considered on the spot, but sufficiently isolated to give him a chance of shaking off scholastic atmosphere when he was at home. Mr. Boulding was an elderly man in the traditional style and manner; he raised his eyebrows slightly at the sight of Poole—no doubt he had expected a large man with a heavy moustache and massive feet—and asked whether he would prefer to conduct his interview in the presence of the headmaster or alone. Poole smilingly suggested that the boy would be more likely to speak freely if his headmaster were not present, and Mr. Boulding graciously agreed.

To Jack Wissel the interview was one of undiluted enjoyment. The detective put him at his ease at once and the boy rattled away with his story

as if it had been pent up inside him for weeks, whereas in fact he had told it at least twenty times a day during the last ten days. Poole let him talk, without interruption, so as to form his own estimate of the boy's character and reliability. He came to the conclusion that Jack was probably straight enough, and truthful within his light, but that a fairly vivid imagination had already been at work in colouring a good story.

"Tell me exactly how you first saw him", he said, when the stream was at last exhausted; "was he walking or standing in the middle of the road, or did he jump out at you, or what?"

Jack thought a moment.

"I think he'd been sitting in the hedge, sir, or on a gate", he said. "He stepped out into the road when I was still about fifty yards away."

"Rather as if he'd been waiting for you and then saw you coming?"

"It was rather like that, sir, now I come to think of it."

"Any reason why he should have been expecting you?"

"Only perhaps that I always bike along that road at about that time."

"You hadn't seen him before?"

"No, sir; not that I know of."

"What did he say, exactly?"

"He held out his hand and said: 'Hi, sonny, you going into Brodbury?' and I said: 'Yes', and he said: 'Well, chuck this in at police headquarters, will you?' and then turned and walked away before I could ask any more."

"You didn't follow him?"

"No, sir; he was a rum-looking chap."

"We'll come to that. How far did you watch him? Till he was out of sight?"

"No, sir, only ten or twenty yards. I hadn't got too much time if I was to go to police headquarters, so I hopped off."

"You didn't see any sign of him having a bicycle?"

"No, sir."

"Right. Now what about his appearance?"

Jack's eye brightened.

"He was a Tough Guy, sir", he announced, for about the two hundredth time.

Poole smiled. He recognized the jargon.

“Just like the pictures of him that are stuck up all over the shop”, continued Jack.

Poole realized that the value of Jack’s evidence from the point of view of identification had been largely destroyed by those police posters. The thing was blatantly thrust at him, like a conjuror ‘forcing’ a card. Poole had not now the slightest doubt that the boy believed he had seen Albert Hinde, and had certainly seen someone very like him, but the possibility of impersonation had to be borne in mind.

“Wait a minute”, he said; “think very carefully about that. Was the man you saw really exactly like the photographs of Albert Hinde on the bills, or was he only rather like?”

Jack Wissel concentrated on thought—evidently rather an effort to him, his *forte* being quick impressions.

“Well, sir”, he said at last, “he certainly was *jolly* like them. P’raps he didn’t look quite such a guy as he does in the pictures—but pretty bad.”

Poole would have liked to sound the boy on the possibility of the man having been ‘made up’, but he didn’t believe that any oath of secrecy would stop him from talking about such an exciting suggestion, and the detective did not want that idea to get about—at any rate for the present. But how was he to establish the fact that this really had been Hinde?—the boy would now simply recognize and swear to the pictures.

“You can’t describe anything about him, that doesn’t show in the pictures?” he tried.

Again Jack pondered.

“There was his hand”, he suggested.

“His hand? What about it?”

“The tattooing. The one that held out the letter had a ship tattooed on it.”

Poole drew from his pocket a copy of the bill with which all Brodshire was plastered. The hands were not shown in the photographs but in the letter-press there appeared: “Distinguishing marks: Body heavily tattooed. On the right hand a ship, on the left a girl’s head . . . etc. . . . etc. . . .” Hopeless.

“I noticed it special”, declared Jack, “because I’m keen on ships. It was a three-masted schooner.”

“What?”

“A three-m . . . .”

“Yes, sorry; I heard all right. You’re quite sure of that?”

"Ab-so-lutely."

Here was something more promising. There was nothing about three masts in the bill. It might be possible to check that point.

"And there was his spit."

"Spit?"

"Yes; he'd got a tooth missing and he had a way of curling up his lip and spitting through the gap. Rather beastly but jolly neat."

"Jack", said Poole, "if you don't become a film-star or a gangster, let me know and I'll get you made a detective. It's chaps who notice things like that that we want. I've known men hung by less than that."

So the interview ended in a blaze of satisfaction—except to the headmaster, who thought young Wissel in much too excited a frame of mind to settle down well to his afternoon studies, and regretted not having insisted on being present.

Poole, for his part, felt that whereas a clever man might have made himself up sufficiently like Albert Hinde to deceive the Chief Constable—who had not seen Hinde for twenty years—in a dark wood, and to have given a fourteen year old boy a general impression of resemblance to a photograph, and though he might even have gone as far as painting a ship on his hand, it was most unlikely that he would have gone into such exact detail as the 'three-mastd schooner'. But the detail of the 'spit', if confirmed, would be absolutely convincing; even if the gap and the habit were known to the impersonator, it was incredible that he would have sacrificed a tooth for the benefit of one small boy.

And after all, where did this idea of impersonation come from? His own imagination, with nothing but an uneasy fancy to support it. As he walked back to his lodging for lunch, Poole read himself a lecture upon the perils of trying to be too clever.

In the afternoon he returned to Headquarters but found that Superintendent Venning was not expected back till evening. The acting-Chief Constable was taking advantage of the arrival of the Scotland Yard man to get round his county for the first time since he had taken over his new duties. Poole decided to fill in the time of waiting by having a talk with Superintendent Jason, with whom so far he had only exchanged a few words of formal greeting.

The Chief Clerk received him with a friendly smile and offered a case of excellent Egyptian cigarettes. He enquired politely how the C.I.D. man's investigations were progressing.

"Not progressing at all, so far as definite facts are concerned", replied Poole, lighting his cigarette. "I've been doing what's officially called 'absorbing atmosphere'—which means having a talk with everyone connected with the case and trying to pick their brains. I'm hoping to pick yours now."

Superintendent Jason laughed.

"Not much good coming to me", he said; "I'm only Chief Clerk. The acting-Chief Constable and Inspector Parry have done all the investigating."

"Quite. Still, you've got your own ideas about it all, I don't doubt", said Poole. "D'you agree with their theory?"

"About who did it?"

"Yes—to begin with."

"Yes, I don't see how you can get away from it. Mind you, when there was all the fuss about Hinde waylaying the Chief in Brodley Woods, and the threatening letter, and so on, I thought—I don't mind owning it—that it was all a lot of bunkum. I didn't believe for a minute that he meant to do more than put the wind up the Chief—and he did that all right. But . . . well, I was wrong."

"You were serving, of course, when Hinde was tried?"

"Yes, but I wasn't in the case; I was a constable in this division and I was in court at the Assizes when he was convicted. He was a dangerous-looking man, I'm bound to admit. But that he should come out of a twenty-year stretch and shove his neck straight back into the halter . . . and advertise his intentions . . . well, it seemed beyond all reason."

Poole nodded.

"And where d'you think he's got to?" he asked. "D'you agree that he's hiding in the woods somewhere?"

"Hiding in the woods!" exclaimed Jason contemptuously. "Of course he isn't. He's been working on this game for twenty years. You don't think he didn't work out a better plan than that? A chap that could warn the police of what he was up to and then walk right through us and shoot our Chief in his chair! No, you can bet your life he'd fixed a better getaway than that."

"Such as?"

The Chief Clerk looked at Poole thoughtfully.

"You are picking my brains, aren't you! I thought you C.I.D. fellows had got the monopoly. Well, I'm not a dog-in-the-manger. I'll tell what I should have done. You know what his description is—broken nose, discoloured

teeth, heavy shoulders, slouch, and all the rest of it. Well, you look for a man who doesn't look like that. Why did he show himself to the Chief and to young Wissel? So that that description should be set about. When he'd shown himself he went straight up to London. You hunt round all the dentists in London for a man who had all his old stumps pulled out on that Thursday or Friday and a temporary set put in. That's the first thing he'd have done. Then he'd have bought some putty for his nose and a little grease paint—ask Willie Clarkson and his friends about that—and a neat black moustache, probably. Then go up to the 'bus station at the top of the square and ask all the conductors who come in whether they had a passenger last Monday night at about half-past five, with a well-shaped nose and good teeth and a neat moustache and clean-shaven and holding himself as straight as a ramrod. That's Albert Hinde—that was."

Poole stared at his companion in blank astonishment.

"You mean he changed his appearance completely between his two appearances—between showing himself to Wissel and shooting the Chief Constable?"

"Of course he did! And had a shave on the roof on Monday morning, after slipping up there on Sunday night. When he'd come down the water-pipe after shooting the Chief, he brushed his clothes and walked quietly out of that passage into the street and up the square, carrying a little black bag with his shaving kit and the pistol in it. Ex-sergeant-major turned traveller he looked like. I shouldn't wonder."

"And where d'you think he is now?" asked Poole.

"Where all good murderers go, of course—London", replied Jason. "He'll be staying in bed in some little lodging-house in Peckham, waiting for a real moustache to grow. Landlady never reads the nasty newspapers, bless her heart, and in any case her nice Mr. Hopkins isn't a bit like that dreadful murderer in the pictures."

Poole was silent for a moment.

"What does Mr. Venning think of that idea?" he asked.

Jason shrugged his shoulders.

"Doesn't know it. Hasn't asked for any ideas. Chief Clerk's job to get on with the paper routine, not to do any *thinking*."

Poole felt an instinctive dislike of the man growing in him, but he didn't show it.

"Very ingenious theory," he said. "I'll follow your advice. Now I wonder whether you'd tell me about your door opening that evening. You think it

was Hinde mistaking the room?"

"Seems like it. I can't find anyone else who can have done it."

"And you're quite certain about it?"

A quick look of annoyance crossed Superintendent Jason's face. He rose from his chair.

"You were doing a bit of reconstruction this morning, I believe", he said. "Now sit down in my chair and be me for a change. Working hard, mind you."

Poole sat down and pretended to write. A minute later the papers on the table fluttered; he looked up and saw the door gently closing. A glance showed him the reason—the writing-table was exactly between the open window and the closing door.

"Pretty convincing", he said, when Superintendent Jason returned. After a little more talk, he thanked the Chief Clerk and walked back to his lodging, realising clearly enough that the official theory was in a fair way to being proved. He found that Sergeant Gower had just returned, bearing still further confirmation. The stationmaster and two porters at Corsington had seen Hinde—or a man answering the description of Hinde—and were prepared to swear his life away in the witness box. The moment the Greyshire Sergeant had appeared, making enquiries, on Thursday, the 9th of November, they had recognized his description of the wanted man as a passenger on the 10.35 a.m. up train. Subsequently seen photographs had confirmed them in their identification.

"Clear enough there, sir, I think", said Sergeant Gower. "I had a bit of luck after I'd seen them; found I'd missed the 'bus and should have to wait a couple of hours for the next, and then I picked up a lift . . . who d'you think from? . . . that tailor fellow, Vardell, I told you about—him who was yarning with the grocer in the *Honest Measure* last night—only he turned out not to be a tailor at all, but a traveller in patent medicines. Lucky I stuck to bibles. He comes down here twice a year for a week and does a tour of the villages round. Knows the place well. He's full of gossip about it all. Soon as he realised I wasn't a local—I stuck to my bible story—he started talking good and proper. Said the place was rotten with corruption and the police the worst of the lot. Bribery, commissions . . . I don't know what he hadn't got against them. His theory is that the Chief Constable had got his hand on to something and the police put him out of the way themselves!"

Poole looked sharply at his companion, but it was evident that Sergeant Gower was taking the whole thing as a joke. It was sometimes a blessed

thing, thought the younger man, not to be gifted with a vivid imagination. Again a picture rose in his mind's eye—a picture that had haunted him all the morning—Captain Scole holding out his hand for one more paper to sign—raising his eyes to give one more order—and looking into the muzzle of a murderer's pistol.

* * * * *

That evening Poole found Superintendent Venning in a more agreeable frame of mind and judged that the acting-Chief Constable was feeling the better for his day's outing. He enquired politely how the detective's investigations were proceeding, and showed suitable appreciation of Sergeant Gower's brain-wave as to the intruder's line of access. Poole refrained from mentioning the Chief Clerk's theory as to the line of retreat; he did not want to stir up trouble between the two Superintendents.

"There were two things I wanted to ask you, sir", he said. "One is whether you have any detailed record of the tattooing on Hinde's hands. I know what the bills say, but I thought there might be some more detailed record taken at the time of his trial in 1913."

Superintendent Venning touched his bell and in a few seconds the Chief Clerk appeared; hearing what was wanted, he fetched Hinde's *dossier*, but it contained nothing more detailed than had already appeared on the bills. It was obviously no use referring to twenty-year-old records for details of a missing tooth and a habit of spitting.

"The other thing I wanted to know about", said Poole when Superintendent Jason had withdrawn, "is just what Captain Scole said he had seen that evening in Brodley Woods."

Superintendent Venning looked sharply at his companion.

"What d'you mean?" he asked.

"I mean, did he give you an exact description of Hinde? Did it tally with Wissel's description and with the official description?"

Superintendent Venning seemed to have some hesitation in answering. When he did speak, his voice had a less friendly note.

"He told me he had seen Hinde", he said. "I didn't cross-examine him about the man's appearance. I understand that when the boy Wissel described him, the Chief agreed that it was the same man—I wasn't present on that occasion."

"Did you gather that Hinde told Captain Scole who he was, or did he recognise him—after twenty years?"

Superintendent Venning pushed back his chair and rose abruptly to his feet.

"What's the point of all this?" he asked sharply.

"Only that I want to make quite sure that Captain Scole *did* see Hinde", replied the detective quietly.

Venning stared at him, then slowly sank back into his chair.

"Are you suggesting that the Chief invented the whole story?" he asked, "or that we did?"

"Not for a minute, sir, but the possibility of impersonation has got to be borne in mind."

"Impersonation?!"

The idea seemed to astonish Superintendent Venning. Poole wondered whether he was not, perhaps, rather a stupid man. However, having grasped the idea, the acting-Chief Constable did not seem to think much of it. To him the case was quite straightforward and it was waste of time trying to turn it upside down and be clever with it. However, that was the C.I.D. man's job. He only hoped that in the meantime Albert Hinde would not have completely and finally disappeared.

The two men parted on much the same terms as on the previous day. Superintendent Venning soon afterwards took himself off to his own house for the high tea that he preferred to a meat supper. All through the meal he was silent, and afterwards, sitting in his armchair with his comfortable slippers and a pipe, he let the latter go out and stared into the fire instead of reading the *Express* which lay unfolded across his lap. Mrs. Venning watched him in anxious silence, but at last could endure it no longer.

"Is your heartburn worrying you, dear?" she murmured.

Venning shook his head.

"It's that damn young busybody from London", he growled. "Coming down here and stirring up trouble."

"But don't you want him to find out who killed the poor Captain?"

Mrs. Venning's gentle heart could not get over the fact that the dead man had been on the point of coming to live under her roof; she regarded him almost as one of the family, and mourned him accordingly.

"I know who killed him", snapped her husband. "Hinde killed him."

He relapsed back into silence, still staring at the glowing coals. Mrs. Venning watched him covertly for a time; then:

“You know, dear; you don’t really believe that”, she murmured.

CHAPTER X

PRIVATE AFFAIRS

POOLE was not too proud to follow up another man's ideas. Before going to bed he wrote to Chief Constable Thurston, explaining Superintendent Jason's theory of Hinde's disappearance and suggesting that the Metropolitan Police might show a little quiet solicitude for bed-ridden male lodgers in their districts. On Wednesday morning he put Sergeant Gower on to interrogating 'bus and coach conductors, especially those on the London route, suggesting various alternative make-ups which Hinde might have adopted. He himself strolled down to the administrative offices of the County Council.

A County Constabulary is administered by a body known as the Standing Joint Committee, composed as to half by magistrates nominated by Quarter Sessions—the court of County Magistrates assembled for the administration of justice—and as to half by members of the County Council, nominated by that body. This Committee alone is empowered to vote the funds to be provided for police purposes, which funds are found in part from the Exchequer—subject to the approval of expenditure by the Home Office—and in part from the County rates. Except for their representation on the Committee, the County Council have no control over police expenditure, and have, with what grace they may, to provide whatever sums are demanded by the Standing Joint Committee. The accounts are, however, kept by the County Accountant, so that the County Finance Committee, while having no control, have at least fairly detailed knowledge of what expenditure is being incurred.

Poole was sufficiently well versed in these facts to know that if he wanted to enquire into police finance without going to the police themselves, the person to apply to was the County Accountant. He did not attach any great weight to the sweeping statements of Sergeant Gower's patent-medicine traveller, but experience had taught him that in a puzzling case no clue, or even hint, was too small to be ignored. Accordingly he sent in a 'Personal' note to the official in question, asking for an interview and, while explaining his official identity, asking that it should not be revealed.

Mr. Mavering was an elderly man, who had been in the service of the County Council for nearly forty years, rising step by step in his department

until, shortly after the War, he had become its head. Poole realised that he would have to go very warily in making any suggestion affecting the honour of Brodshire County administration, even in the more or less detached branch of Police. He began by explaining that in all investigations of this kind it was a matter of routine that all aspects of the question should be examined. This axiom Mr. Mavering acknowledged with a courtly bow.

"In the crime of murder", continued Poole, "the commonest of all motives is money. Ignoring for the moment the generally accepted theory—in this case, of revenge—I am bound to enquire into the possibility of a money motive. That includes not only a direct gain of money as a consequence of the murder, but the fear of exposure of some financial fraud. The question of direct gain I needn't trouble you with, Mr. Mavering; that almost certainly would be connected with Captain Scole's private life; but fear of exposure might well be connected with his official duties."

The County Accountant's face was getting long and Poole hurried to reassure him.

"Don't misunderstand me, sir, please", he urged. "I am making no accusation or suggestion; I am only asking for your help and advice in a routine enquiry. I understand that though you have no direct control over police expenditure, the accounts do pass through your hands. You will appreciate that I can't very well ask these questions at Police headquarters, so I come to you. Is there any possible loophole for fraud in police finance?"

Mr. Mavering tugged at his handsome grey moustache.

"This is a very grave suggestion, Inspector", he said; "very grave and distressing. I appreciate your point and I realise that it is hardly even a suggestion, but I am bound to say that in forty years' experience of local government administration this is the first time that a shadow of suspicion has been cast upon our very admirable body of police."

Poole felt that a reproof had been administered, but he was determined to get behind this armour of administrative righteousness.

"I'm very glad to hear, sir, that you have never had any unpleasant experiences, but of course you must realise that such cases do occur from time to time. There is, as you know, a case *sub judice* at the present moment."

"Not in England, Inspector; not in England", asserted Mr. Mavering, as if the morals of the other three kingdoms were on a different standard.

"No, sir; not this one. But . . . is there such a possibility in Brodshire?"

The County Accountant frowned and committed himself to thought.

"I don't see how such a thing could possibly happen", he said at last, "without, that is, my becoming aware of it. You are not, I imagine, suggesting that I am a party to this fraud?"

"I'm not suggesting anything, sir", replied the detective patiently.

"In that case it is clearly impossible. All receipts come direct into the County Funds and payments are made by me on requisitions signed by the Chief Constable. You are not, I suppose, suggesting that the Chief Constable himself . . . ah, no; you are not suggesting anything. To continue; the Chief Constable certifies his requirements and has to satisfy me by the minutes of his committee that expenditure has been approved. Naturally, my department checks all such requisitions before they are met. The receipts for such payments are also checked by this department, so that unless those receipts are forged, which implies fraud upon a colossal scale, and one that must inevitably be discovered before long, it is difficult to see what loophole there can be."

"It wouldn't be possible, for instance, for a requisition to be made for pay for more men than actually are on the strength, or for pensions for men who are dead?"

Mr. Mavering came as near to snorting as his dignity would allow.

"Naturally, I see the pay-sheets of the force, and check the receipts signed by the men and by the pensioners. That is elementary, Inspector."

It might be elementary, thought Poole, but it had been done before now —in other branches of public service at any rate.

"What about fines inflicted in court? Who handles them?"

"They are sent direct to me by the Magistrates' Clerks."

"And disposal of old uniforms when a new lot's issued?"

"That is a matter for the Chief Constable's office, but the payments are made to the County Funds."

"Then there's nothing you can suggest?"

"Nothing. You can take it from me that any question of fraud in connection with police finance is out of the question."

"Nothing, that is, except bribery", suggested Poole, irritated at the official's pompous manner.

Mr. Mavering flushed angrily.

"Such a suggestion in connection with the Brodshire Constabulary could not be made by anyone connected with the County", he declared heavily.

“What may be the standard of public morality in the Metropolitan area is another matter which does not concern me.”

He rose to his feet, and Poole, rather ashamed of himself, took his leave with what grace he could. He had realised, before the interview was half over, that he could look for no intelligent help from this quarter. He determined to try and get in touch with one of the younger and less fossilized members of the department. In the meantime he would look into the other side of the ‘money motive’ problem—the dead man’s private affairs.

Borrowing a bicycle from headquarters, Poole rode out to the late Chief Constable’s house and asked if he might see Mrs. Scole. He was shown into the drawing-room—a cheerless room, much in need of new chintzes and flowers—and was kept waiting some time before the door opened and a tall, well-built girl, in a black coat and skirt, appeared.

“Mother won’t be long”, she began, then stopped and stared at Poole with frank curiosity.

“Are you a detective?” she asked.

“Yes”, replied Poole with a smile. “Do I look very stupid?”

Poole was always ready to ‘Sir’ or ‘Madam’ anybody, but when anyone spoke to him as a human being he had no hesitation in responding in a similar key. Miss Scole smiled and the lighting up of her rather heavy face showed Poole what an attractive girl she would be in more cheerful circumstances. What he had seen of the house and felt of its atmosphere told the detective that, though it was respectable enough and reasonably clean, it was ‘dead’. Why, for instance, in a house with a garden, were there no flowers? There might be no gardener, but what were two women about, not to do at least some elementary gardening for themselves? There must be a strange lack of vitality—of happiness—to account for that.

“I thought you’d be much older”, she said, “and either saturnine or ponderous. You look quite human.”

“I believe I am; that’s rather the old school, Miss Scole. There are some, of course.”

“Well, I’m glad you aren’t, anyway. It will be easier to talk to you. Mother will be down soon, but I make her stay in bed for breakfast now and not get up till eleven. She’s nearly worn out, poor dear.”

Poole nodded.

“I hope she’s not getting up specially for me. I can come back.”

"No, it's all right. Meantime, can I help you at all? Do sit down."

"Did your father tell you anything about meeting this man Hinde on the Wednesday evening before . . . before he was killed?"

Katherine Scole shook her head.

"Not a word", she said, "but then he never told me anything. May have told mother, but not in front of me."

"He didn't appear nervous?"

"I didn't notice it."

Poole hesitated. It was fairly evident that there had been no understanding, no 'touch', between father and daughter. On the other hand, the girl might be more observant about her father's affairs than about his feelings, and—being obviously not sensitive—might be willing to talk about them.

"Apart from being nervous, did it ever strike you that your father was worried—as if anything serious was troubling him?"

The girl shrugged her shoulders.

"Money was always troubling him. He'd got it on the brain. If you spent sixpence you heard all about it."

"He wasn't very well off, I suppose?"

Katherine Scole hesitated, as if uncertain whether to unburden herself to a stranger. But Poole's pleasant face and natural manner encouraged her.

"He made out that he was badly off, at any rate", she said. "He gave me thirty pounds a year to dress on—I don't know whether that conveys anything to a man—and he gave mother fifty pounds for clothes and everything like presents and charity, and two hundred for housekeeping. We've got two servants and a boy who looks after the horse and digs potatoes. I don't know what all that comes to, but it doesn't seem much. I don't know what a Chief Constable gets paid, but it can't be too bad, and I know he had got some investments because he was always groaning about prices going down. Personally I always thought he could have let mother and me have a little more; we never had any fun or theatres or holidays—hardly any books, and we never entertained, so no one entertained us. But perhaps he spent it on things we didn't know about."

Katherine broke off and stared into the fire. Poole respected her silence. It couldn't have been pleasant for her to tell a stranger things about her private life—her dress allowance and so on; he did not feel inclined to question her about it.

As they sat in silence, one on each side of the fireplace, the door opened and Mrs. Scole came in. Venning would have noticed the change in her in the last week; there was colour in her cheeks and a spark of life in her eyes.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting, Inspector", she said. "I hope my daughter explained."

Poole bowed.

"Miss Scole has been very kindly answering some questions for me, madam", he said, not quite truthfully.

Mrs. Scole turned to her daughter.

"I expect the Inspector would like to see me alone, dear", she said. "I shall be quite all right."

"All right, mum, but I shall bring you your Bovril in a quarter of an hour. You're not to get tired."

Her glance at Poole told him that this was addressed to him. She walked out of the room and presently he saw her across the ill-kept lawn with a trowel and a basket in her hands. Life was returning to the garden.

"You wanted to ask me something, Inspector?"

The gentle voice recalled Poole's attention to the work in hand.

"I'm very sorry to trouble you, madam", he said, "but I wanted to ask whether your husband told you anything about his meeting with Hinde on the Wednesday evening before his death. I am assuming that you know all about the theory that has been formed."

Mrs. Scole bowed her head.

"Yes, I know", she said quietly, "though it's very, very difficult to understand—I mean, how a man could go on hating my husband so much all that time, just for doing his duty, and then come back and kill him—and risk his own life again. No, my husband didn't tell me that night about meeting the man, but next day when two policemen appeared and said that they were going to mount guard, I asked my husband what it was about and he told me."

"Did he seem to take it seriously? Was he nervous?"

Mrs. Scole hesitated.

"I shouldn't say he was nervous, but he seemed worried. But the funny thing is that it was before the man appeared that I began to realise that he was worried. I noticed that at the inquest; they said the man threatened my husband on the Wednesday evening, but it was on Monday that he was

worried; he had been to London that day and I wondered whether anything he'd heard there was worrying him."

"And you've no idea what it was? You didn't ask him?"

Mrs. Scole shook her head.

"He didn't like our asking about his work, or about any business things", she said simply.

Poole took his leave, receiving a cheerful wave of the hand from Katherine Scole as she pored over what had evidently once been a herbaceous border. He was anxious to follow up what the girl had hinted to him about her father's finances, and apart from the delicacy of questioning Mrs. Scole about them, her last remark had shown that she was unlikely to know anything. The family solicitor would be the man, and Poole was lucky enough to discover, from Superintendent Venning, that Captain Scole's affairs were in the hands of a local firm. After a belated lunch, therefore, Poole sought out the office of Messrs. Churchman, Vale and Churchman.

Mr. Joseph Churchman, the senior partner, to whose presence the detective was shortly admitted, was a cheerful, ruddy-faced man, looking more like a country squire than the solicitor of tradition. He greeted Poole genially and said that he hoped the best London brains would soon solve a problem that had so far defeated 'us country-bumpkins'. Poole replied modestly that it was to the local man that he was already looking for help. This brought them down to business and the detective explained what it was he wanted to know—the dead man's financial position. Mr. Churchman raised his eyebrows.

"But what can that have to do with the case?" he asked. "We know who killed him, and why; it was purely a matter of revenge; nothing to do with money."

Poole hesitated. Mr. Joseph Churchman looked the type of man who repaired to the club after his day's work and enjoyed a whisky and soda and a good gossip. On the other hand, it was the rarest thing for a solicitor to talk about his clients' affairs—he would get no business if he got that reputation—and Poole felt that the habit of secrecy would be sufficiently ingrained to keep his tongue quiet about police matters. In any case, Mr. Churchman was unlikely to reveal his client's affairs to the detective unless he saw a good reason for doing so.

"To be perfectly frank with you, sir", he said, "I'm not absolutely satisfied with the generally accepted theory of the crime. At any rate, I'm not closing my eyes to the possibility of another explanation. I can't at the

moment say more than that, but it may help me, one way or the other, if I may know whether Captain Scole was in any financial difficulties, and who his heir or heirs may be. Other questions may arise later."

Mr. Churchman thought the matter over carefully and then retired to consult his partner, returning before long to say that they had decided to give the detective any information he wanted. As Captain Scole's affairs were in the course of being prepared for Probate, Mr. Churchman was able to produce all the latest figures without reference to the bank. What he did produce astonished the detective hardly less than it would shortly astonish the dead man's family and friends.

For the last twenty-one years—ever since he had returned from India, in fact—Captain Scole had been setting aside for investment sums amounting to anything from a quarter to a half of his income. In addition to his pay, he had inherited a little capital from an aunt, but his early experience of financial stress—he had married on his pay alone—had given him such a horror of an ill-provided old age that he had scrupulously economized in order to build up a capital fund on which he and his family could eventually live without care or worry. This foresight, admirable in itself, had gradually developed into something like a mania, so that the pinching and scraping—largely at the expense of his wife and daughter—had gone on long after there was any necessity for it. The invested capital had steadily accumulated, at compound interest, so that, when all death-duties and expenses were paid, Mrs. and Miss Scole would inherit a fortune of nearly forty thousand pounds; they were the joint heirs and there was no other legatee. The solicitor explained that he had not yet put these figures before Mrs. Scole; until he had got all the facts before him he had been very uncertain how they would work out and had merely told the two ladies that they would be comfortably off.

When he had grasped these astonishing facts and figures, Poole leant back in his chair and thought how they might affect his case. A careful examination of pass-books had disclosed no sign of any mysterious payments or drafts to 'Self' which might suggest blackmail, and in any case it is usually the blackmailer rather than the blackmailed who meets a violent death. The receipts were entirely confined to dividends and salary payments, so that there was no hint that Captain Scole himself was a blackmailer. All was perfectly simple and straightforward, merely astonishing in its unexpectedness.

"That washes out the idea of serious financial worry", said Poole. "Mrs. Scole told me that her husband was worried by something *before* Hinde's

appearance. She dated it from Monday the 6th; you can't suggest any cause?"

Mr. Churchman could not. He could hardly imagine any man, in these hard times, with less cause for worry of any kind—apart from the fact that his carefulness had undoubtedly developed into an obsession. There was nothing here to hint at any cause of trouble or motive for crime. The detective decided that his last chance was to go through the private papers which he knew Superintendent Venning had already examined.

The acting-Chief Constable yielded up Captain Scole's keys with some reluctance and suggested that the detective might not find it necessary to go through the Confidential Police file which he had already removed to his own room at Headquarters. Poole reserved judgment on that point but for the moment contented himself with the personal papers which Superintendent Venning had left at 'Horstings.'

As the maid led him across the hall to the study the drawing-room door opened and Katherine Scole came out. Poole saw with some surprise that she was dressed in a tweed skirt and brightly-coloured jumper. The girl evidently noticed his look; she flushed slightly and her tone was defensive.

"I'm alone now", she said. "I packed mother off to her sister this afternoon. I can't bear those black things."

Poole nodded and explained that he had come back to make a routine search.

"I thought Superintendent Venning had done that", said Katherine.

"He did, but I'm bound to do it too. I'm starting from the beginning; it's the only way when a line dead-ends."

"I see; well . . . if you want any help . . . I expect what you really want is to be left alone."

She swung on her heel and ran upstairs. Poole turned back into the study.

The detective noticed at once that this was a much more comfortable room than any other he had so far seen in the house. Evidently Captain Scole's economic mania had not been carried to the point of personal discomfort. Poole had already gathered from the daughter that her father might have been spending his surplus income on himself.

In the absence of the Confidential Police file, the papers in the desk were singularly uninteresting. Two of the personal letters appeared to be from an old flame but were only mildly indiscreet; the rest were from men friends and mostly concerned shooting and fishing holidays in which Captain Scole had evidently not stinted himself. Having drawn a complete blank, Poole

proceeded to look for secret drawers. In a modern desk it was unlikely that there would be any; still, it was as well to make sure. He began with the middle drawer above the knee-hole and, pulling it right out, thrust his hand into the aperture. Immediately his fingers encountered a piece of paper and, pulling it out, he saw that it was a crumpled letter which had got pushed behind the drawer, as sometimes happens when the drawer is over-full.

Straightening it out, the detective read it and at once realised that his persistence had at last been rewarded. It ran:

275 Darlington Road,
S.E.II.
4/Nov/33.

Sir,

The writer is an employee in the firm of Brancashire and Co., Clothing Contractors. He has reason to know that illegal commission is being paid to someone in your office in connection with the contracts for police uniforms which this firm has secured in recent years. He thinks that you should know about this, but in case you want it kept quiet, please communicate with Mr. John Smith at the above address.

CHAPTER XI

CONTRACTS

THE hand in which this illuminating document was written was obviously disguised, just as the name might reasonably be taken to be assumed and the address one of accommodation. The wording of it too, thought Poole, was not altogether without subtlety. It began with a straightforward statement of fact, conveying information which should properly be conveyed by the most loyal of citizens—and to the proper person. That such a subject might be better 'kept quiet' was a reasonable suggestion, always provided that, though quiet, it was officially dealt with—which naturally might be left to the discretion of the 'proper person'. The final sentence merely asked for instructions on the point.

But if the letter of the document was innocent enough, its spirit was perfectly clear. 'Here', it ran, 'is a dirty piece of scandal. It you want it kept quiet you must come to terms'.

And that it was a dirty piece of scandal—if true—was undeniable. It meant, of course, that for some years the firm of Brancashire had been obtaining profitable contracts by bribing an official at Police Headquarters. Presumably these contracts were put out to tender and the bribery probably took the form of paying for information as to the figures tendered by competing firms. Just how that would be done was a matter for investigation.

The receiving of a commission, even without the offence of opening sealed tenders, was of course an illegal act, but the real bearing of the letter upon Poole's investigations was of far graver import. The letter was dated 4th November, a Saturday; it would have been received on the Monday, the day on which Mrs. Scole said that she had noticed that her husband was worried. Whether it had any bearing upon his visit to London that day remained to be seen, but it could hardly be doubted that that very disturbing letter was the cause of the worry. It was probable that the Chief Constable had tackled the matter at once—had at least begun to probe it; two days later 'Hinde' had appeared, with his dramatic ambuscade and his threatening letter, distracting attention from the scandal; five days after that—time in which to work out a plan in greater detail—the Chief Constable was murdered.

It was an imaginary picture but a realistic and terribly ugly one. And—Poole realised with a start—it might represent only the first act in the tragedy. If the death of the Chief Constable was necessary to save the murderer from exposure, no less necessary must be the death of his informant. 'John Smith' must be in imminent peril of his life. Poole decided that no time must be lost in tracing him and arranging for his protection.

Was anyone else in danger? With the Chief Constable and 'John Smith' out of the way, the culprit might hope that his secret was safe—safe, at least, between himself and the no less guilty (so far as that offence was concerned) giver of the bribe, who would hardly be expected to reveal his own crime. But was that all? How had Captain Scole got his information from Smith? By letter. That letter was damning evidence and the murderer would realise that it must, if it still existed, be destroyed. How could that be done? Probably his body and the desk in his room at Headquarters had been searched—no, surely there had not been time for that. His study at 'Horstings,' then?

Poole pulled himself up with a jerk, feeling a horrible qualm of sickness pass over him. He had found the letter, but someone else might have overlooked it, tucked away, as it had been, behind the drawer. The idea was terrible, but it was only an alternative to one hardly less appalling. In any case it must be faced, and, as time might mean a matter of life or death, it must be faced at once. Without further word to anyone at 'Horstings,' he left the house and bicycled back to Headquarters.

The acting-Chief Constable was still in his office when Poole appeared. Without a word the detective handed him the crumpled letter. Venning read it carefully and Poole, watching him closely, saw the colour ebb from his cheeks. Carefully smoothing out the crinkles, Superintendent Venning laid the letter down on the blotting-pad in front of him and continued to stare at it. A minute—two minutes—passed; then he raised a haggard face and looked at Poole.

"What d'you make of this?" he asked.

The detective noticed that he did not ask where the letter came from; perhaps that was self-evident.

"It looks like a suggestion of blackmail, sir", he said quietly.

Venning re-read the letter.

"Yes. Yes, I suppose it does. But—that isn't quite what I meant. Who do you suppose it means . . . the commission, I mean?"

Poole looked steadily at his chief.

"That's what I came to ask you, sir. What opportunities of bribery are there? Who deals with contracts and tenders?"

Venning stretched out his hand to his bell.

"I'll ask Jason", he began—but Poole checked him.

"Just a minute, sir, please. I'd rather not let anybody else know about this just yet. I expect you can give me a fair idea of the procedure yourself."

Superintendent Venning thought for a minute.

"Yes, I suppose I can", he said. "No doubt the invitations for tenders go out from this office in the normal way, probably to a limited number of selected firms. They would call for tenders—quotations—to be in by a certain date. The tenders would come in and would remain unopened till they were laid before the Standing Joint Committee and opened in public by them."

"Whose hands would they go through?"

"I suppose the post is opened by the Chief Clerk, but he wouldn't, of course, open these. Either the envelopes would be marked in some way or else they would be contained in bigger envelopes with a covering letter. Probably the Chief Clerk would hand them straight to the Chief Constable and he would keep them locked up till the Committee met."

Poole nodded.

"I see. Thank you, sir."

He sat for a time in silence, thinking over what he had heard. Venning watched him anxiously.

"What have you got in your mind?" he burst out after a time.

"If this story's true, sir, I imagine that something like this would happen. As the tenders came in, someone would open them carefully, note the figure quoted, and re-seal them. Then, at the last possible moment he would either telephone or send a code telegram to Brancashire, giving the lowest figure so far quoted, and Brancashire would fire one in slightly lower and get the contract. The margin of profit must be a pretty big one to make it worth while to cut the price every time *and* pay a commission."

"Five per cent", muttered Superintendent Venning. "Nearly a hundred pounds."

Poole looked at him enquiringly, but he hurried on:

"What are you going to do about this? It can't affect the case; it can't have anything to do with Hinde. Of course it will have to be looked into, but that seems to be my job."

Poole looked at him steadily.

"Of course, sir, it's as you say", he replied, "but I'm bound to go on with my investigations bearing this in mind. You'll see that it changes the whole course of the enquiry."

Superintendent Venning stared at him.

"How? How, man?"

Poole sat up abruptly in his chair.

"I'd better speak frankly, sir. It's not a pleasant thing for me to say; but it's no good havering about it. This letter is bound to suggest that Captain Scole was not killed by Hinde but by somebody in the police."

Superintendent Venning sprang to his feet.

"Good God! Good God! What are you saying, man?"

Poole went on quietly:

"There are other indications of the same thing, but in themselves they didn't amount to much. Taken with this, one is bound to consider them."

"What other indications? What are you talking about?"

Poole shrugged his shoulders.

"The most obvious of all is the question of how Hinde got into the Chief Constable's room and *right in front of the table* without anyone seeing or suspecting him."

"But we know that. You told me yourself that he came down through the trap door. We know how he got up onto the roof."

Poole shook his head.

"That's only a theory, sir; there's some evidence supporting it, but that may have been faked. The real point is, how did he walk into this room and get in front of this table before Captain Scole saw him or shot at him?"

Superintendent Venning stared wildly at the detective.

"He may have fired from outside the window, after all."

"There were marks of powder round the wound. That's impossible at a range of twelve or fifteen feet."

"But then he *did* come in and get in front of the table!"

"Somebody did, sir; my suggestion is that it was somebody whom Captain Scole knew and had no reason to suspect."

A horror of doubt came into the big man's eyes. He stared, as if fascinated, at the detective. Poole went on inexorably.

"Quite apart from that, sir, how could Hinde, a man just out of a twenty-year stretch, know that he could get up on to the roof, and down from the roof; how could he hope to do it without being seen; how could he know where the Chief Constable's room was; or when he would be in—and alone? Above all, if he was going to kill Captain Scole, *why didn't he do it when he waylaid him in Bradley Woods*?"

"But . . . but someone was in the passage, looking for him. You forget . . . Jason's door."

Poole was silent, looking steadily at his companion.

"You mean . . . it didn't? . . . Jason?"

Venning's voice was hoarse.

"That's a possibility, sir, of course. Superintendent Jason was outside this door when the others came up. He may have made up the story about his door to divert suspicion from himself; he's the most likely man, of course, to have had access to the tenders. That's all guess-work; we don't know yet that the commission story is true. We must find out. If it is, it should point direct to the murderer."

"But Hinde? He *did* appear; he *did* threaten the Chief."

"I don't think his threats amounted to much, sir, when you come to look at them. Besides, it's conceivable that there never was any Hinde. His release and disappearance from home were known in this office before he appeared here. It's just conceivable that someone impersonated him. I'm trying to check that now. That's why I asked about the tattoo marks. There's another point that makes one suspect that it wasn't the real Hinde who appeared in Brodley Woods: how could he have known that Captain Scole drove a horse? The natural assumption would be a car, and after dark, with lights in his eyes, he wouldn't have been able to tell who was in the car. The man who stopped that trap *knew* that Captain Scole was driving it."

Superintendent Venning was pacing up and down the room, a deep frown between his close-set eyes.

"You see, sir, I'm bound to follow up the idea that this murder is a police affair."

"No!"

Venning had stopped and was planted firmly in front of the detective.

"You've got it all wrong", he said harshly. "Captain Scole committed suicide."

CHAPTER XII

T O G E T H E R

At the ripe age of thirty-three, Poole had begun to flatter himself that he was too experienced a hand ever to show, or even feel, surprise. But on this occasion he had to admit defeat; he was not only surprised, he was flabbergasted; the idea of suicide had not for one instant crossed his mind. And yet, when one did come to think of it . . .

"I meant to keep quiet about it", Superintendent Venning broke in upon his thoughts. "I meant to keep it to myself. Scandal never does the police force any good and when it comes to the Chief Constable . . ."

He raised his hands expressively.

"Hinde turning up like that, and writing that stupid letter gave me a wonderful chance of hushing things up. I guessed he'd disappear pretty completely. Of course he came down here just to get a score off the Chief—put the wind up him—and then he bolted. When he read about the Chief's death he must have had the fright of his life, and he'll realise well enough that if ever he appears again he'll stand a good chance of being hanged. But, of course, he had a far better chance of getting away than ever we realised, because he was probably hundreds of miles away when we were looking in the town—and may have got out of the country before we put a watch on the ports. Likely enough he was in Liverpool or Cardiff or some big port—he's a sailor, remember—on that Monday evening—may have heard our B.B.C. broadcast—and signed on to the first boat he could find."

Poole listened in growing amazement.

"And you knew this all the time you were supposed to be hunting for him?"

"Oh, no, I didn't—not straight away, that is. I had a bad shock that very night, but I didn't realise what it meant at the time. Next morning—that's Tuesday—I began to look into things and didn't like what I saw. I went on searching for Hinde because it was the obvious thing to do, and anyway I wasn't sure. But when I came to think things over it all worked out plain as a pike-staff. The Captain had taken advantage of Hinde's appearance and his threats and had put himself out. He faked it up to look as if Hinde had shot

him, so that people shouldn't know he'd killed himself. Perhaps he thought the scandal wouldn't come out if he was dead, or . . ."

"What scandal, sir?"

"Why, this scandal of a commission—bribery, if you like."

"But you didn't know about that."

Superintendent Venning was silent for a moment. Then he took a bunch of keys from his pocket and unlocked a drawer; pulling it open, he took out a sheet of paper and laid it before the detective.

"I found that in the Chief's writing-table at 'Horstings' ", he said.

Poole looked at the paper. On it was written in a sprawling hand:

Brancashire Contract £1,660. 5% = £83.

"That's the Chief's writing", explained Venning. "Yes, I know what you're thinking; I ought to have told you about it. Well, I didn't, and I wouldn't have now if you hadn't started this hare about a policeman murdering him. I wanted to keep the Chief's suicide a secret—I still do, but not at the cost of a worse scandal and injustice."

And what about the injustice to Albert Hinde, thought Poole, allowing this suspicion to hang over him, perhaps driving him out of the country? But he thought it wiser to keep his thoughts to himself, though he had no intention of allowing that injustice to continue indefinitely.

"What did you make of that, sir—what Captain Scole had written? You hadn't seen the letter, I gather."

"I made of it just what it is; it jumps to the eye. 5% obviously meant commission—secret commission. It couldn't have been discount; that wouldn't be anything to do with the Chief—at least, he wouldn't write notes about it and lock 'em up."

"You ju . . . you came to the conclusion that the Chief Constable was accepting an illegal commission?"

"I did; it explained the suicide."

"But why . . . well, we'll come back to that. Apart from this question of motive, what made you think he killed himself?"

Again Superintendent Venning pulled out his bunch of keys and, going this time to a cupboard, brought out a cardboard box. From it he took an automatic pistol, two spent bullets, and two brass cartridge-cases, all of which he laid on the table in front of Poole.

"That's the Chief's pistol", said Venning; "the sound bullet was taken from his head, the crumpled one from the wall above the window there. The

two cartridge-cases were on the floor, one to the right of the table and one in front and to the left. Both those cartridge-cases are of the same calibre; so are the two bullets. That might possibly be a coincidence, though a mighty odd one. But look here, Mr. Poole, I've been through a Firearms course and that includes identification of bullets fired from particular firearms. I examined the bullet taken from the Chief's head, and found that it had been fired from his own pistol!"

Superintendent Venning sat down heavily in his chair and stared gloomily at the 'exhibits' in front of him. He showed no sign of pleasure or pride in his own skill; indeed, it seemed to have recoiled upon himself. The C.I.D. man, however, was suitably impressed.

"That's very smart of you, sir, to spot that", he said. What he thought was:

"And so you were keeping that to yourself too, were you, you old fox", but again he kept his thoughts to himself.

Venning, however, must have guessed something of them.

"I've labelled these things, as you see", he said defensively. " 'Exhibit 1 X', that's the pistol; 'Exhibit 2 X', that's the bullet. The X represents the fact that they belong to one another."

"I ought to have asked about them before", said Poole tactfully. "What about this other bullet; was it fired from the same pistol?"

"It's too crumpled to tell, but it must have been. Anyway, the point is that the one in the Chief's head was fired from the pistol in his own hand."

For a time the two men sat in silence, each busy with his own thoughts. Poole was the first to speak.

"These pistols eject automatically as they're fired, don't they, sir?"

"That's right."

"Which shell was which, do you suppose?"

"How d'you mean?"

"Your idea, I take it, sir, is that Captain Scole fired a shot at the wall and then turned the pistol on himself . . . oh, by the way, could he have shot himself in the forehead—from straight in front—and far enough away not to blacken the flesh?"

"Yes, I tried it. It's possible if he held the pistol like that—backwards almost—and squeezed with his thumb on the trigger."

"*Was* his thumb on the trigger?"

"No, the pistol wasn't actually in his hand; it lay half underneath it."

Poole nodded slowly.

"I see", he said, "that meets the point I was going to make about the position of the shells; I didn't see how that one had got out in front and to the left."

Superintendent Venning nodded.

"When I found out about the bullet I began to think again over the rest of the story—not at once, of course; I had a lot to do, searching the woods and so on. But that evening I thought it all out and I realised the unlikeliness of the Hinde story—about his getting in, I mean, and finding the Chief—same as you pointed out to me just now. Gradually it grew on me, against my will, till I saw there was no way out of it. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't consult anybody. One man might decide to hold his tongue about a thing like this, but once you consulted anyone it would be impossible—too much like conspiracy. Of course I've run a big risk, but for the sake of the force, even more than the Chief himself, I took it. You can break me over it, if you like, Mr. Poole, I expect."

It was an embarrassing remark. Poole knew that he would have to decide for himself whether to report the acting-Chief Constable's theory and his suppression of evidence. It would rather depend on how things turned out. For the moment it was best to change the subject.

"How does Superintendent Jason's door fit in with your suicide theory, sir?" he asked.

Venning jerked his shoulders impatiently.

"I don't believe there's anything in that", he said; "pure imagination; one of these nervy fellows; never heard a shot fired and started imagining things."

Poole was not impressed by this sweeping away of a difficulty; he had found Superintendent Jason's demonstration rather convincing.

Again he changed the subject.

"This letter I found, sir; do you regard it as confirming your theory or upsetting it?"

Venning stared at him.

"Confirming, of course. The fellow was trying to blackmail him. You said so yourself."

"I don't think it follows from this, sir, or even from your bit of paper in the Chief's handwriting, that *he* was the recipient of the commission. In fact,

it seems to me most unlikely. He wasn't in any need of money."

"That's all you know", said Venning, obviously annoyed at this questioning of his judgment. "Captain Scole was hard up. You've been to his house; you ought to have noticed that. I sounded his servants and it's obvious; he couldn't even give his wife and daughter enough to dress on properly, let alone have any fun."

Poole hesitated. It was always one of the most difficult parts of a detective's duty to know how much information to give away. Still, Superintendent Venning was his temporary chief and entitled to know everything.

"You haven't seen his solicitor, sir?" he asked.

"No. Why? Have you?"

"I saw him this afternoon", replied Poole. "He gave me the facts. Captain Scole died worth forty thousand pounds."

"Forty th . . . what on earth are you talking about?"

Superintendent Venning's expression of amazement was almost ludicrous.

"It is a bit startling, sir, isn't it. I don't fancy anyone has the faintest idea of it, except his solicitor and perhaps his broker."

Poole explained to the acting-Chief Constable all that he had learned from Mr. Churchman about Captain Scole's financial eccentricities. The information evidently bewildered his Deputy. Apart from its unexpectedness and the curious light which it threw upon the dead man's character, it appeared to upset the motive upon which the suicide theory was based; it was inconceivable that a man worth forty thousand pounds would commit a criminal act, and jeopardize his whole career, for the paltry sum of £83—unless, of course, his eccentricity had reached a stage of positive mania. His recollection of his dead chief gave Venning no grounds for believing anything of the kind; he knew him to be hard, could believe him to be mean, but anyone less suspect of insanity it would be difficult to imagine.

"What d'you make of it, Poole?" he asked in a bewildered voice.

The detective noticed that this was the first time on which the acting-Chief Constable had addressed him in an informal manner; the fact augured well, he thought, for the future.

"I think it casts very grave doubt upon your theory of suicide, sir", he said. "That really rests, to my mind, entirely upon your discovery that the bullet taken from Captain Scole's head was fired from his pistol. But there

may be other explanations of that. For instance, are you sure it was his pistol?"

"Certain. At least, it was lying under his hand. And now I come to think of it, I remember he showed it to me a day or two before he was shot. He used to keep it in this drawer on the right here and I persuaded him to keep it under a pile of papers. Oh, yes, it's his gun all right."

"It's a fairly common type, sir—this. I believe it was used a good deal by officers in the later stages of the War; much less cumbersome than the old heavy service revolver."

Venning nodded.

"Yes, that's so", he said. "I only had a Government issue myself, but I remember that some of the youngsters used to fancy themselves in those things. Much easier to shoot with, for one thing."

"If you agree, sir, hadn't we better make quite sure that this *is* his pistol. The Firearms Register would tell you."

"So it would."

Superintendent Venning stretched out his hand to the bell, but again the detective checked him.

"If you don't mind, sir, I'd much rather nobody else knew what we've got in our minds. I expect the Register's kept in the Chief Clerk's room; probably we could find it when he goes off duty."

Venning glanced at his watch.

"Later than I realised; he'll be off now, I expect. I'll stroll across and if he's there I can talk about something else."

Five minutes later he was back, with a volume of the Register in his hand. Sitting down at his table again he flipped over the pages.

"It was in the general office—something like forty books of it", he said. "Here you are, Captain Anthony Scole, Westing-Thomas, ·380, No. 27."

Poole looked at the number on the pistol.

"That's it, sir. This is his all right."

"Well, there you are."

The detective shook his head.

"That's only one possibility, sir. There's another."

"What's that?"

"Somebody took this pistol from under the pile of papers and shot Captain Scole with it, then shot at the wall."

"But, good God, man, what would the Captain be doing to let him do that?"

"It may have been taken while the Captain was out of the room, or even . . . suppose someone was showing some papers, he could easily under cover of that have picked up the pistol without Captain Scole noticing."

"Showing some . . . you mean . . . ?"

Poole nodded.

"It always comes back to that, sir; it's so simple."

Venning pushed back his chair, jerked himself to his feet, and again started pacing the room. Heavy lines of worry seamed his face.

"It's a ghastly idea", he muttered, "I can't believe it. I simply can't believe it."

Poole felt desperately sorry for his companion. In the last fortnight the life of his Chief had been threatened; it had been his duty to protect that Chief—and he had failed; he had lost a man whom he had served for more than twenty years—that in itself was a severe blow, but it had been made far worse by his discovery—or believed discovery—that the man he had respected had taken his own life rather than face exposure of a dishonourable crime; finally, he, Poole, had launched this further bombshell —the suspicion that it had been murder after all, and murder by a member of his own force.

"I shouldn't worry too much just yet, sir", he said. "It might turn out quite differently. I'm bound to follow up that idea, but it may be all wrong. If you agree, I'll go up to-morrow and try to trace this fellow who calls himself John Smith. In any case, I'll see Brancashire's and find out what they've got to say about it. If we can find out who's been receiving the commission it may short-circuit the whole problem of the murder."

Superintendent Venning took some time before he replied.

"All right, Poole", he said at last; "you go ahead on those lines. If it stirs up mud—well, things have gone too far now for me to try and stop them. In any case, I don't think I want to now. I've made a mistake in trying to hush up a scandal; I'm ready to admit it. I'll go a step further. I didn't want you here; I didn't intend to call in the Yard, but public opinion was too much for me. I was afraid you'ld . . . do just what you have done. And when you came I didn't mean to help you—I daresay you noticed that. Well, that's finished. I'm going to work with you now and we'll get to the bottom of this rotten

business, whatever it costs. I think I owe you an apology. I'm sorry—and I mean it."

Poole was genuinely moved. It could be no easy matter for a man in Superintendent Venning's position, and with his upbringing, to eat humble pie to a subordinate.

"That's very generous of you, sir", he said. "I shall be proud to work with you, and I only hope that things won't turn out to be as bad as they look."

Venning nodded, then held out a large fist.

"Together, eh?"

The two men shook hands.

CHAPTER XIII

JOHN SMITH

BEFORE starting for London the following, Thursday,[6] morning, Poole obtained from the acting-Chief Constable permission to take the pistol, bullets and cartridge-cases to Scotland Yard for examination by the C.I.D. expert. The suggestion required rather delicate handling, as he did not want to cast any reflection on the Superintendent's skill, still less upon his integrity; by suggesting that it might be well to make a further attempt to identify the crumpled bullet he was able to 'save face' for Venning, who showed no signs of injured feelings.

Poole took the opportunity of being at the Yard to talk things over with Chief Constable Thurston. After a good deal of hesitation, he had decided to say nothing for the moment about Superintendent Venning having suppressed his suicide theory—and certain vital evidence—merely reporting that the possibility of suicide had been discussed between them as a result of Superintendent Venning's discovery that the bullet in Captain Scole's head had been fired from his own pistol. Poole asked that this might be confirmed by the firearms expert, and also that the latter should try to discover whether the crumpled bullet taken from the wall was fired from the same pistol.

Chief Constable Thurston asked whether any steps had been taken to watch Superintendent Jason, and on hearing that they had not, said that he would arrange to send another man down for that purpose, whose presence should not be known even to Superintendent Venning.

"From what you tell me, Jason looks like the man", he said. "As Chief Clerk he would have more chance of tampering with the contracts than anyone else, except possibly the Chief Constable himself, and as you say, a man worth forty thousand isn't likely to play that kind of fool's game. Jason may think everyone's still looking for Hinde; he may think himself safe; but if he gets an inkling that you're on to this Brancashire business he may bolt. We don't want all the bother and expense of another man-hunt if we can help it. I'll send a man down, Poole, and let you know who he is and where to find him, but don't have anything to do with him unless you must. The fewer people who know about his being there the better. Well, off you go, my lad; let me know how you get on with Brancashire."

He turned to his other work and Poole left the room and the building. He had decided to go first of all to John Smith's reputed address; if he could get some description of the man he might be able to shorten the enquiry at Brancashire's. As he had expected, 275 Darlington Road was an accommodation address. The occupant was a greengrocer, an old man of the name of Prinkle, who informed Poole that he had been in the business for nigh-on fifty years and for most of that time had 'accommodated' gentlemen, and ladies too, in the matter of correspondence. In former days he had been a letter-writer as well, but the regrettable spread of education had caused that branch of his business to dwindle almost to nothing. But as an accommodation address . . .

"I reckon I make anything from fi' pun' to ten pun' a year out of it", he said. "I charge 'em a penny a packet, penny a packet, whatever it is—card, letter, parcel, all one price. Flat rate, I call it. People like a flat rate—know where they are. Y' wouldn' think what a lot o' people uses an accom'dation address. Some of it's crooked, no doubt, but that's no business o' mine. No harm in receiving a letter, if y' don't know what's in it, nor in handin' it over to its rightful owner. I asks no questions an' so I don' get tol' no lies. Love letters, a lot of it is. Some o' the ones who use my address, ladies, slap-up ladies, that's what they are; lovely women, actresses I shouldn' wonder, havin' letters that they don' want their gentlemen friends to know about."

The old man laid a grimy finger along his scarcely less grimy nose and leered at a broccoli.

"But now, this Mr. John Smith you ask about, I don' know what to say about him. 'Ts a silly name to use if you ask me, because there's more than one John Smith in the world. I know of two o' them now; one's an old gentleman whose lady don' like him havin' letters from his lady frien's; and one's a young lady—I think she's a companion to some ol' dowager and does a bit of writin' for the papers on the quiet. I told her to change her name, 'case I got the letters mixed, but she said it was a nom d'plum. Anyway the old chap hasn't been in for ten years or more, so I daresay he's defunc. Now this John Smith of yours; would it be one o' them?"

"Doesn't sound like it", said Poole, who had listened patiently to this long rigmarole.

"Ah, well; it'll be the other John Smith 'at I've never set eyes on. Wrote to me, he did, an' asked me to hold letters for him. Got one for him now, what's more."

"Eh?"

Poole pricked up his ears.

"Can I see it, please?"

Mr. Prinkle looked doubtful.

"Can't very well do that, Mr. Inspector", he said. "Got my reputation as an accom'dation address to think of. Once it gets about that letters are tampered with, an' my rep'tation's gone."

"I can understand that, but I'm a police-officer. I've shown you my warrant-card and I'll give you an official receipt. By the way, when did it come?"

Mr. Prinkle pondered.

" 'Twas a Monday", he said presently, " 'cos Mrs. Suddle, 'at does my washin', came in when he was here. 'Twas . . ."

"When who was here?"

"The gentleman 'at brought the letter. Fine-looking gentleman he was; soldier I should say. Sharp with me, he was, about 'this man John Smith'. I didn' tell him what I've tol' you; he was a bit too sharp with me, and anyway he wasn' a police-officer like you. I jus' tol' him that I didn' know Mr. Smith but had been asked to accom'date his letters. Gentleman hum'd an' ha'd a bit and then gave me the letter an' wen' away."

"I'd better see it, please."

Poole had little doubt as to the identity of the 'gentleman'.

Without further protest, Mr. Prinkle retired to a back-room and returned with a note, addressed in the bold, scrawling hand of the late Chief Constable of Brodshire to *John Smith, 275 Darlington Road* Poole opened it and read:

Chief Constable's Office,
BRODBURY.
6.11.33.

Sir,

If you have any information to convey to me concerning the matter of which you write, I shall be obliged if you will do so in a formal manner, addressing your letter to me in my official capacity and marking your envelope 'Personal'.

In the meantime, and unless I receive substantial proof of your statement, I decline to believe a word of it.

Yours faithfully,
A. SCOLE,
Chief Constable.

"Very typical", thought Poole, "and rather effective. Puts his foot down firmly on any idea of blackmail, discourages idle accusations, but does not shut the door to genuine information. This seems to settle the question of his being himself the receiver of the commission."

"Seemed surprised not to find said John Smith here", said Mr. Prinkle in an aggrieved tone. "Never realised it was an accom'dation address. Brought the note in case he was out. Angry, he was, at coming all this way for nothin'. 'Twasn' my fault, as I tol' him."

So that was what Captain Scole had come to London for that Monday—the Monday on which his wife had noticed that he was worried. The very day—the very morning—that he had received the letter. He was a man of action, evidently; this was a viper that must be trodden under foot at once—this scandal, or else the author of it.

Interesting as had been his interview with Mr. Prinkle, Poole realised that he had made no progress in his attempt to identify the mysterious John Smith. It was almost certain that the man must know of Captain Scole's death, and as he had not called for an answer to his letter before that event, it was extremely unlikely that he would do so now. None the less, it would be a matter of routine to have the place watched; he therefore arranged with the greengrocer a simple vegetable signal which should be displayed in the event of anyone asking for a John Smith letter; Scotland Yard would do the rest.

In the meantime the matter must be taken straight to the fountain-head, Brancashire's; it was, of course, possible that Smith might be identified there, and even if he were not, Poole thought that he might be able to discover whether there was any foundation for the scandal, or whether it was merely a barefaced attempt at blackmail—or possibly something much more subtle than either of those possibilities.

Brancashire's, or to give them their full style, Brancashire Bros. and Son, had a London office and branch store in the City of London, not far from the shadow of St. Paul's. They had other branches in the principal Northern towns and their own mills in Yorkshire. The head of the firm, Mr. Zedekiah Brancashire, had his office in Sheffordbury, and was commonly reported never to have set foot outside his native town, except upon one epoch-making and never-to-be-repeated visit to London and the Crystal

Palace in the 'eighties to watch his beloved City team play and lose their only Cup Final match—an experience so shattering to his nerve and exhausting to his purse that it had swamped for ever any spirit of restlessness that might previously have been working within him. His younger brother, however, Mr. Hoseah Brancashire, had settled in London and was the head of the Sales section of the business. It was to him that Poole sent up his card, discreetly shrouded in an envelope, and he it was who, a few minutes later, politely bowed the detective into a chair and waited to hear the explanation of a visit so startlingly unfamiliar to the family business.

The sales manager's office bore no resemblance to the soft-carpeted, arm-chaired *salons* of modern business fashion; it was plain to the point of discomfort. A stout linoleum, made in Sheffield, covered the floor; Mr. Brancashire and his visitor sat upon serviceable but not luxurious wood-and-leather chairs, made in Huddersfield; a telephone instrument was probably the only startling innovation that the office had seen in the present century. Mr. Hoseah himself, in personal appearance, might have been taken for his prophetic namesake, while his manner was completely devoid of the snap and dash which in these days are taken for efficiency. None the less, before many minutes had passed, Poole was realising some of the quiet and unwavering determination which had built up one of the soundest clothing businesses in the country.

The detective came straight to the point by laying John Smith's letter on the table before Mr. Brancashire.

"This letter was addressed to the Chief Constable of Brodshire, sir", he said.

Mr. Brancashire adjusted a pair of heavy steel spectacles to his fine nose and carefully read the letter through. Then he re-read it. Poole, watching him carefully, could not detect a shadow of expression upon his face.

"I shall be obliged if you will tell me something of the circumstances connected with this letter", he said, laying it on the blotting-pad before him. His voice was quiet and there was the barest trace of a Yorkshire inflection.

Poole explained how he had found it when going through the papers of the murdered Chief Constable. At the mention of the word 'murder', Mr. Brancashire slightly raised his hand, as if in deprecation of the use of violence. When the story was finished he sat for some minutes in silence, evidently pondering over what he had heard.

"There is no employee of the name of John Smith in the London branch of the firm", he said at last. "I cannot answer for the other branches."

“I take it to be an assumed name, sir”, explained the detective.

Mr. Brancashire bowed his stately white head.

“That will make it difficult to trace the writer, then”, he said quietly. “In what way can I help you?”

Rather taken aback by this calm air of detachment, Poole realised that he would have to speak plainly.

“I have been instructed to ask you, sir, whether there is any foundation for the statement which is made in this letter.”

“Whether the firm has paid illegal commission? . . . I think that is the phrase. . . .” Mr. Brancashire picked up and scrutinized the letter. “No, Inspector; no commissions, legal or illegal, are paid by Brancashire’s to anybody not an employee in the firm. The statement is in fact libellous—and actionable.” He paused for a moment, and then added, “Actionable, that is, even in the form of a suggestion, and even if made by the police.”

Mr. Brancashire’s voice was as quiet as ever, and his manner as polite, but there was the faintest glint of anger in his clear blue eyes.

“The police are not making any statement, or suggestion, sir”, replied Poole, no less quietly; “we are asking for information which may help us in the enquiry which, I am sure you will understand, we are bound, under the circumstances, to make.”

Mr. Brancashire leant back in his chair, so far as that was possible, and, taking a large and immaculately clean white handkerchief from his pocket, blew his nose with a defiant trumpet. As he tucked his handkerchief away, however, Poole noticed for the first time that his hand was trembling.

“I have given you information”, he said; “I have told you quite definitely that no commission on sales has been paid by the firm to any outsider. Payment of an illegal commission—bribery it’ld have been called when I was a young man—has never been thought of at Brancashire’s, let alone done. You can know little of Brancashire’s, young man, if you can make such a suggestion.”

Strong feeling had slightly broadened the speech of ‘young Mr. Brancashire’, but there was little else to show the violence which this bombshell must be presumed to have done to his feelings. Poole realised that plain speaking was not enough; he must get down to concrete suggestions. English law being what it was, he could not ask Mr. Brancashire to prove his firm’s innocence, and so far he had got no more than a practically anonymous hint of evidence against them. He must, for the time, follow a less direct line.

"I'm much obliged to you, sir, for your statement. Can I ask you to help me in tracing the writer of this . . . libellous letter?"

Mr. Brancashire glanced at him shrewdly.

"That's different", he said. "That's talking."

His heavy eyebrows closed down on the blue eyes. Poole saw his fingers moving, as if they were ticking off possibilities, or names.

"There's not a man in this firm that I can believe it of", he said at last, "nor yet a girl. If it had been true, it could only have been written by one of two men—no one else could have been in a position to know—and both of them have been with me thirty, nay forty, years. But as it is—well, a lie can be thought of by anyone. Why should it have been a Brancashire man at all, eh?"

There was a note of eagerness in his voice that appealed to the detective.

"It may not be, of course, sir", he said, "but we're bound to look here first. Why should anyone fix on Brancashire's?" He leaned forward. "If you want to find out, sir, can you get a specimen of the handwriting of each of your employees?"

Mr. Brancashire stared at him, then picked up the letter.

"But this is a feigned hand!" he protested.

"Yes, sir, but handwriting experts can often trace a resemblance, even in a feigned hand."

Mr. Brancashire picked up his spectacles, wiped them vigorously, held them up to the light as if his one interest was their perfection, then threw them down.

"I can't do it", he said. "It would be like accusing men I trust. I do trust them. I don't believe a word of it. You must look for the writer of this . . . this wicked letter . . . somewhere else."

He rose to his feet, and Poole, realising that he could expect no more, rose too, recovered the letter and took his leave. As he opened the door, he was startled to hear a completely strange voice exclaim:

"Hey! Shut door!"

He turned and stared at his companion. Mr. Brancashire's face was red, his mouth was quivering. Poole shut the door.

"Yon letter. 'Tis a daamed lie!"

There was no mistaking the White Rose now.

“Brancasheeres have never gone crooked yet—and they never will. Eighty years Brancasheeres have borne an honoured naame in Yorksheere and the City of Lon’on and all over the kingdom. And here you come wi’ a . . .”

The old man turned on his heel and strode to the window. For a minute he stood, staring out at the great dome that towered above him. Then he turned quickly back.

“I’ll not rest till I know who writ yon letter”, he said. “ ’Twas no Brancasheere man, I’ll swear. But I’ll prove to you that Brancasheeres are straight; I can’t rest under a shadow. Where will I find you?”

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[6] 23rd November.

CHAPTER XIV

A L I B I S

POOLE'S interview with Mr. Brancashire, though it had ended upon a note of helpfulness rather than of obstruction, had taught him nothing about the writer of the 'secret commission' letter. With great reluctance the Sales Manager had agreed to try and obtain specimens of the handwriting of everyone in his office and he had himself offered to allow the firm's books to be inspected by any police-officer, or by any accountant authorised by the police. At the same time, he pointed out that it was extremely unlikely that a firm engaged in so dangerous a practice as the payment of illegal commission would allow the fact to appear in their books, and he frankly advised the detective to consult a firm of solicitors or accountants who had had wide experience in the detection of frauds and illegal acts of this kind. He expressed himself as perfectly certain that the whole story was a mare's nest, and he would not himself be happy until the creator of it was exposed.

Poole returned to Scotland Yard, reported the result of his two interviews to Chief Constable Thurston and arranged for the watching of Mr. Prinkle's shop and the examination of Brancashire's books. As he returned to Brodbury by an early afternoon train he thought over the case with a good deal of care and found its condition to be anything but good. In his own mind he had practically destroyed the original police theory about Hinde; he had no faith at all in Superintendent Venning's substitute theory of suicide; but in their place his own theory had advanced no further in the important matter of proof—in fact, he felt very grave doubts indeed as to the reality of the 'secret commission' story upon which it was largely based. If that story, which at the moment rested entirely upon 'John Smith's' letter, was a fabrication, what earthly motive could there be for the murder of the late Chief Constable of Brodshire by one of his own men? The one solid fact to which Poole clung was that that letter *had been written*, whether it was true or false, and that it was beyond belief that it had been written without good reason, and without reason connected with the murder.

Putting aside the question of motive for the moment, Poole decided that the arguments in support of the murder having been committed by someone whom Captain Scole could not suspect—and therefore, by inference, by a policeman—were so strong that he must follow up the movements of

everybody who had been or might have been in Headquarters at the time of the murder. It was fortunate that that time had been so exactly fixed; it should be a fairly simple matter to discover where everyone had been at—or within a few minutes of—5.20 p.m. on that tragic afternoon. It was an unsatisfactory way of arriving at a murderer's identity—the elimination of the impossibles—but, with the failure of other methods, it must at least be tried.

In the slow, stopping train which was all that the early afternoon provided, Poole found it extremely difficult to concentrate his thoughts. He decided to give up the attempt and rest his mind by doing a cross-word puzzle. A completely blank mind would have been an even better rest, but he knew that that was an ideal to which he would never attain.

Walking up from the station, Poole met an extremely bored-looking Sergeant Gower. The Detective-Inspector had been unable to think of any more active employment for his subordinate than hanging round Brodbury, and, in his capacity as commercial traveller, trying to pick up gossip about the chief characters in the drama. All that Sergeant Gower had been able to acquire, in nearly two days' effort, was a distaste for public-house port and a general impression that neither the late Chief Constable nor his Chief Clerk was much liked in the town. In the former case the unpopularity was undoubtedly due to a generally-recognized unwillingness to spend any money in the town, coupled—in the case of the older men—with a lingering feeling of distrust arising out of the twenty-year-old Hinde case; staunchly as his subordinates had supported Captain Scole, or at least, firmly as they had held their tongues, a feeling had got about that the evidence in the case was not quite straight and that Hinde and his companions had not had a square deal; naturally enough the return of Hinde had revived these memories, and with the first shock caused by the Chief Constable's death past, heads were again being shaken and, in some cases, tongues wagged. In the case of Superintendent Jason, Sergeant Gower reported, he was generally respected and regarded as absolutely straight, but his tongue was too sharp and his wife too ambitious, both fatal bars to popularity.

Superintendent Venning, on the other hand, was universally liked, as was Inspector Tallard. Venning was a difficult man to know and did not mix much with his fellow-men, but nobody had a word to say against him and he was trusted by everybody. Tallard, curiously enough, who was silent on duty and regarded as rather dull by his fellow-policemen, was in great demand as an entertainer among the townspeople. He was a clever conjuror and was never so happy as when he was amusing large parties of children. He was also a boxer of some note, though he never would take part in any public

competitions, contenting himself with sparring in the gymnasium, and teaching youngsters the noble art of self-defence. At the present time he was giving most of his spare evenings to the unemployed recreational centre, and Sergeant Gower had watched him one evening with considerable admiration.

As to the story of police corruption at which Mr. Vardell, the patent-medicine traveller, had hinted, Sergeant Gower had come across it in one or two places but never in any more concrete form than . . . 'they say' and 'something fishy'. He had come to believe that Mr. Vardell was himself responsible for the whole story.

Poole had offered to send Sergeant Gower back to the Yard, but Chief Constable Thurston had told him to hang on to his assistant a bit longer. In view of the suspicion attaching to the local police, an occasion might suddenly arise when the detective would be glad of the help of another C.I.D. officer. There would now also be the detective-constable who was being sent down to keep an eye on Superintendent Jason, but Mr. Thurston was particularly anxious that Poole should not even speak to him, except in a case of emergency.

Superintendent Venning, in the Chief Constable's office, welcomed Poole back in a very friendly spirit and was frankly delighted to hear of his failure to find any proof of 'John Smith's' commission story.

"Mare's nest, the whole thing", he declared heartily. "I never believed it, but you put the wind up me, Poole. Sorry for you, of course—all that trouble for nothing, but you'll realise my feelings about it."

"I do, sir, of course", said the detective, "and I don't want to seem pig-headed about it, but someone did write that letter, and, true or not, he must have had a reason for it."

"Reason, perhaps—in his own eyes", returned Venning, "but no good one. Mischief-maker of some kind, I'll bet. You don't know what a lot of them there are about, especially in a small county town where everybody knows everybody else's business and hasn't got too much of his own to attend to. You wouldn't believe the stories that get about sometimes—generally about public men—aldermen, councillors, and so on. Of course, in a sense, the police are public men, and there are lots of people who've got a spite against us and wouldn't be above a bit of dirty work to vent it."

The thought of Mr. Vardell came into Poole's mind. Was it possible that the patent-medicine traveller had got a spite against the police—had perhaps been in some kind of trouble with them and was trying to revenge himself? Could he be the author of the letter? As a salesman, he might have some

experience of commissions, legal or otherwise, and the name of Brancashire as the clothing contractors for the County Police would appear in the reports of Standing Joint Committee meetings, at which the Press were present. The idea was worth looking into and the job was one well suited to Sergeant Gower's ability.

Poole told Superintendent Venning of his decision to examine the alibis of everyone in Police Headquarters at the time of the murder, and the acting-Chief Constable, though with great reluctance, agreed that it should be done.

"What do you include in 'Police Headquarters'?" he said. "The Divisional office—my office as Superintendent in charge of the Central Division—and the Brodbury Police Station are all under the same roof, and there's a door connecting the charge room with the Headquarters waiting-room downstairs. I suppose we all come under suspicion, as well as the Headquarter staff."

"Better cover the whole ground, sir, perhaps", replied Poole, who felt none too comfortable on that same ground.

"Well, I can answer for Sergeant Bannister", said the Superintendent. "He was in the charge room when I went out to my tea at five o'clock and he was there when I came back just after the shots were fired. I was in my quarters when I heard them and I ran straight across. Quite rightly, he'd stayed where he was; he was on duty in the charge room. I brought him up with me."

"He couldn't have got down into the charge room again before you got in? On the old idea, that is, of the murderer sliding down the rain-water pipe? Could he have got round from the little yard to the charge room without coming into the Headquarters part of the building?"

"He could have, yes. There's a passage that leads along the side of my old office—that's underneath this room—and he could have gone in by the Station door. Or he might have gone in by the side door that leads into the waiting-room at the foot of the stairs . . . no, he couldn't; that was locked on the inside, I remember Tallard telling me."

"Was there time, d'you think, sir? For him to have got down the pipe and round into the charge room before you came across from your house?"

Superintendent Venning pondered.

"Just possible, p'raps", he said. "Took me a second or two to recover from the shock of hearing the shots and to lace up my boots—I always unloose 'em at home—suffer terribly from my feet. Might have been a minute or more before I got into the charge room, but he was there all right

then, and no sign of any sliding down pipes . . . and now I come to think of it, there was a constable there too—Twist, I think it was. He'd be able to tell you if Bannister ever left the charge room."

"That ought to fix that, sir. Perhaps some time . . ."

"No time like the present. He may be down there now. Shall we have him up, if he is?"

"Certainly, sir. Of course we don't want him to know what we're after."

"Of course not", grunted Venning

By good luck, P.C. Twist was in the Station, and a minute or two were enough to establish Sergeant Bannister's alibi. Asked for his own account of the evening of the murder, Twist said that he had been on duty in the Station, and had been sitting in the charge room with Sergeant Bannister when the shots were heard. Neither he nor Sergeant Bannister had left the charge room for an hour or more previous to the firing of the shots. Clearly these two men, establishing each other's alibi, could be eliminated.

"May as well finish off the Divisional police first", said Venning, when Twist had gone. "There's myself, of course; my old lady can speak for me—though, of course, a wife's evidence isn't supposed to count. Still, do I look the sort to slide down a drain-pipe?"

The acting-Chief Constable glanced at his manly sub-chest with a smile.

"Then there's Inspector Parry. He came in just after me. We'll tackle him."

Inspector Parry had, on the evening in question, just finished a tour of points in the town. He was returning down the square when he heard the shots and had at once grasped what had happened. He had come straight in at the front Headquarter door and had joined the others on the landing just as Superintendent Venning was giving his orders for the search.

"We'll be able to check that account all right", said Superintendent Venning when they were alone again. "But look here, Poole, with Sergeant Bannister and Twist in the charge room, how could anyone get up here who wasn't already in the Headquarter part of the building?"

"Might have walked in by the front door, sir."

"But there was a constable on duty there all day. That was the one precaution the Chief would let me take at Headquarters."

"If the murderer was the type of man we're looking for, sir—someone Captain Scole couldn't suspect—he'd also be the type of man your sentry

wouldn't stop coming in—probably wouldn't even remember he had come in. He'd just salute and forget."

Venning frowned.

"I hate your way of looking at things, young fellow", he said. "Still, I suppose you're paid to have a nasty mind."

"We'd better ask him, anyhow, sir. Would he have been one of the Headquarter staff or one of the Central Division Constables?"

"One of mine. I'll find out."

Venning stumped downstairs but soon returned.

"Constable who was on duty that afternoon, Purcell, is out", he said, "but Parry has shown me his report. Smart young fellow; he'd kept a note of everyone who came in or out of Headquarters while he was on duty—wrote it out in a fair copy for his Inspector. Look here; the only person who came in after the Chief got back from Blything at 4.20 p.m. was P.C. Tupple, who'd been out to post letters and got back a few seconds before the shots were fired. Then, you see, he reports Inspector Parry coming in just after the shots. So that settles that."

"Yes, sir; those two entrances are blocked. There remains the old theory of someone coming down off the roof."

Venning stared.

"Good lord, have you gone back to that? Then you think it was Hinde after all?"

"Oh, no, sir, I don't. I'm sure Hinde couldn't have got where the murderer was when the Chief shot at him. No, I meant that the roof—or the store-room—was the only alternative to someone already in the Headquarter part of the building."

"The store-room? That *is* in the Headquarter part of the building. It's just along the passage there."

"Yes, sir. I should have said: 'someone *belonging* to the Headquarter part of the building'. What I'd got in my mind was that it was possible that someone *not* belonging to the Headquarter staff had been up on to this floor, possibly to see the Chief Constable, and then, instead of going downstairs again and out, had gone into the store-room and waited there till the coast was clear."

Superintendent Venning took a little time to assimilate this idea, and when he had done so he did not appear to think much of it.

“Seems pretty far-fetched”, he said. “I don’t see how the chap could ever have got there without either Sergeant Bannister or Twist or Purcell seeing him. Better have a look over the Headquarter people. Who’ll you start with?”

The choice was obvious enough; perhaps Venning was shying unconsciously from something he would rather leave alone.

“It’s often a sound idea to start with the person who was last known to have seen the murdered man alive. In this case I suppose that would be . . . ?”

“Tallard”, said Venning. “He was up doing his Motor Patrol schedule with the Chief after he got back from Blything—after the Chief did, I mean. He said he left the Chief at . . . I’ve got a note of the times somewhere.”

Superintendent Venning pulled a note-book out of his pocket and flicked over the pages.

“Here you are. He says he left the Chief at 5.5 p.m. and went across to see Jason. According to Jason, Tallard stayed with him five or ten minutes—I remember that they had a bit of an argument about it—not much love lost there, I’m afraid—and then he went out.”

“That would be at 5.10 or 5.15 then, sir?”

“5.15 according to Jason.”

“And the shots were at 5.20?”

Poole stared at the Superintendent. Venning stared back.

“You don’t think . . . he went along to the store-room, or . . . no, no, what am I thinking of?—he went downstairs and dictated his schedule to Hookworthy”. Again Venning consulted his note-book. “ ‘Went down to own room, revised notes 5 minutes, talked to Hookworthy 5 minutes.’ That’s what he said, and of course Hookworthy can check the last part of it. The shots were fired a second or two after Hookworthy left him. He and Tupple, who’d just come in from posting letters, were standing talking in the waiting-room. When the shots were fired, Tallard came bursting out of his room and Sergeant Pitt and the other constable out of the general office. They all ran upstairs together and . . .”

Venning stopped.

“And found Superintendent Jason outside the door—this door”, concluded Poole.

CHAPTER XV

THE CASE AGAINST X

"BETTER to face it, sir," said Poole quietly. "We've both got it on our minds and it's no good looking the other way any longer. Besides, we may find some evidence that clears him. What I'm up against now is this: I don't believe any stranger got into this room, with Captain Scole sitting there with a pistol beside him, on the look-out for trouble. Well now, as far as we've got evidence, Inspector Tallard left Captain Scole alive at five minutes past five, had a talk with Superintendent Jason across the way for another five or ten minutes and then went downstairs to his own room, leaving Mr. Jason alone up on this floor with the Chief Constable. So far as we know, nobody else came up to this floor till after the shots were fired, ten minutes later. Then they all ran up together in a bunch and found Mr. Jason outside the door of this room, looking in. That's right, isn't it, sir?"

Superintendent Venning nodded.

"So far as I know", he said gloomily.

"Why was he looking in? Why hadn't he gone in? You'd think one's instinct would be to go straight to the man and see if he was dead."

"That's right; you would. Nervy fellow, Jason, I think. It struck me when I got up here that he was shaky and dazed. I spoke sharply to him just to pull him together. May have been shock, you know, Poole. He wasn't in the war and he's probably never seen a dead man before—not shot like that, anyway."

"How did he miss the war?" asked Poole. "He can't have been too young—I only just missed it."

"Just didn't volunteer", replied Venning with a shrug. "There were a certain number of exemptions for police service, you know; it wasn't possible to strip the country of all its regular police. Jason stayed at home."

"It doesn't really help us much, either way, sir. He might have looked shocked because he'd never seen a man shot before, or he might have looked it because he'd never shot a man before. What really seems to me odd is, not his being shaky, but his not being in the room—if he had time to get there. The others did say he was standing there, didn't they—not that he was coming across from his room?"

"Yes, they said standing. I think one of them said he was leaning against the side of the door. I didn't think much of it at the time, because of course I first thought it was Hinde and then I thought it was suicide—which it still may have been, you know, Poole—even though I was mistaken about that note I found."

Poole ignored this red-herring.

"You didn't ask him about it?"

"No; not properly. Now I come to think of it, I did begin to ask him about it that night but we were interrupted—I think the Yard came through. Do you want to ask him now?"

Poole thought for a minute.

"I think perhaps we ought to clear it up, sir", he said. "It might be fairer to Mr. Jason. We may have formed a wrong idea of what really happened."

Without further discussion the acting-Chief Constable pressed his bell; a few seconds later Superintendent Jason appeared.

"Sit down, Mr. Jason", said Superintendent Venning, with the gruffness of embarrassment. "Inspector Poole and I have been having a talk over this case. We're rather at a dead end at the moment and we came to the conclusion that the best way would be to run through the story again. Now you only came back on Monday morning, I believe, so you can't say anything about the early part of the business. Will you tell us—tell Mr. Poole here—just what happened that day so far as you are concerned?"

"From the moment I came back to duty, sir?"

"Yes, roughly."

Superintendent Jason turned to Poole, and speaking in a flat voice, rather like a child repeating a lesson, or an inexperienced constable giving evidence, said:

"I returned to duty at 9 a.m. on Monday morning, and after hanging up my hat on a peg in my room I sat down and opened my letters. The first one was from . . ."

"Mr. Jason!"

Superintendent Venning's voice was sharp. He had stood a good deal of this sort of thing from the Chief Clerk in the past, but the last ten days had given him a new sense of authority.

"This is a serious matter; please don't treat it as a joke."

"I understood, sir, that you wanted . . ."

"You understood perfectly well what I wanted. We're trying to find the Chief's murderer; please tell us anything that can help us."

A slight look of discomfort crossed the Chief Clerk's face.

"Yes, sir. I think the first thing that struck me that morning was the constable outside the front door. I asked Inspector Tallard about it and he told me about the threats to the Chief and about the steps that had been taken to protect him and to find Hinde. The last part of the business Inspector Tallard had been attending to in my absence, and of course I took over from him."

"Do you mind telling me what you did about that, sir—about finding Hinde?" asked Poole.

Superintendent Jason smiled.

"I'm afraid you've caught me out there, Mr. Poole", he said. "I didn't do anything, except take a message from Greymouth. It seemed to me that all reasonable steps for finding him had been already taken."

"And I think I remember your telling me that you didn't really take his threats very seriously."

"No; that's perfectly true; I didn't."

Superintendent Venning, remembering the Chief Clerk's rudeness to him on the subject, was tempted to remind him of it, but he refrained, not wishing to humiliate a fellow Superintendent in front of the C.I.D. man.

"Well, what happened next?" he asked.

"I was busy all the morning, catching up with work that had accumulated. In the afternoon I took my papers in as usual and had a bit of a talk with the Chief about routine things. We hardly mentioned Hinde. I went back to my room and . . ."

"Can you say what time you left him, sir?" asked Poole.

"Yes; Tallard and I worked it out together—he went to the Chief directly I left—the Chief told me to send him up. We made it a quarter to five."

Poole jotted down the time.

"And then, sir?"

"It was just after that—I should say ten minutes later, that my door opened—as I described to you, Mr. Poole."

The detective nodded.

"4.55 to 5 p.m. I've got a note of", said Superintendent Venning, looking at his book.

"D'you want me to describe that again?"

Poole shook his head.

"No, you showed me, sir; it was very clear."

"Then Tallard came in—soon after five, I think we fixed it—and asked if I'd got any more letters for the Chief, as he wanted to be off home. I said I hadn't. Tallard stayed talking for a minute or two and then went out."

"Did you hear him go downstairs?" enquired Superintendent Venning.

"Eh?"

Jason appeared surprised at the question. He looked from one to the other of his companions, but there was no expression on either face.

"No, I don't know that I did. But surely . . . why, he came running upstairs after the shots. I remember . . . I was here at the time—I got here first—and he joined me."

"Where were you?"

There was a sharp note in Superintendent Venning's voice that he probably had not intended to appear. Superintendent Jason shot a quick glance at him.

"Here, sir. In the doorway, that is. When I heard the shots I was rather taken aback, but as soon as I'd collected my wits I came straight across. I knocked at the door and opened it at once and saw the Chief lying dead across that desk."

"You didn't see anyone else?" interrupted Superintendent Venning. "I know I asked you that before, but . . . you're sure? No impression of movement? Nothing out of the window, for instance? No sound?"

Jason shook his head.

"I saw and heard nothing, sir. I just stared at the Chief. I couldn't believe it."

"But you didn't come in? You didn't want to find out if he was dead?"

"No, sir. I am afraid I was rather knocked over by the shock of it. I . . ."

A sudden thought seemed to strike him. He looked quickly from one to the other. For the first time he seemed to notice the concentration of their interest.

"Why are you asking me all this?" he asked quickly.

"I told you", replied Venning. "We're going over the ground again to see if we've missed anything."

But Superintendent Jason was an intelligent man. He had seen their expressions. Slowly his eyes widened; the colour ebbed from his face.

"Good God!" he whispered. "You don't think . . . ?"

His voice faded away. His thoughts were racing back over that scene.

Poole realised that there was no chance of setting the man's suspicions at rest now. If he were guilty he would from now on be on his guard.

"I'm afraid it's my doing, sir", he said. "I've not been satisfied with the Hinde theory and I've asked Superintendent Venning to let me check over the movements of everyone who was in the building that evening. We've already questioned Inspector Parry and Sergeant Bannister and one of the constables from the station downstairs. Now we're starting on the Headquarter staff. Of course, as you've seen, there *is* the fact that you were nearest to this room and when the others came up you were outside the door. We wondered why you were outside and hadn't come in; that's all."

Superintendent Jason looked hard at the detective.

"I see. Yes, I see that", he said, in a voice which he had hard work to keep steady. "I didn't come in because it gave me the hell of a shock to see the Chief lying across that desk, dead. I told you I hadn't taken the threats at all seriously. I suppose I lost my head. I remember that the Deputy Chief cursed me for not being awake. I . . . I didn't kill him, sir."

He had turned towards Venning, and there was a note almost of appeal in his voice.

"I never supposed you did", replied the Superintendent, gruffly. He was hating this interview.

Realising this, Poole quickly switched to a different line.

"You said something about being away and not coming back till Monday morning, sir. I don't think I knew about that."

"Yes, I went on short leave on the Wednesday to attend my sister's wedding. I didn't get back till Monday morning."

"On Wednesday? That was the day Hinde first appeared?"

In a flash Poole remembered his earlier thoughts about the possibility of impersonation. Jason, of course, was completely unlike the descriptions of Albert Hinde, but he was of the type of which actors are made—spare, clean-shaven; a clever make-up might transform him, in the dark, and to a small boy . . .

"Then you knew nothing about Hinde's appearance?"

"I told you I didn't", snapped Jason, nerves beginning to show themselves. "Not till I came back on Monday morning."

"Not even that he was missing from home?"

The Chief Clerk hesitated.

"Yes, I believe I did see the report from Chassex", he said, "but I was rather taken up with my sister's wedding and going on leave. I didn't think much about it—left Inspector Tallard to deal with it."

He knew, then. Had that put the idea into his head?

"And when was the wedding, sir?" Poole tried to give a casual note to the question.

"There wasn't a wedding", replied Jason shortly. "My sister was taken ill suddenly the morning I got home—Wednesday. I telegraphed to ask if I should return to duty, but the Chief very kindly wired to say that I was to stay out my leave."

"I hope your sister's recovered all right, sir", murmured Poole, self-consciously.

"Thanks. She's away at the sea convalescing now."

It was an embarrassing subject on which to press the man, but Poole was determined to find out if there was any foundation for his suspicions.

"D'you mind telling me where you went, sir?"

"I stayed with my sister—with my mother, rather. She was very much upset."

"Yes, but where is that?"

"Cambring, near Helford."

Helford; Poole knew it well; it couldn't be fifty miles from Brodbury. A motor-bicycle . . .

"You were at home then, sir—at your mother's home, I mean—on Wednesday night and Thursday morning?"

"I was. Why . . . ?"

Jason looked sharply at the detective.

"What are you getting at now?" he asked sharply.

Superintendent Venning fidgeted in his chair.

"Only what I said before, sir; I want to check everybody's movements."

"You said before: 'everybody's movements on the night of the murder'. You're not suggesting that I impersonated Hinde, are you?"

The man had a quick brain. Poole realised that he was fencing with an opponent at least as skilful as himself. Superintendent Venning was looking blankly astonished; the possibility of impersonation had been mentioned to him by Poole on the occasion of their first frank talk together, but it had run off his back—he had not seriously thought about it. Now here was this C.I.D. man suggesting that one of his own officers, a fellow Superintendent, had not only killed his Chief Constable but had worked up a complicated plot for putting the blame on another man. The latter idea, though child's play compared to the murder, somehow seemed to him the last straw. It was almost more than he could bear.

Poole sensed the hostility—knew that he must fight now on his own, without help from Venning. But he stuck to his guns.

"It's all part of the same story, sir", he said quietly. "While we're talking plainly I thought it was better to get the whole thing clear."

"I see. You want me to prove an alibi. Well, I can't. Everybody at home was so upset at my sister's illness that they won't know from Adam whether I was there or not. You'll have to take it I haven't got an alibi."

Jason's voice was aggressive. He probably realised that his Chief was coming round to his side.

"I daresay somebody will remember, sir", said Poole soothingly.

"You're not to go worrying my old mother", said Jason, fiercely. "Leave her alone, or I'll . . ."

"Steady, Jason."

The acting-Chief Constable realised that it was time for him to take hold of the situation.

"I quite understand Inspector Poole's idea", he said, "but I think we've got all the information we need now. Don't let it worry you, Mr. Jason; it's a matter of routine."

The old formula, so often used successfully with civilians, fell flat when applied to a police-officer with twenty-five years' experience.

Superintendent Jason rose to his feet.

"I'm glad to know where I am, sir", he said angrily. "If you've finished with me, I'll go."

Without waiting for an answer he turned on his heel and went out of the room, shutting the door none too gently behind him.

"You didn't tell me you were going to ask him about that", said Superintendent Venning, gruffly.

"I didn't know about it, sir—about his being away when Hinde made his two appearances. I think I did tell you that I had the idea of impersonation in my mind. It did just strike me that Mr. Jason might have been able to get over from Cambring. I thought, while we were about it, we'd better go the whole way.

"Wild idea, it seems to me. Still, it's for you to do as you please now. Only I hope you won't upset old Mrs. Jason; I know she's not strong and she's been a lot upset by her daughter's illness just when the wedding was on."

"I don't suppose I need see her", said Poole. "There must have been someone about who saw him on Wednesday evening or Thursday morning, if he was there."

"You want a car? The train service is bad. When'll you go—this evening?"

"Better get it done, sir."

There was a knock at the door and P. C. Tupple brought in an official-looking letter.

"For Inspector Poole, sir", he said.

Poole glanced at it and handed it across to Superintendent Venning. It was from the Governor of Fieldhurst Prison and was a reply to Poole's letter of enquiry, written after his interview with Jack Wissel. It stated that the ship tattooed on Albert Hinde's right hand had three masts but it was not known whether it was intended for a schooner. Hinde had lacked a front tooth and his habit of spitting through the gap had been noticed—and severely commented on.

"That settles it, sir", said Poole. "It was undoubtedly Hinde who gave the letter to Jack Wissel."

"Save you a long drive", said Venning, drily.

CHAPTER XVI

THE GUNSMITH

THE letter from Fieldhurst established the fact that it had indeed been Albert Hinde who appeared in the neighbourhood of Brodbury on the Wednesday and Thursday before the murder. The possibility of impersonation could therefore be discarded and the problem was by that much simplified. But it did not clear Superintendent Jason of suspicion; nor, for the matter of that, anyone else. Superintendent Venning seemed to regard it as in some way supporting either the original police theory, or his own subsequent theory of suicide, forgetting that till half an hour ago he had not taken the idea of impersonation into account at all.

Poole was, on the whole, glad that the idea had been dissipated. It had raised a further disturbing element of uncertainty, and the more dead wood of that kind that was cleared away the closer they must get to discovering the truth. At the same time, it was evidence only of a negative character, and he seemed in the last two days to have discovered little else. The examination of police alibis had been useful; everybody who had been, or could have been, in the building at the time the shots were fired had established—generally without knowing it—an alibi. Superintendent Venning had been at his quarters, Inspector Parry going the round of points in the town, Sergeant Bannister and P.C. Twist cancelled each other in the charge room, as did Sergeant Pitt and P.C. Leith in the general office, and P.C.'s Hookworthy and Tupple in the waiting-room, while Hookworthy had only that moment left Inspector Tallard in his room just off the waiting-room. Superintendent Jason alone, on the first floor, within a few yards of the scene of the crime, was without an alibi, and had, too, been found actually outside the door when the others rushed up. In the absence of any other possible suspect, he must remain: X—the most likely person, upon whom attention must be concentrated.

There remained considerable difficulties to be cleared up before a case against Jason could be established. Most formidable of all was the question of motive; if the Brancashire clue failed, Poole did not know where he would turn to find another. It was not, of course, essential to find and prove a motive, but Poole knew that juries were very reluctant to convict without one. Then there was the rain-water pipe, which showed obvious signs of

rough treatment—signs which had been taken to mean that someone had climbed down it—and possibly up it as well. They would have to be accounted for. If Jason was the murderer he clearly had not made his escape down the pipe and there was no reason why he should ever have used it—unless it was to divert suspicion from himself. The latter explanation might also apply to his door. Poole was convinced that that door was no figment of a nervous imagination; either it really had been opened by someone, or Jason had deliberately invented the story.

These thoughts were passing through the detective's head as he walked back to his lodging after a rather embarrassed parting from the acting-Chief Constable. Both men had agreed to think over the situation and have another talk in the morning.

But the next morning found Poole on his way to London in response to a telephone message from Chief Constable Thurston asking him to come to the Yard as soon as he conveniently could. Before going, he instructed Sergeant Gower to try and find the patent-medicine traveller and probe the possibility of his being the author of the 'John Smith' letter. Sergeant Gower was glad of a definite job to do, though he felt rather doubtful of his ability to extract such a confession from Mr. Vardell.

Poole had telephoned the time of his expected arrival at Headquarters and he was not kept waiting long before being sent for, not to Chief Constable Thurston's room, but to Sir Leward Marradine's. There he found the Assistant Commissioner himself, the Chief Constable, and a stranger, who was introduced to him as Mr. Westing, the gunsmith to whom Scotland Yard always referred for expert evidence on the subject of firearms. On the writing-table in front of Sir Leward, lay an automatic pistol, two bullets and two cartridge-cases—the Brodbury 'exhibits'.

"We got Mr. Westing's report last night, sir ", explained Thurston, "and as soon as I knew what time Inspector Poole could be here I asked Mr. Westing to come along and talk the matter over."

"Yes; I am glad you told me", said Sir Leward. "It looks interesting. Mr. Westing's reports are always interesting."

That kind of soft soap was part of the A.C.C.'s job, thought Chief Constable Thurston, who confined himself to facts. Mr. Westing bowed his acknowledgment of the compliment.

"To save time, perhaps Mr. Westing might tell us what he found, in his own words, sir. There's a material difference from the report made by the Brodshire Constabulary."

Poole pricked up his ears, but said nothing. Mr. Westing picked up the pistol.

"This is a ·380 Westing-Thomas. It was designed in 1906 by my father and one of his mechanics, Joseph Thomas. It came on the market in 1907. It follows the same lines as other automatic pistols, but we claim that it is lighter and decidedly more accurate. There is less kick to it, and consequently a comparatively inexperienced person, if he holds it steady and points it straight, will get remarkably accurate results."

There was a subdued note of pride in Mr. Westing's voice which appealed to Poole.

"To turn from the general to the particular", continued the gunsmith, "this particular pistol was sold to Captain Scole in 1907. It was one of the first we sold; in fact I sold it to the Captain myself. I remember the circumstances well. Captain Scole was home on leave and told me that he had just been appointed to a police post in India and wanted the most accurate weapon we could provide. I recommended him this. You will notice the number—twenty-seven; that shows that it was one of the very first batch. We've sold thousands since then; in fact the numbers now are in five figures. The war, of course, pushed it on; it was very popular with officers of the New Armies."

Sir Leward Marradine nodded.

"I remember them well", he said.

Mr. Westing picked up one of the bullets.

"Now this bullet, marked 'Exhibit 3 Query'—I don't know what the 'query' stands for—this bullet was fired from this pistol. It's in a very battered condition, as you see, but there's sufficient of the base left intact to show the grooves made by the rifling of the barrel—sufficient, that is, for an expert to detect; I don't say it is obvious to a layman."

Poole was intensely interested. Here at last was definite evidence; he had not hoped that that crumpled bullet would tell its tale. He waited eagerly for what was to come. The gunsmith picked up the other, almost complete, bullet.

"This bullet, marked 'Exhibit 2 X'—again I don't know what the X represents—was fired from a different pistol. . . ."

Poole caught his breath.

". . . and I should say a distinctly newer one. The marks of rifling are deeper—again, of course to the expert eye, aided by a microscope. They are

quite distinct from the marks on Exhibit 3. Fired, certainly, from a Westing-Thomas ·380, but, as I say, a different one."

"That's where the reports differ, sir", murmured the Chief Constable.

Mr. Westing picked up the two cartridge-cases.

"Again, these shells were fired from different pistols. There is an infinitesimal difference in the position of the dent in the cap made by the striker, and there are also differences of marking on the base of the shell. This sound shell was fired from this pistol, the crumpled one was not."

"You can swear to that?" asked Sir Leward.

"Oh, yes, sir; that's quite definite. I can't say whether Exhibit 2 was the bullet in this crumpled shell, but they were both fired from the same pistol, a fairly new Westing-Thomas ·380, just as Exhibit 3 and the sound shell were fired from this old one."

There was an appreciable silence after the gunsmith had finished speaking, each man busy with his thoughts. Sir Leward was the first to break it.

"And the Brodshire report was that Exhibit 2—the sound bullet—was fired from this pistol?"

"Yes, sir", replied Thurston.

"Who made that report? A local gunsmith?"

The Chief Constable looked at Poole.

"No, sir; the examination was made by Superintendent Venning, the acting-Chief Constable; I understand that he had been through a Firearms course some time ago, and kept it up as a hobby ever since."

The Assistant Commissioner frowned.

"A very serious error", he said. "Is it an error that might easily be made by someone with a sprinkling of knowledge but without great experience?" he asked, turning to Mr. Westing.

The gunsmith gave a slight shrug of the shoulders.

"I don't wish to disparage anyone's work, sir", he answered, "but I'm bound to say I don't see how such a mistake could be made—not, that is, by anyone capable of giving an opinion at all. The crumpled bullet, Exhibit 3, is a different matter; I shouldn't be at all surprised at anyone failing to read that, but . . ."

"Mr. Venning reported that it was unreadable, sir", murmured Thurston.

". . . but this sound bullet is as clear as a pike-staff to anyone with reasonable knowledge and experience."

"The man must be a bungler of the first water", exclaimed Sir Leward. "Is it conceivable that he should have got muddled owing to the fact that one bullet is sound and one crumpled, and one cartridge case also sound and one crumpled? Could he have jumped to the conclusion that the crumpled bullet belonged to the crumpled cartridge-case, and the sound to the sound, whereas in fact it's the other way about?"

Again Mr. Westing shrugged his shoulders.

"Those facts have no bearing upon the identification, sir; they are quite fortuitous."

Sir Leward looked at Poole.

"What about it, eh?"

"From the position of the bullets and the cases, sir, I don't think there could be much doubt which belonged to which. This sound cartridge-case was on the floor to the right of the Chief Constable's chair, ejected there when he fired at the murderer. The crumpled bullet was in the wall opposite him, behind and apparently just above the murderer's head. The crumpled shell was to the right of where we believe the murderer was standing and the sound bullet was in Captain Scole's head. Superintendent Venning didn't confuse the bullets and cases, sir, I'm sure; all he said was that the bullet in Captain Scole's head had been fired from his own pistol; that's what made him think it might have been suicide."

"He thought that, eh, did he?" said Sir Leward. "You didn't tell me that, Thurston. Then where does Hinde come in and why have we been looking for him?"

"I understand that the suicide theory only came to the fore after the hunt had been on some time, sir. I didn't tell you about it, because I thought it'd be best to get Mr. Westing's report first. I confess I don't quite understand the point myself."

He looked enquiringly at Poole, who was feeling distinctly uncomfortable. He had withheld from his chief the fact that Superintendent Venning had deliberately sat on the suicide theory; he had, in fact, slurred the whole thing over when first reporting to Chief Constable Thurston. He might find himself in serious trouble. Still, having kept it to himself in the first place it was no good talking about it now.

"I don't think Superintendent Venning was at all sure what to think, sir. The Hinde theory was so obvious and he felt bound to hunt for him."

Fortunately, his superiors let it go, for the moment, at that.

"Well, I don't know that we need keep Mr. Westing any longer, need we?" said Sir Leward. "No more questions?"

He looked at his two officers, both of whom shook their heads.

"Oh, there is one other little matter I forgot to mention, sir", said Mr. Westing.

He searched in his pocket and brought out a sealed envelope.

"When I was examining the pistol I found a certain amount of grit in it. I examined the particles under the glass and came to the conclusion that they were grains of sand. I don't know whether that's of any interest, but I thought I'd bring them along and hand them over to Mr. Thurston."

Sir Leward turned to Poole. "Any significance in that?" he asked.

Poole shook his head. "I don't think so, sir, but I'll bear it in mind."

"Then we must let you go, Mr. Westing, and thank you very much for your help."

Sir Leward rose and shook the gunsmith warmly by the hand, escorting him to the door with more honeyed words. Poole saw a faint glint in Chief Constable Thurston's eye, but was careful not to catch it. The Assistant Commissioner returned to his chair.

"Well, what about this Superintendent . . . what's his name . . . Venning? What sort of a chap is he, Poole?"

"Very sound, I think, sir. Slow, perhaps, but reliable. He's very much respected in Brodshire."

"Humph. I'd like to have him up here and twist his tail, eh, Thurston? Damned serious mistake to make. Ought to have sent the things up to us straight away. That's the worst of these amateur experts; a little knowledge is a damned dangerous thing."

Poole did not remind the A.C.C. that Venning had attended an official course for the avowed purpose of obtaining that 'little knowledge'.

"No jurisdiction, of course, have we?" Sir Leward looked at his Chief Constable.

"None, sir. Nobody has over the Chief Constable of a county—the acting-Chief Constable in this case. He can do whatever he likes and nobody can say a word to him."

"Not even the Standing Joint Committee?"

"Not except in matters of administration, sir. In the detection of crime he's his own master."

A twinkle appeared in Sir Leward's eye.

"Perhaps there ought to be an Assistant Commissioner in each county, eh? And a bigger flea on *his* back? Well, well; we can't do anything about that. You talk this pistol business over with Inspector Poole; I must go over to the Home Office about this Westminster Square case. Plenty of big fleas in the Metropolitan area, alas."

The two C.I.D. men retired, leaving their titular chief to his more important duties. In the Chief Constable's room, Thurston pushed a box of cigars across to Poole.

"You're a county man for the time being, Poole", he said, "so I can treat you as a guest."

He took a cigar himself and, biting the end off, carefully lit it. For a time he smoked in silence, apparently absorbed in watching the blue smoke curl up towards the ceiling.

"I've an idea there's more behind this business of Superintendent Venning and the suicide theory than you've told me, young fellow", he said at last.

He kept his eye on the smoke, for which Poole felt grateful to him, for he was conscious of having turned red. Uncertain what to say, he remained awkwardly silent. Thurston turned briskly towards him.

"Come on, my lad; out with it. I know you're in an awkward position—attached to the Brodshire people and under Superintendent Venning's orders. 'No man can serve two masters', eh? Well, I'm your master; you're only lent to Venning."

Poole hesitated no longer.

"I'm sorry, sir; I expect I've done wrong. I wasn't quite sure what I ought to do."

He told Chief Constable Thurston everything that he knew about Superintendent Venning's suicide theory and his suppression of it in order to save a scandal. Thurston listened without interruption.

"Difficult to say what one would do in another fellow's shoes", he said, when Poole had finished. "On the face of it, it was a stupid thing to do—if nothing more. I don't wonder he didn't want us butting in. You ought to have told me straight away, Poole, but barring that you've handled an awkward situation not too badly."

This, from Chief Constable Thurston, was praise indeed. Poole found himself blushing again.

"You think he's a fool, eh—rather than a knave?"

It was an awkward question, and Poole avoided it.

"I should say Mr. Venning was quite straight, sir."

Thurston smoked on in silence for a time.

"As I said just now, we've got no authority over Brodshire, but I'm not happy about Venning. Westing said it was impossible to make a mistake about that bullet. I don't always take an expert's word for gospel—I've had too much experience of 'em—but Venning seems to have been very positive about that bullet being fired from Scole's own pistol. You're . . . you're sure he's not mixed up in this himself, eh?"

"Oh yes, sir; I've been into his alibi. He couldn't have been there when the shots were fired."

"Perhaps. But he's got a better motive than most, you know."

"Motive, sir?"

"Dead man's shoes", replied Thurston, cynically.

Poole felt genuinely shocked.

"Oh, no, sir; I'm sure Mr. Venning's not like that."

"Well, you know him better than I do. Look here, Poole; he's got to be talked to about that mistake. Difficult for you. How would it be if I came down and talked to him—gave him the 'once over' at the same time?"

Poole hesitated. He was in no position to argue with his chief, but . . .

"I'm not quite sure that it would be wise, sir", he said slowly. "We're working together very well now. I don't want him upset . . . you'll forgive me, sir. He can help me a lot in looking into things at Headquarters, and I should have great difficulty if he were hostile."

Chief Constable Thurston sat up.

"Very well, young man. The responsibility's yours. Back you get to it. I've got some work to do."

CHAPTER XVII

DEAD MAN'S SHOES

As soon as his chief had departed for London, Detective-Sergeant Gower set about finding Mr. Vardell, whom he was to sound about the 'John Smith' letter. He had not seen the patent-medicine traveller for some days, but he knew that the latter's favourite haunt was *The Honest Measure*, where he had first met him. Although it was not yet opening time, he thought he might learn from the landlord where Mr. Vardell lived. Unfortunately, the landlord did not know, and it was not until he had tried most of the small commercial hotels that he ran Mr. Vardell to earth in the smallest and least comfortable of them all. Mr. Vardell was busily engaged in packing samples into a very dilapidated Morris-Cowley, but he greeted the detective with a cheerful smile.

"Just off, I am", he said; "finished Brodshire yesterday and I'm moving on to Chassex. Shan't be sorry to go either—much more wide-awake town than Brodbury, Paslow is. You know it, I suppose, Mr. Gower?"

The Detective-Sergeant had sedulously maintained his character as a 'traveller' during his stay in Brodbury, but he travelled under his own name. Although he had been born in London and had never crossed the Tweed, Gower had true Presbyterian blood in his veins and disliked departing from the truth any more than was absolutely necessary in the course of his duty. Besides, Gower was a good name, and he was proud of it—and false names often led one into slips.

"I haven't been there in the last two years", he said, truthfully enough, if *suppressio veri* can be regarded as truth. "I heard you were leaving, Mr. Vardell; they were talking about you last night at the *Measure*. I thought I'd slip round and say good-bye, and if you aren't in too much of a hurry ask you to have a last one with me till we meet again."

"That's very good of you, Mr. Gower. I take it kindly, I'm sure." The traveller looked at his watch. "Quarter-to now; that'll just give me time to pack my old bus and then we could run round in her together to the *Measure* for our glass."

"Suit me well", said Gower; "but I'd like to suggest that we went somewhere else. I want a word with you private-like, and that's not easy

among friends."

So it was that twelve o'clock saw the gallant old Morris-Cowley pull up with a squeal outside *The Jovial Linkman*, where Gower knew from his Inspector that a quiet private bar was to be found. The very sight of port made the detective feel ill now, so he was relieved when his companion accepted the suggestion of a 'double Scotch and Polly'. To a port drinker, such as Mr. Vardell, a double Scotch whisky brings a punch that quickly sends the blood flowing and discretion flying. It was not long before the traveller was mellow enough for Sergeant Gower's purpose. He dropped his voice a tone, though there was no one in the bar with them.

"I've been thinking over what you told me about the corruption in this place and the police and all that. It's a terrible thing, corruption in public life, Mr. Vardell, and it ought to be shown up; that's what I say, shown up."

Mr. Vardell nodded solemnly.

"That's what I feel exactly", he said.

"Now this murder", continued Sergeant Gower. "You think that was done by someone the Chief Constable was going to expose, don't you?"

Mr. Vardell looked about him.

"That's about the size of it", he whispered; "and you know what that means, a policeman!"

Gower sank back against the wall.

"You don't say that?" he exclaimed, aghast—though it was only what the traveller had told him three days ago.

"Don't pass that on, mind. Wouldn't do for it to get about that I'd said that about the police. Libel, it'ld be", said Mr. Vardell, who evidently credited the police with special privileges in the matter of slander. Sergeant Gower looked grave.

"I won't, of course, if you say so, Mr. Vardell", he declared, "but someone ought to know about this. It oughtn't to go in silence to the grave."

The detective was uncertain himself what this meant, but it sounded well. For a minute he remained silent, apparently lost in thought, while the patent-medicine traveller examined the bottom of his whisky glass. Out of the corner of his eye Gower saw this manœuvre and was disturbed by it. It was doubtful whether the authorities would regard *two* double-scotches as legitimate expenses—not unless a good result was obtained—and Gower's blood cried out against the extravagance of paying for a second out of his own pocket. Best to distract attention for the moment.

“How would it be”, he asked cautiously, “to write an anonymous letter to Scotland Yard?”

Mr. Vardell continued to examine his glass, and Gower, seeing there was no help for it, summoned the landlord. Fortunately, the traveller asked for ‘a single only’, in view of his coming drive, and Gower gratefully followed suit. When their wants had been supplied he returned to the attack.

“That might be a very good way of doing it, don’t you think, Mr. Vardell? Advance the public good and do no harm to ourselves.”

Mr. Vardell did not appear greatly impressed.

“No harm, perhaps, but what good?” he asked with a slight hiccough. “To ourselves, I mean.”

This was a better opening than the detective could have expected.

“There might be a reward given”, he urged.

“Reward?” Mr. Vardell’s look was slightly owlish, and Gower feared that perhaps he had overdone the oiling. Who would think that a man would go stupid on three Scotch whiskies?

“Yes, they might pay us for the information.”

“What for?”

Damn the fellow. Was he really tight or merely dense?

“For disclosing facts for the public good, or . . .” Gower lowered his voice, “. . . they might pay us to keep our mouths shut!”

“What’s that?”

Mr. Vardell drew himself up and looked extremely solemn.

“That sounds to me like blackmail”, he declared.

The door opened and a uniformed police-officer entered the little room.

“What’s this about blackmail?” he asked. “Oh, it’s you, Mr. Vardell.”

He looked at Gower and opened his mouth, but shut it again. Vardell rose to his feet.

“I must get on my way”, he said quickly, “or I shan’t get to Paslow before dark. Good morning, Mr. Gower, and thank you.”

He looked uncertainly at the police-officer, nodded, and went out. Sergeant Gower followed him, cursing the interruption that had come just when the kettle was beginning to sing. His attempt to bring it back to the boil when Mr. Vardell was in the car met with no response; the little man seemed to have sobered completely and he drove off with little more than a

curt farewell. A tap on the window behind him made Gower turn round; the police-officer was beckoning to him from the room he had just left. None too well pleased, Sergeant Gower returned.

"Have another, Mr. Gower?" asked his new acquaintance, who was already half way through a pint of Mild and Mellow.

"No, thank you", replied Gower curtly, omitting the 'sir' that a detective-sergeant should use to an Inspector. "You wanted to speak to me?"

"Yes, but don't be so damned stand-offish. I'm Inspector Tallard, in case you don't know. Your real name Gower?"

"Of course; what d'you mean?"

Inspector Tallard laughed.

"Wonderful character-actors you C.I.D. chaps are", he said.

Sergeant Gower was rather taken aback. He thought that no one except his landlady, who had been sworn to secrecy, and possibly Superintendent Venning, knew who he was. He and Inspector Poole lodged together because the latter liked to be able to talk things over with his assistant, but they had been most careful not to leave the house together or to be seen together in the town. However, as his identity was known to the Inspector, there was no point in making any more mystery about it. He showed his warrant-card and put it back in his pocket.

"I'm passing as a commercial traveller in Brodbury, sir", he said; "bibles is my line."

"So I heard. We country chaps do know something of what goes on under our noses."

Gower flushed and remained silent.

"Come along; better have something", said Inspector Tallard. "Whisky is it?"

"Thank you, sir. I've had about enough of that already. A bit of what you've got might settle it."

"Ah, you've been doing a bit of pumping."

Tallard rapped sharply on the table and in a short time the landlord appeared.

"Two more pints please, Mr. Vokes, and head 'em off here if you can."

Sergeant Gower was annoyed. He did not in the least want it to get about that he had been closeted with the local police. Still, he could not help

himself now. He regretted having taken any notice of Inspector Tallard's signal.

"That old blighter been shooting his mouth again?" enquired Tallard when the drinks had been brought.

Sergeant Gower looked at him enquiringly.

"Regular old mischief-maker", explained the Inspector. "Goes about from town to town spreading lies about the last place he's been in. How did you get on to him?"

"I've had orders to pick up anything I can in the town", replied Sergeant Gower, who knew that the Inspector must have guessed that much. "Mr. Vardell was talking a lot about the murder the other night and I thought I'ld get him to myself and see if he'd got anything more than talk in his head."

Tallard nodded.

"What's he got to say about blackmail?" he asked.

But this was further than Gower was prepared to go, without orders.

"Got it into his head that Hinde might have been intending to blackmail your Chief", he said. Poole had told him what Inspector Tallard had said about the poaching case, so this seemed a reasonable and safe suggestion.

"Oh."

Inspector Tallard took a long pull at his tankard.

"I don't quite follow that", he said presently. "If Hinde was going to blackmail the Chief, why did he kill him?"

Sergeant Gower wriggled internally.

"I'm not sure that he thinks Hinde did kill him", he said, feeling that he was getting out of his depth but not knowing how to silence a senior officer. Inspector Tallard looked at him shrewdly.

"Who does he think killed him?" he asked.

Sergeant Gower had a brain-wave.

"We were just coming to that, I think, sir, when you came in. He seemed to get shy then and made off for Paslow."

"Pity. Sorry I butted in. Well, I don't suppose you want to tell me, Sergeant, what your ideas are?"

Gower thought that his agreement with this remark was best expressed by silence. Tallard waited a moment, then rose to his feet.

"I must be getting back", he said. "Don't worry about Vokes; he won't talk."

Leaving *The Jovial Linkman*, Inspector Tallard strolled back towards Headquarters, exchanging cheerful greetings with several townsmen on the way, and particularly with a group of men lounging outside the Labour Exchange. He reached Headquarters just as a large Daimler saloon drew up outside the door. Glancing at the occupants, he saluted. A hand beckoned him up to the car.

"Good morning, Inspector. Is your Chief in?"

"So far as I know he is, Sir George. I'll enquire. Shall I ask him to come out?"

"No; if he's in I'll come up—if he can spare me five or ten minutes, that is."

In half a minute Inspector Tallard was back. He opened the door of the car.

"Will you come up, sir, please?"

With some heaving and pulling, Sir George Playhurst got his large bulk out of the car. He was followed by the dapper figure of General Cawdon. The General had established himself as unofficial 'gingerer' to the Chairman of the Standing Joint Committee. This visit was the outcome of persistent suggestion from him. Inspector Tallard led the two gentlemen up to the Chief Constable's room, placed chairs for them, and then retired. Sir George Playhurst greeted Superintendent Venning courteously, and General Cawdon added warmth.

"You're very busy, I expect, Superintendent", said Sir George. "We won't keep you many minutes, but there's a matter that ought to be discussed before long. By the way, you haven't any news of this man Hinde, I suppose?"

"Nothing, I'm afraid, Sir George. We don't seem any nearer finding him than we were ten days ago."

He tactfully refrained from saying: "since you made me call in Scotland Yard", but General Cawdon bounced in:

"What's the C.I.D. man doing? Is he any use? Why don't they send a more senior officer?"

"I think Inspector Poole's a very efficient officer, sir", replied Venning. "He's made a most thorough investigation of every possible aspect of the case."

General Cawdon appreciated loyalty in a superior officer to his subordinate. It was not a universal virtue in the services. He wanted news, though, and was about to launch a new attack when Sir George forestalled him.

"We feel, Superintendent, that it's time to consider the appointment of a new Chief Constable. You won't misunderstand me; there is no lack of confidence in you implied, but it is not really satisfactory for the Force as a whole to be without a permanent head. For one thing, we are a senior officer short. You are acting-Chief Constable and I suppose someone is doing your work as Divisional Superintendent and so on."

Superintendent Venning nodded.

"I thought so. Now, Superintendent, you won't be hurt if I call a special meeting of the Standing Joint Committee to consider the matter?"

General Cawdon frowned. Why consult a subordinate about his feelings?

"It's just as you think, sir", replied Superintendent Venning slowly. "I shan't be hurt, of course; it's not satisfactory, the present position, as you say."

Sir George's face cleared. He liked Venning and he knew that 'feelings' mattered a great deal to a man in his position.

"Of course, as you know, it's open to you to apply for the post if you wish for it. Quite normal, in fact. Of course, I can't make any promise; the Committee may prefer to follow the previous practice of appointing from outside our own Force, but in any case I can promise this, that any application you may make will receive very sympathetic consideration."

"Not from me", thought General Cawdon; "a soldier's what we want", forgetting perhaps that a man who had commanded a battalion on active service might almost be considered a soldier.

Sir George Playhurst heaved himself on to his feet.

"Well, we won't disturb you any longer. I hope you'll catch this fellow soon. Come along, Cawdon."

The Brigadier followed, but turned back into the room.

"This C.I.D. chap anywhere about? What's his name?"

"Poole, sir; Detective-Inspector Poole. He's gone to London to-day; conference at the Yard, I understand."

"Well, I'ld like to have a word with him some time. Perhaps he'ld come out to my house one evening; you know where I live? It's only a mile out. Or I'ld come in here if that was more convenient."

The last a reluctant concession to unmilitary methods.

"I'll tell him, sir."

Superintendent Venning's voice conveyed no enthusiasm for the suggestion, but the Brigadier did not notice that. He ran lightly down the stairs after his Chairman, who had halted at the bottom and was talking to Inspector Tallard.

"By the way", he said, "I forgot to fix a date. Ask Superintendent Venning if Thursday week will suit him for the meeting I spoke about; a lot of members will be coming in anyhow that day for the Roads Committee; we could meet beforehand—it won't take long—say ten o'clock. Thank you; that will save me going upstairs again."

Tallard was back in a minute, confirming the suggested date and time. The big Daimler rolled away.

Superintendent Venning rang for the Chief Clerk.

"Who sends out notices of Standing Joint Committee meetings?" he asked. "Do you?"

"No, sir; the Clerk of the Peace, Mr. Jersey."

"Right; then ask him to send out notices of a special meeting for Thursday week at 10 a.m."

"What about the agenda, sir?"

"Agenda? What d'you mean?"

"The members'll have to know what the meeting's about, sir."

"Oh, appointment of Chief Constable", said Venning, locking his drawers preparatory to departure. "Coming to lunch?"

"I've a letter to finish, sir." Superintendent Jason hesitated.

"I suppose you'll put in for it?" he asked.

Superintendent Venning's mouth set in a hard line. For an appreciable time he took no notice of the question; then he looked steadily at his companion.

"I'm not applying for any dead man's shoes till I've put my hands on the man that killed him", he said.

CHAPTER XVIII

BACK TO THE OLD LINE

ONCE again Poole had to return to Brodbury by a stopping, middle-day train. It was a tiring process and not at all conducive to clear thinking. His mind was principally occupied with the problem of how to approach Superintendent Venning on the subject of his incorrect report about the pistol and bullet. It was obvious that he could not leave his temporary chief in ignorance of the expert's report. It was equally clear that he, in his subordinate capacity, could not cross-question the Superintendent as to how the mistake came to be made. Eventually he decided just to state the bald fact and let the situation develop itself.

Apart from that, he felt that his morning had not been wasted. Again it was negative information that had been obtained, but the fact that suicide could now be definitely eliminated was a decided step forward in the process of arriving at the truth. Poole felt more firmly than ever that the murderer was to be found among the men trusted by the victim. The question of motive still hung in the air; the detective thought that if only that could be established he would be able to move forward more rapidly towards the solution of his problem.

Walking up from the station, he decided definitely to go straight to the point with Venning and get that uncomfortable business out of the way. He was so busy framing the tactful speech that he should make that he nearly cannoned into a girl who was getting out of a car outside one of the big multiple shops. Stopping to apologise for his clumsiness, he saw that it was Miss Scole whom he had nearly knocked down. She recognised the detective at the same time and held out her hand with a smile.

"I'd forgotten all about you", she said. "How are you getting on?"

Forgotten all about him! The man who was trying to find her father's murderer!

"Slowly, Miss Scole, but I hope surely."

He had dropped his voice, not wanting other passers-by to hear what they were talking about. Katherine Scole evidently understood what was in his mind.

"Let me give you a lift", she said. "I'ld like to show you my car."

There was an almost childish pride in her voice. Poole realised that the last time he had seen her there had been no car for her to get out of. He looked at the new acquisition.

"Vauxhall?" he said. "Jolly good, aren't they?"

"Six cylinders! An absolute ripper!" exclaimed Miss Scole. "Only 12 horse power, and you'd never guess what it cost."

"It looks very expensive", said Poole with a smile, knowing well its exact price.

"£195! Marvellous, isn't it? Get in. I'll show you what she can do."

"Not between here and Police Headquarters", thought Poole. Aloud he said: "That'll be splendid. I don't know whether I shall ever have a car of my own, but I'm all for learning about them."

The girl let in the clutch and the car leaped forward, narrowly missing a bicyclist. With an agonizing screech of gear-wheels, Miss Scole engaged second speed.

"They *said* it had a silent gear box", she said in an injured tone.

"The synchro-mesh doesn't work on first and second. You'll find it all right in the two top speeds."

"Oh? Oh, yes; that's better. Of course, I'm not really a good driver yet. In fact, this is only the second time I've driven alone."

"And she offers to show me 'what it can do'!" thought Poole. Aloud he said: "Your father preferred a horse?"

"Yes", replied the girl curtly. "Now I'm going to make up for lost time. Get out of the *way*, you fool!"

An innocent motorist on his correct side of the road just avoided being torpedoed as Katherine Scole shot round a lorry. Poole thanked his stars that Police Headquarters were not far off. Covertly he eyed his companion and saw with a mixture of admiration and misgiving that there was a brilliant sparkle of excitement in her eyes. He saw, also, that she had a diamond brooch in her neat black beret; he suspected, too, that her clothes had not been made in Brodbury. Evidently the family had at last come into the money and comfort that had been so long denied to them.

"And a good job too", thought the detective. "Damned shame to keep a good-looking girl like this hidden under a bushel of false economy."

With a magnificent sweep the car shot round the police-constable on traffic duty at the top of the square, rushed down the hill and pulled up abruptly in front of Police Headquarters.

"I suppose you're in a hurry", said Katherine Scole regretfully. "I'ld like to have shown you what she can do on a straight road."

"Just at the moment, I'm afraid I am. Perhaps I might have a drive one afternoon, if you really mean it."

Poole was astonished at his own recklessness. Sudden death was the best that could come of such a drive 'in the open'. But the girl interested him—perhaps attracted him too, though he did not think of it in that way.

"Yes, do. I don't know many people and they're all old and dull. Besides, they seem to think I might kill them."

Poole laughed.

"I'm all for dying young", he said. "Well thank you very much, Miss Scole. You've saved me a dull walk."

He watched the girl drive off, then turned regretfully back to duty. Superintendent Venning, he heard, was in his room, so, screwing up his courage, he went straight upstairs.

"Ah, there you are, young fellow", Venning greeted him. "Well, what have the Wise Men got to say?"

"They'd got the expert's report on the pistol and bullets, sir. In fact, they'd got Mr. Westing himself."

"Oh? Did he make anything of the crumpled bullet?"

"Yes, sir. It was fired from the Chief Constable's pistol."

"Was it? Then there *was* only one pistol."

"No, sir; there were two."

"What d'you mean?"

"The bullet taken from Captain Scole's head wasn't fired from his pistol."

"Wasn't . . . !" Superintendent Venning stared at the detective. "But I'll swear it was! I fired four or five other bullets from that pistol and compared them with that bullet. I'll swear they had the same markings. Of course, I haven't got a comparison microscope—that's a double thing with a comparison eye-piece, I daresay you know—but there's a rotating gadget that you can use with a watchmaker's eye-glass that's quite good enough . . . besides the ordinary plasticine test—rolling on plasticine, that is—shows the groove. I can't understand it, Poole. Look, here are the comparison bullets."

He pulled open a drawer and took out a little cardboard box containing three spent cartridges.

"Fired into a bag of rags, so as not to damage them. You can see the grooves for yourself—but there, it's no use without the other bullet to compare them with. I suppose the Yard have kept that?"

"Yes, sir; I'm afraid they have."

"Then I can't show you. Pretty fool I must look", growled Venning. "But I'll need to be persuaded that I'm wrong", he added obstinately.

Poole thought it wisest to leave the acting-Chief Constable to chew on his own disgruntlement. Excusing himself on the ground that he must get back to his lodgings to see if any letter awaited him, he left Headquarters and, on reaching his destination, found that indeed there was a letter—a bulky one, too. Opening it, he took out a bundle of handwritten sheets, together with a typewritten covering letter bearing the superscription of Brancashire and Son. The letter read as follows:—

23 Nov. '33.

Dear Inspector,

On thinking over our talk this morning, I came to the conclusion that it was no use delaying an unpleasant task. I therefore sent for each of my staff in turn and directed them to write out in my presence a statement of their age, family, and service with the firm. I gave no explanation of my action and no doubt they think I am unwell. However, here are the specimens of handwriting, and as I saw each written I do not think there is any possibility of the handwriting being disguised.

I have given further thought to the question of our tenders for the Brodshire Constabulary clothing contracts, and it occurs to me that by examining the dates of all tenders (assuming them to have been kept)—both our own and those of other firms—you will discover whether in fact ours were submitted at a later date than our competitors'. It was only on this basis, as I understand it, that the question of fraud could arise.

I shall be glad to hear whether this suggestion helps to elucidate this distressing matter.

Yours truly,
HOSEAH BRANCASHIRE.

Poole threw down the letter with an exclamation of annoyance. The suggestion it contained was an obvious one, and should have occurred to

himself. Well, whose ever it was, it must be tested at once. Returning to Headquarters he again presented himself to the acting-Chief Constable and explained what he wanted.

"Can't very well get the tenders without Superintendent Jason knowing what we're after", he said. "D'you mind that?"

Poole hesitated.

"I think we must risk it, sir", he said. "It would be difficult for anyone else to find the things, I suppose?"

"Very."

Venning pressed his bell and the Chief Clerk appeared.

"Mr. Jason, do you keep old tenders? Clothing tenders and so on."

"Tenders, sir? Yes, I keep them ten years just to compare with new ones. It acts as a check."

"Can you let me have them?"

"All tenders, sir?"

"All clothing tenders."

"Certainly, sir."

The Chief Clerk left the room and presently returned with a neat file, which he laid before his chief.

"Anything I can help with, sir?" he asked, a note of curiosity in his voice.

"No, thanks. I'll run my eye over them and if there's anything I want I'll give you a ring."

Superintendent Jason retired and Venning beckoned to Poole to sit beside him. Together they ran over the tenders for the past five years, Poole making notes of the names, amounts, and dates. Seven or eight firms, usually the same, tendered each year, and in the last four years Brancashire's had been successful in obtaining the contract; in 1929 they had been underbidden by one firm. Each tender was dated and it was at once clear that, if these dates were true ones, Brancashire's had not on one single occasion been the last firm to submit a tender; in fact, they were generally one of the first. It followed, therefore, that they could not have had previous knowledge of their rivals' quotations, and consequently the idea of an illegal commission fell to the ground.

Poole felt his spirits sink. Venning's reaction was the exact opposite.

“There you are”, exclaimed the Superintendent. “Now what price all your nice ideas about fraud in the Brodshire Constabulary?”

The detective flushed. This was rather unfair, but not unnatural.

“The dates may have been faked, sir”, he suggested doggedly.

“Oh, come off it. All those firms?”

“No, sir; the Brancashire ones only. They’d only got to put on their tenders an earlier date than the actual one.”

“That means that a clerk would have to know about the fraud—the clerk who did the typing.”

“He may be ‘John Smith’ ”, replied Poole, knowing that he was fighting a losing battle.

“And d’you mean to say nobody this end would have noticed it? Neither the Chief Clerk . . . oh, I suppose you think he was in it. Well, neither the Chief Constable, nor any of the members of the Standing Joint Committee when the tenders were opened? Some of ’em always examine tenders pretty carefully—mostly the County Council members. Suspicious minds some of ’em have got.”

It did indeed seem outside the bounds of possibility, this scheme on which he had built so much. Poole felt that the one piece of solid, constructive evidence on which a motive could be built had slipped from under his feet. The ‘John Smith’ letter must be a fake, though what its object could have been he failed to understand. It had evidently been intended either to deceive the Chief Constable or to deceive the police. Captain Scole had taken it seriously, as his visit to Prinkle’s accommodation address showed. The note in his handwriting, which Venning had found, must have been his estimate of the amount of the commission—the figure 5% could only have been a guess, though a fairly safe one. In any case the whole thing, from the point of view of providing a motive for the murder, must be regarded as a wash-out, whatever other significance it might have. There was, then, no motive for a police crime. There remained the original motive, revenge; in other words, Hinde.

It was a depressing thought. It meant going right back to the beginning. Poole felt a cold shiver of dismay go through him. He had so completely convinced himself that Hinde could not have committed the murder—could not have got into the building, found the Chief Constable’s room, known when he was alone, presented himself, unsuspected, opposite a victim who was on his guard.

Still, it was no use kicking against the pricks. He at least knew something more than he had known when he began. He knew that Captain Scole had not shot himself. He knew that it really was Albert Hinde who had shown himself to the Chief Constable in Brodley Woods on the Wednesday night and to Jack Wissel on Thursday morning. He knew, more certainly than ever, that Hinde had disappeared and was hiding himself in a highly suspicious manner. It *must* be Hinde who had done the murder. But how had he done it, how had he overcome those apparently insuperable difficulties?

The telephone buzzed and Superintendent Venning picked up the receiver.

"What's that? Inspector Poole? Yes, he's here." He handed over the receiver. "Scotland Yard asking for you", he said.

Poole listened carefully, jotting down some notes on a sheet of foolscap as he did so.

"Yes, sir, Coroner's warrant", he said; then, after another interval of listening: "D'you want me to go, sir?" he asked, nodding his head in reply to the answer. "Very well, sir. You'll send someone to their office? And I'll stay here till I hear from you?"

Venning listened with growing impatience. These one-sided telephone conversations were infuriating.

The detective hung up the instrument.

"They've got him, sir", he said quietly.

"Got him? Who?"

"Albert Hinde."

Venning leaned back in his chair and stared at his companion.

"Where?"

"Bretosk, sir, in the Baltic. British consul's just cabled through that a man answering exactly to Hinde's description was admitted to hospital there yesterday. Landed from a timber boat belonging to Wasson and Vent—they're a big firm in that trade—offices near the London Docks. The Yard are sending a man down there to-morrow to get all particulars about the boat."

Superintendent Venning, his face expressionless, sat on in silence.

CHAPTER XIX

NEWS FROM BRETOSK

POOLE had been greatly relieved to hear that Chief Constable Thurston did not want him to go out to Bretosk to arrest and bring back the wanted man. For one thing, it was the kind of job he hated; lacking the phlegmatic temperament of some of his colleagues, he could never help feeling an intense pity for the man who had been caught and must now face his punishment. For another thing, he was a bad sailor, and he knew that considerations of economy would ordain that as much of the journey as possible should be done by sea. Finally, he realised that though Hinde must be arrested, on the extremely premature verdict of a local Coroner's jury, there was still a great deal to be done in the preparation of a case against him.

All the old difficulties crowded up for the *n*th time in the detective's brain, and with them came that terribly vivid picture of the Chief Constable staring across his desk at some trusted subordinate with a pistol in his hand. Well, that idea had collapsed; there was not a tittle of proof of any motive for such a crime. Unless . . . was it conceivable that Hinde had been helped by someone on the Headquarter staff? Someone, perhaps, who sympathised with him and was ready to help him to execute his revenge? With help from inside, the problem was very different; Hinde might have been hidden in the building—in the store-room perhaps—and given the tip when the coast was clear. Who could have done that? Either Jason or Tallard could have done it easily—Jason, left alone on the first floor with the threatened man, or Tallard, the last known to have seen him alive; who had left Jason in his room and said that he had gone downstairs, but who might have slipped along the passage to the store-room . . .

But even then, it was another ten minutes before the shot was fired; if Tallard had given Hinde the tip, why had the latter delayed so long? Perhaps to give his confederate time to get downstairs and establish his own alibi. For Tallard had a complete and unshakable alibi; he was downstairs in his room when the shots were fired. Hookworthy had only that second left him and he had emerged from his room the moment after. Could he have shot Scole from his own room, which faced the Chief Constable's, though on a different floor? No, that was inconceivable; Captain Scole had been sitting

at his desk when he was shot—and shot at a range of three or four feet. No, Tallard could not be the murderer, but he still might be the accomplice. Why should he be? With a start, Poole remembered his first meeting with the Headquarters Inspector, their long talk in the private bar of *The Jovial Linkman*, Tallard's description of the poaching case, his obvious sympathy for the convicted poachers. Could that sympathy be enough? Surely not, and surely, if Tallard had been an accomplice, he would never have paraded that sympathy before the detective—it would have been asking for suspicion.

The accomplice, if there had been one, would have been much more likely to adopt the other attitude—sympathy for the Chief Constable, condemnation of the poachers. What had Jason's attitude been? Poole cast his mind back to the talk he had had with the Chief Clerk on the day after his arrival, just after his interview with Jack Wissel. Jason had said that at the time of the poaching case he had been a young constable, had had nothing to do with the case, but had been in court at the Assizes during the trial. He had expressed no particular view as to the merits of the case, beyond saying that Hinde was a dangerous-looking man. It was a clever, detached attitude—if attitude it was—much more astute than a direct siding against the poachers. What connection there could possibly be between Jason and Hinde it was difficult to imagine—but it might be possible to find one. Apart from that he was, of course, by far the most suspicious character on the Headquarter staff, not only as an accomplice, but as the actual murderer. He, and he alone, had been on the first floor when the shots were fired, and he was actually found within a few feet of the dead man, in a shaken, highly-strung condition, when the whole of the remainder of the Staff rushed upstairs.

The one thing so far lacking in the case against Jason had been a motive. Poole had thought that he had found it in the 'John Smith' letter, but that had broken down; could this be an alternative? Poole felt a little shiver of excitement pass through him, as it always did when his nose owned to a whiff of 'scent'. Was this what he had been looking for? What was the connection between Jason and the Hindes? The Hindes! There had been two of them, besides a third man, whose name Poole had never heard. This man and the younger Hinde had received sentences of five years' imprisonment and had both earned remittance of sentence and been released in 1917; both, Poole knew, had joined the colours and both had been killed in the War. The detective remembered how Inspector Tallard had commented upon the bitter irony of that fate—the two minor offenders doing their duty to their country at the cost of their lives, while the principal, who had been condemned to death, was kept in safety at home. If only those two men had not died, what

a pretty turn it would have given to the problem. He might even have suspected Jason of being the younger Hinde, enlisted in the Police Force under a false name! No, that wasn't possible; Jason had been a constable at the time of the trial—impossible that he should have lied about that. Besides, Poole's own experience told him that a man joining the force had to produce unimpeachable evidence of good conduct and of identity.

It would be as well, of course, to make quite certain that the other two really had been killed. Who had told him that? Tallard, of course, in their first talk. But he had heard it more officially than that—probably from Superintendent Venning, or the Chief Clerk. It would be easy to find out, and, at any rate, any information he could get about the poaching gang would help towards discovering whether Albert Hinde had had an accomplice. Poole ruefully admitted to himself that he ought to have made those enquiries earlier, but he had been so taken up with his theory that the murderer was a policeman. . . .

These thoughts had been passing through the detective's mind while he smoked a pipe after dinner in his lodging. Sergeant Gower had told him of his inconclusive interview with Mr. Vardell, and the two detectives had discussed the advisability of following up that elusive gentleman with a view to sounding him still further as to his views on anonymous letters. Finally, Poole had decided to let the matter rest for the present, till it was seen whether the letter really affected the case or not.

On the following, Saturday, morning, Poole was early at Headquarters, but found Superintendent Venning already at work. He thought his temporary chief seemed heavy and dull-eyed, as if he had slept badly, but there was no lack of friendliness in his greeting.

"Well, Poole", he said with a smile, "are you giving us a clean bill?"

The detective grinned but did not give a direct answer.

"I'm looking for more information about that poaching gang, sir", he said. "I ought to have done it sooner. I think you told me that the younger Hinde and the other man . . . what was his name?"

"Powling. Albert Hinde, John Hinde, Frank Powling; I shan't forget those names in a hurry. It was the first big case I was ever in. I was a young sergeant at the time. Albert Hinde you know all about; John was a gawky young fellow of about eighteen, done a trip or two to sea with his brother but didn't like it and took to odd jobs on shore, mixed with a bit of poaching—mightn't have been a bad lad if it hadn't been for his brother; Powling was an older man, a sailor too, but not quite all there, I thought. Poor fellows, tough luck their getting killed as soon as they got out."

“That was what I was going to ask you about, sir; do you know any particulars?”

“Can’t say I do. I remember hearing about it when I came back from the War. Jason may know; he was here.”

Poole thought he could detect the faintest note of contempt in the Superintendent’s voice—probably quite unconscious.

“Like to ask him about it?”

Poole hesitated. He didn’t want to put the man on his guard; on the other hand, he might, if suddenly questioned, give something away; if he were guilty he must in any case be thoroughly on his guard already.

“Yes, please, sir”, he replied.

Venning stubbed a thick thumb on to his bell-push. The Chief Clerk appeared. He took no notice of Poole and the detective was glad to be able to watch him unobserved.

“Mr. Jason, can you remember anything about that young John Hinde and the other fellow, Powling, being killed? I mean, did you hear any details?”

Not a flicker of expression crossed the Chief Clerk’s face.

“Only that they were both killed early in 1918, sir. About the time of the big German offensive, I think it was.”

“How did we come to hear about it? Was it in the papers?”

“No, sir; I don’t think so. We were notified by Pentworth. They enlisted from there, and the Governor thought we might like to know about it.”

“That’s all we heard? Just the fact of their being killed?”

“That’s all, sir.”

“Anything more you want to know, Mr. Poole?” asked the Superintendent.

“What about next-of-kin, sir? Had they any family, d’you know?”

“Albert Hinde’s got a wife; saw her myself; respectable sort of woman—not at all what you’d expect for the wife of a scoundrel like that. I felt very sorry for her. Anyone else, d’you know, Mr. Jason?”

“I’ve never heard of anyone else, sir.”

“No other brothers?” asked Poole.

“I’ve never heard of any.”

Still Superintendent Jason did not look at the detective. He had not, in fact, spoken to him since Poole had questioned him about his sister's postponed wedding. Evidently that had rankled.

"That's all, I think, thank you, sir."

Venning nodded and the Chief Clerk left the room.

"What have you got in your mind?" asked Venning, eyeing the detective shrewdly.

"I only wondered whether Albert Hinde could have had any help—in getting away and so on, sir."

It was a deliberate lie, but Poole did not want to let the acting-Chief Constable know that he had still got the police in his mind. It might be all moonshine and he did not care to stir up unnecessary trouble.

"Quite possible, of course", said Venning. "These old lags pick up a lot of useful friends while they're inside—more's the pity. A lot of them go in more or less accidental criminals, but they come out up to all the tricks of the trade. That's what makes half the trouble."

Poole thanked the Superintendent for his help, and borrowing the Hinde *dossier*, took it off to Inspector Tallard's room to read in peace. Tallard, as it happened, was out, so he had the room to himself. The first thing he looked for was a description of the younger Hinde, John. It ran as follows: 'Age 18, height 5′ 8″, weight 10.3, chest 30½, etc., etc., hair mouse, eyes brown, distinguishing marks nil, carries himself badly, slight stammer.' Not very helpful; a poor sort of creature, certainly not like any member of the Brodshire Constabulary!

Frank Powling was more easily pictured: 'Age 27, height 5′ 10″, weight 13.4, chest 40, etc., etc., hair black and bristly, long moustache ditto, eyes brown, tattoo marks on chest, cross flags and bust of a woman, index finger of left hand lacking top joint.' The latter item alone would debar him from any police force, apart from age—and the fact that he, as well as his companion, was dead. So much, at any rate, for their appearances; now for their story. Poole turned to the early notes of the case and began to read. It was not long, however, before P.C. Leith came in to say that the Yard were on the telephone again and he was soon speaking to Chief Constable Thurston.

"Prepare yourself for a blow, young fellow", came the Chief's voice down the wire. "Perrin went down to Wasson & Vent's offices this morning and they told him that the *Tilford Queen*, from which this fellow Hinde is

supposed to have been landed at Bretosk, sailed from the Port of London on Friday, 10th November."

"Good Lord", exclaimed Poole involuntarily.

"Quite so, but I don't like blasphemy. That means either that the Bretosk fellow isn't Hinde at all, or else that Hinde can't have committed a murder in Brodbury on November 13th. You can pay your money and take your choice . . . though, mind you, the Consul seemed pretty positive about it."

There was a pause, while Poole thought over the implications of this news. The whole case seemed a whirl of contradiction and confusion.

"Then you won't send anyone out for him, I suppose, sir, till you get some more news?"

"No; I've sent a cable asking for a detailed description—measurements, marks, etc., and if possible a photograph. I don't think I told you, by the way, that the man's name was given as Harris—an obvious enough alias. He's down with some queer sort of fever and is unconscious, so they haven't been able to question him. We'll have to mark time till we get more news."

"Yes, sir."

"Nothing fresh your end?"

"Nothing, sir. I've got an idea, that's all."

"I don't suppose that'll amount to much", said the Chief Constable bluntly. He was a firm believer in facts and had little use for ideas. "Well, keep trying."

He rang off, and Poole slowly hitched up his receiver. Where was he now? His mind felt numbed and useless. Perhaps it wasn't Hinde after all. In that case . . . But surely it was significant that the *Tilford Queen* had sailed at just about the date on which Hinde was last seen. Friday, 10th November? Jack Wissel had seen him on Thursday, 9th, and an hour or so later he had been seen getting into a train bound for London. It *must* . . .

The telephone bell trilled again.

"That you, Mr. Poole?" asked the voice of P.C. Leith. "Scotland Yard asking for you again." A click, and the voice of Chief Constable Thurston: "Poole? Another wire just come through from Bretosk. Harris has recovered consciousness and admitted that he is Albert Hinde. Just what it all means I don't know, except that he can't have killed Scole. But thanks to your bright Coroner we're bound to arrest him. I'm sending Perrin off to-night to bring him back."

CHAPTER XX

WOOLHAM AND PENTWORTH

ALBERT HINDE, then, could not have committed the murder. Here again was one more negative fact established—negative, but vitally important. Disappointing as it was, Poole realised that every definite fact established meant another obstacle to the truth cleared away. Hinde had not killed Captain Scole. Very well, then, somebody had; a fresh start must be made and in time another obstacle would be removed until the truth stood revealed. Poole's C.I.D. training and experience had taught him that by the persistent work of elimination, truth—in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred—always was revealed. That did not mean that murderers were always caught and hanged, but the number of cases in which the identity of the murderer remained unknown *to the police* was infinitesimal. To produce proof sufficient to satisfy a jury, or even to bring the murderer to trial, was an entirely different story. Very well; on with the chase.

There was no definite line to follow at the moment. He had got to find one. And he was going to look for it in the history of the Hinde family and that old poaching case. In the first place, he was going to satisfy himself that young Hinde and his companion, Powling, really were dead. How was that to be done? Find their regiment. Again, how? Perhaps someone at Pentworth Prison could tell him; from what Jason had said, the men had gone practically straight from the prison to the recruiting depôt; the Prison authorities might know to what depôt they had gone and, though the depôt was probably a temporary war-time affair, it should not be impossible to trace its records of enlistment. To Pentworth, then.

But before going there, there was a duty to be performed. Mrs. Albert Hinde had got to be told of her husband's capture. It would be brutal to let her hear it first from the Press, and in any case it was possible that something might be learned from the interview. It was Saturday morning. Poole intended to take a twenty-four hour holiday; he could get a bus to Woolham, in Chassex, where Mrs. Hinde lived, and from there take the train to London. It was not a good day to go to Pentworth; the Governor would probably be playing golf. Sunday morning would be better; he would be pretty sure to attend Divine Service in the morning. Poole's holiday, then, should consist of Saturday afternoon and, with luck, Sunday afternoon as

well, leaving it open whether he should return to Brodbury on Sunday night, or continue his investigations in London on Monday morning.

The drive to Woolham was a dull one, the road being one of the modern 'improved' type, with concrete curbs, iron railings, and no bends—a racing track rather than a country road. Poole spent the time in a profitless review of his case and was glad when his destination was reached. Superintendent Venning had told him where to find Mrs. Hinde; her home was one of a row of 'subsidy' houses just off the London road. Poole noticed that the garden was neatly kept and the window curtains tidy; Mr. Hinde not being exactly a regular wage-earner, it was to be presumed that his wife had money of her own.

The woman who opened the door confirmed this impression. Her appearance, like that of her house, was neat. Although it was morning and though she was presumably in her working dress, there was no sign of slovenliness or raggedness about her. She was small and slight, with fair hair, tightly drawn back from her forehead, and a fresh, though pale, complexion. There were surprisingly few lines on her face considering all she had gone through, but her mouth was thin and her eyes, behind gold-rimmed glasses, were hard and expressionless. Poole explained who he was and Mrs. Hinde, in a quiet, even voice, invited him to come in.

The interior of the house bore out the impression given by the garden and the windows. It was well furnished, comfortable, but with no sign of luxury or feminine adornment.

"I've come to talk to you about your husband, Mrs. Hinde", said Poole.

Still no sign of expression in those quiet blue eyes.

"He has been traced to a port in the Baltic, a place called Bretosk, where he's in hospital with a touch of fever."

A slight catch of the breath, a tightening of the thin hands which clasped each other on her lap, were the only sign that Mrs. Hinde gave in response to this news. She did not speak, but sat watching the detective, waiting for what should come next.

"As you are the wife of a man who will be charged with a crime, it's my duty to warn you that you needn't make any statement unless you wish to. You know, I expect, that a wife cannot be asked to give evidence against her husband and she is entitled to the same caution that will be given to him."

At last there was a sign of life. Mrs. Hinde's eyes flashed, and a faint colour came into her cheeks.

"Charged?" she exclaimed. "He's done nothing."

"He will be charged with the murder of Captain Anthony Scole. There is a Coroner's warrant out against him. Surely you have been told that?"

"The police did tell me, yes, but I thought. . . . How can he be charged? He wasn't there."

Poole looked at her enquiringly. He would have given anything to question her, but it wasn't allowed. His look was enough, though.

"He wasn't there; he wasn't even in the country when the man was killed!"

Anger had evidently shaken Mrs. Hinde out of some of her self-control.

"How d'you know that?" exclaimed Poole, forgetting some of his own. "No. You needn't answer that. I shouldn't have asked you."

The woman bit her lip. The colour slowly died out of her cheeks. She watched him silently, resentfully.

"I have to ask you to keep this information to yourself for the present, Mrs. Hinde", continued Poole. "We will keep you informed about him. At the moment we don't know what he's suffering from. The Consul at Bretosk only said fever, and that he was unconscious when admitted to hospital, but he's recovered consciousness now and has admitted his identity. He had signed on under the name of Harris."

"Harris?"

The name seemed to startle Mrs. Hinde. Poole looked at her enquiringly, but she said no more.

"That's the name we got from the Consul, but, as I say, your husband has now admitted his identity. As the Coroner's jury brought in a verdict of murder against him, the Coroner was bound to issue a warrant and we are bound to execute it. As soon as he's fit to travel he will be brought home and will appear before the justices at Brodbury. If they don't consider that a *primâ facie* case can be made out against him, it is open to them, of course, to discharge him."

Very few women, thought Poole, could have resisted the inclination to speak their minds about a system that could allow a man to be charged with murder when it was known that he was out of the country when the crime was committed, but Mrs. Hinde only pressed her thin lips more firmly together. She had lost control of herself once and had said something that would have been better left unsaid; she was not going to make that mistake again. The detective began to realise that he was dealing with a woman of very strong character, and the fact intrigued him. Still more was he intrigued by that remark that had slipped out; how did she know that her husband was

out of the country when the murder was committed? Or rather, knowing it, why had she concealed her knowledge, when, by revealing it, she could have cleared her husband of the terrible charge under which he lay?

'The Judges' Rules', which forbid the cross-questioning of a person whom it is intended to charge with a crime, apply also to the wife—or husband—of the suspected person, so Poole was unable to ask Mrs. Hinde to explain her remark, but he tucked it away in his mind as a significant fact and determined that by some other means he would discover the explanation of it. In any case, it confirmed him in his decision to find out everything that was known about the whole Hinde family, whether alive or dead. The telephone call from Scotland Yard had interrupted him in his study of the Hinde *dossier*. He had not, for instance, read the shorthand notes of the trial; this must be done as soon as he got back to Brodbury; at present he had only heard the story as told by Superintendent Venning and Inspector Tallard, with a few comments from the Chief Clerk. Something which might seem of no importance to them might be revealed by a detailed reading of the case in the light of subsequent events.

Taking leave of Mrs. Hinde, Poole walked to the station and caught one of the slow, stopping trains that seemed to be his fate in this case. He had provided himself with some sandwiches and an apple, which he ate on the way up, so that on reaching London he was able to go straight to Twickenham and watch his old club, the Harlequins, play the first of their annual dog-fights with their great rival, Blackheath. True to his resolution to cut himself off entirely from his old life and old associates when he joined the Metropolitan Police, Poole had resigned his membership of the famous club, and played all the football he had time for with the Metropolitan Police team, but he still loved to watch a first-class match, and still thrilled at the old cry of 'Play up, 'Quins', which had so often spurred him to superhuman efforts as he sped down the touch-line in his undergraduate days. Tucked away in a corner of the vast stand, he saw many of his old friends but made no attempt to join them, though one or two who knew of his career spotted him and made a point of showing him that he was not forgotten.

With two of these friends he drove back to London and, unable to resist their friendly insistence, returned to his lodgings in Battersea, changed into the evening clothes that never now lost their clinging scent of moth ball, and spent a happy evening doing a round of 'shows' and night clubs. In one of the latter he saw an immaculate colleague, obviously looking for trouble, but no sign of recognition passed between the two detectives and Poole, slightly sobered by this reminder of his present sphere, soon afterwards said a grateful good-bye to his hosts and retired, solitary but refreshed, to bed.

The change of atmosphere, mental as well as physical, had done him good, and on Sunday[7] morning he made his way to Pentworth Prison with a renewed feeling of keenness. Major Prenderton, the Governor, an upright, sparely-built man, with grizzled hair and moustache, received him in a forgiving, rather than a welcoming, spirit. He had intended to leave divine service to his deputy and spend a long day at Sunningdale, but Poole's telephone message on the previous evening had decided him to cut the morning round and attend to the claims of his chaplain and of Scotland Yard instead.

"I remember the case quite well", he said. "Powling was a commonplace, dull-witted type, but young Hinde had possibilities. When he came in he was little more than a boy, gawky, sullen, and rather frightened. One of my officers, Haling, took an interest in him—fathered him, so to speak—and developed him into a young man of considerable character, a good gymnast—we've rather a model prison, you know—and quite an intelligent member of society. I lent him some books that I thought might help him—he talked of taking up engineering when he came out—and my chaplain had a crack at him too; I think he was rather disappointed with him—said he had a hard crust he couldn't get underneath; you know what chaplains like—a man who goes all soft and mushy with them is sure to be on the highroad to heaven. But Haling and I liked him and it was a great disappointment to us when we heard he'd been killed."

"That's one of the things I wanted to ask you about, sir. Did you get the news officially or privately or out of the papers, or how?"

Major Prenderton leaned back in his chair and bent his brows in thought.

"I can't be quite sure about that", he said at last. "Haling might remember; he's still here. I'll get hold of him."

He picked up the receiver of his 'house telephone', gave the necessary instructions, and within five minutes a burly figure in the sombre uniform of a prison officer appeared.

"Good morning, Haling. This is Detective-Inspector Poole, C.I.D. He's asking about that young fellow, Hinde, whom we took rather an interest in in the early part of the war. Came in just before, I think, didn't he? Yes, I thought so, and joined up as soon as he'd earned his discharge. You remember him?"

"Perfectly, sir. He was a promising young fellow—made a fine soldier if he'd stuck to it and the Germans hadn't got him. Wanted to be an engineer, I remember, but I always thought the Army would be the place for him, war or peace. Discipline was what he wanted, and not too much chance of

thinking and running on his own. Bad company had been his downfall, and would be again, in my opinion. Thought he had a grievance against society, as they're so fond of saying. His brother was condemned to death, you know, sir, and then had a commuted life sentence. I saw he came out the other day, by the way. . . ."

He broke off and looked at Poole.

"I suppose that's what you're after", he said. "I remember now, the chap's been in trouble again. Didn't he do in the Chief Constable of Brodshire?"

"Suspected of it", replied the detective. "In fact, there's a Coroner's warrant out against him. It *is* in connection with that that I'm making enquiries about his brother."

Haling eyed the detective with interest, but, in the presence of his chief, was evidently not going to appear too inquisitive.

"Inspector Poole wants to know how the news of Hinde's death reached us", said Major Prenderton; "officially, or privately?"

"I'd really like to begin earlier than that, sir", interrupted Poole. "If Mr. Haling can tell me what Regiment he and Powling enlisted in I might be able to trace what happened to them through the regimental record office."

"I can tell you all about that", said the prison officer, "because I more or less recruited 'em myself. They were discharged the same day. That was an interesting thing, you know, sir". Haling had turned towards the Governor now; "the way young Hinde seemed to carry Powling along with him—seemed determined that they should be discharged together. Powling was often in a bit of trouble, not so much deliberately troublesome as idle and unwilling. Hinde always seemed to be able to buck him up. As soon as we realised that he was having the right sort of influence on Powling we didn't try to stop him; some of it of course was done strictly not in accordance with regulations but . . . well, you know how it is, sir; a blind eye occasionally is all to the good."

Major Prenderton nodded.

"The only time Hinde was ever in trouble was just after Powling had lost a week's remission. Hinde lost one too, and I always thought he'd done that deliberate in order to stay on terms with his mate. Anyway, that's how it was. They were discharged together and I took 'em straight down to the recruiting office myself and saw them sworn in. I wasn't too sure about Hinde even then; I knew he'ld make a fine soldier once he'd taken on the job, especially in war time, and I hoped he'ld stick to it if he came through.

But I thought if I didn't see him in he might slip off and become a Conchy or even worse, just to get his own back on 'society'. There was a streak of the devil in young Hinde; that's what I thought 'ld make him a rattling fine fighting soldier."

"And what was the regiment he joined; d'you remember that?" asked the detective.

"Oh, yes; London Fusiliers. Everyone was joining 'em round here, except a few of the big ones as fancied themselves in the Guards. The London Fusiliers had a recruiting office of their own here in Pentworth and I took these two fellows straight there—didn't think they were quite suited for a Household regiment, even though they were big enough", added Haling with a grin.

"Big enough?" queried Poole. "My note of John Hinde, taken from the Brodshire records, is five foot eight. Would that have got him into the Guards?"

The prison officer pondered a moment.

"I don't rightly recall the Guards' height standard in the war", he said. "Mind you, this was in '17, when they'd had smashing losses on the Somme and at Ypres; standard may have gone down a bit then. But anyway, Hinde was more than five foot eight, Inspector; you're wrong there."

Poole pulled out his note-book and began to turn over the pages.

"Ah, but wait a minute", said Haling. "Those measurements of yours would've been taken when he was arrested. He was only a boy then. I remember him when he came in; weedy young fellow and not fully-grown. We put a lot onto him in four years, made a man of him."

There was a note of genuine pride and pleasure in the old officer's voice. He might have been a doctor speaking of a hospital patient, or a schoolmaster of one of his pupils.

"Would you have his record—measurements and so on—when he left?" asked Poole.

"Sure to have."

Haling looked enquiringly at his chief.

"Yes, get them", said the Governor. "It will be interesting to compare the two."

The officer was absent for nearly a quarter of an hour, during which time Poole outlined to Major Prenderton the details of the present case and explained the line on which he was now working. He was not anxious that

the latter should go beyond the Governor at the moment, so he switched off when Haling re-appeared.

"Here it is, sir; 'John Hinde, discharged 5 November 1917, having earned full remission less one week, etc. . . . Age 22-7/12, height 5′ 10″, weight 12.4, chest 36, hair dark brown, erect carriage, distinguishing mark scar inner side left wrist'."

He handed the paper across to Poole, who studied it with growing interest. The description was that of a completely different man to the John Hinde arrested in 1913. Opening his note-book, he compared the Prison record with the figures he had taken from the Brodshire *dossier*.

"He's grown two inches for a start", he said. "Nothing surprising in that, of course; he was only eighteen when Brodshire measured him. Gained over two stone; that's good work, sir. Five and a half inches round the chest; that's even better. Lost his stammer and straightened his back. Hair's changed too, got darker; I suppose that often happens."

"Yes, and it would have gone on", said the prison officer. "Probably have been nearly black by now, if he'd lived."

Poole nodded.

" 'Distinguishing marks nil'; hullo, here's a difference. That's the Brodshire record, but you've got him down as having a scar on the left wrist."

He looked enquiringly at Haling, who scratched his head as if in thought. Then his face cleared.

"I know what that was", he said. "Happened on the way here. One of his hands was freed from the handcuffs for a certain purpose and when the warder went to put it on again Hinde struggled; the warder was afraid he might be trying a break and he clapped it on sharp and caught the flesh—took a nasty bit out. I remember he had his wrist bandaged for some time. The mark never disappeared."

Poole nodded thoughtfully. If only young Hinde had remained alive, what a lot might have been built upon this description of his character, and what a help to identification this scar would have been. The rest was less helpful; it described half the members of every police force! Inspector Tallard, Inspector Parry, Sergeant Bannister, to take the men in the Headquarter building alone, all had dark hair, held themselves erect, and were of approximately those measurements and that age. Any variation might be accounted for by the sixteen years which had since passed, to say nothing of the changes made by war and strenuous duty. But John Hinde

was dead—or so it was said; it was his duty now to determine whether that really was the case.

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[7] 26th November.

CHAPTER XXI

THE OLD SOLDIER TALKS

"AND then he was killed, sir?"

"So I understand", said the Governor of Pentworth. "What about that, Haling? How did we hear?"

"Notified officially, sir. You see, these two lads . . . well, Powling wasn't a lad then, must have been over thirty, but Hinde was only a youngster still . . . as I was saying, these two young men took it into their heads to enlist under false names. They talked it over as we walked down to the recruiting station. I tried to dissuade 'em; told them that joining up was something to be proud of and would clear their names of the slur of being in prison. But Hinde wouldn't listen to me; got some idea at the back of his mind, I fancy, and when he had that, he was obstinate as a toad. Powling enlisted under the name Peters and Hinde took the name Harris."

"Eh? I beg your pardon, sir. That's the name given by the man I was telling you about when he signed on to his ship. Sounds as if the family must have known of this assumed name, anyhow. It can hardly be a coincidence."

Major Prenderton nodded and the prison officer looked mystified, but Poole did not enlighten him.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Haling", he said. "I interrupted you."

"I took them down to the station, as I was saying", continued Haling, in a slightly aggrieved voice, "and they enlisted in the London Fusiliers and were sworn in and went off straight away to the depôt—said they'd got no friends or relations they wanted to see, and would rather get straight on with the job. I said good-bye to them, wished 'em luck, and gave them a few words of advice, which I don't suppose they paid any attention to, any more than the Old Contemptibles did to Lord Kitchener's in '14. I never saw them again and some time early in '18—March or April—we got a letter from the War Office saying they'd both been killed. Mr. Walker showed it to me, sir; he knew I was interested in Hinde."

The Governor nodded, and Haling continued:

"The War Office said that the next-of-kin address given by the two men had been found to be fictitious in each case, and as it was known that they'd

come from here they notified us for our information."

"And we passed it on to Brodshire for *their* information; I remember now", said Major Prenderton. "So the information was official, Inspector. No doubt that answers your point."

It looked as if it did, but the detective was not going to be satisfied to leave it at that. Official information was not invariably correct.

"I'd better just check up with the War Office", he said. "Better make quite sure about their source of information and so on."

"Quite right. Leave no stone unturned; that's the spirit, Inspector. But you'd better go direct to the Regimental Record Office; they'll have got all the particulars now. The War Office will have buried all those things a mile deep in dust."

"Thank you, sir; I will."

Poole rose to take his leave.

"Beg your pardon, sir", said Officer Haling. "If it's any help to the Inspector, I know the chap that was recruiting-sergeant to the London Fusiliers in '17; he was an old friend of mine, and that's partly why I took those two chaps along myself—to make sure there was no trouble about their having been in here. He put it right with the officer, and no doubt he made a note of where they came from and that was how the War Office knew to write to us. He's living not so far from here now; got a little eating-house in the Peckington road. If it's any help and I could get leave off dinners, sir, I could take the Inspector along after Divine Service and introduce him to Mr. Bowles."

"Do so, by all means. Well, Mr. Poole; I must get ready for Church. I hope you'll be successful in your case. You'll let me know?"

Poole thanked the Governor and took his leave. By arrangement with Haling he attended the service in the prison chapel, and studied with interest the types and expressions of the congregation. Although attendance was optional, nearly half the men in the prison were present; no doubt some came to kill time, but others, if their expression were any guide, genuinely enjoyed and took part in the service. It was the first time that Poole had seen this end of his work; it both saddened and interested him; there were so many faces on which dull despair was stamped, but others looked as if there might be a prospect of new life when they came out.

As soon as the service was over, Haling went across to his quarters to change into plain clothes, while Poole talked to some of his colleagues. One other senior officer remembered Hinde, but knew no more about him than

Haling had already told. As soon as the latter appeared the two men set off for Peckington Road.

The eating-house of Mr., late Company-Sergeant-Major, Fred Bowles, was a modest but comfortable establishment in the busy thoroughfare. Half a dozen marble-topped tables down one wall and two or three smaller ones between them and the counter did not strike Poole as a probable source of great wealth, but Mr. Bowles seemed prosperous and cheerful enough. A few early lunchers had come in but he thought he could leave the business to his girls—two fine, black-eyed wenches, who no doubt accounted for a good deal of the custom—for another quarter of an hour, while he passed the time of day with his old friend Joe Haling and the latter's young friend in his private parlour.

Mr. Haling did not disclose his young friend's official identity till they were out of earshot of the customers. When he did, Mr. Fred Bowles was suitably impressed and interested. After a little mental jogging from the prison officer, the old recruiting-sergeant managed to remember the incident of the two ex-convicts in 1917 and, warming to his work, gradually disclosed quite a notable recollection of their enlistment and subsequent history.

"It all comes back to me now", he said, sipping a glass of dubious sherry which he had insisted on his visitors sampling. "Don't know that I'ld have taken 'em quite so quick if it hadn't been for you, Joe. Regiment had a great reputation to keep up and we weren't taking every rag, tag and bobtail that turned up. Biggish men, I remember; but for you I should 'ave passed 'em on to the Coldstream Guards. They'ld have been glad enough to get 'em."

"Damned old liar", chuckled Mr. Haling, who had a brother in that illustrious regiment and had had an almost life-long experience of the old soldier's fondness of a leg-pull. "Go on; you were glad to get 'em and earn your shilling."

Mr. Bowles snorted.

"Shilling! You don't know what you're talking about. However, you're too old to learn anything now. As I was saying, I remember the lads, Peters—Powling that was—in particular. You remember, Joe, I left that recruiting job early in '18 and went down to the depôt to help train all the new batch of recruits they were getting ready for the German offensive—knew it was coming, of course, me and Wullie Robertson did. There weren't too many experienced N.C.O.'s to be got then. Most of the wounded ones had to be drafted back to France and they were glad to get some old hands like me to take on the job. What's more, when the show did come, and they sent big

drafts across to fill the gaps, I went with 'em. You couldn't keep old Fred Bowles out of it, once Haig had said we'd got our backs to the wall. 'E wanted me, and I wangled it an' went."

"So you did, Fred; so you did. I was forgetting that."

"Ah, you would forget, sittin' there in a cushy job inside walls that'd keep out a 5·9 and makin' them dratted conchies feel at 'ome."

There was a note of bitterness in the old soldier's voice; the question of exemptions in the police and prison services had been a sore one with some of them.

"Pore young fellers", continued Mr. Bowles, who never could air a grievance long, "untrained they were; many of 'em 'adn't 'ardly fired a rifle when they went to France. Boys, too, most of 'em, or else old men with wives and families to leave be'ind. Pathetic, it was, to see 'em, when we marched off. Of course, your two lads was all right—proper age, no families or friends—at least, so they said—and quite keen to be on the job. On the job they was, too, before we'd landed many hours. The base camps was all 'iggledy piggledy, thousands on thousands of men and very few officers or N.C.O.'s. Drafts were going off up the line as quick as the trains could take 'em and where most of 'em went to I don't believe they ever knew. I was lucky; took a draft of a hundred odd up to our 15th Battalion in front of Albert. Got there just in time for a big Hun attack and had a real good shoot. Didn't get a yard of trench, the 'Un didn't, and what's more 'e never did till the people on our right went back and we 'ad to conform. I remember my Company Commander sayin' . . . Capt'in Solomon, an' a fine fellow, 'owever many wives 'e may 'ave 'ad . . . I remember him sayin' . . ."

Poole saw that he was in for a long spell of war-time reminiscences, and feared that Mr. Bowles might have to return to his duties before he had got any useful information out of him.

"Excuse me, sir" he said, "but were these two men, Hinde and Powling, with you then?"

Mr. Bowles stared at the young detective, not at all pleased at this interruption of his narrative.

"Wasn't I comin' to that?" he enquired, aggressively. "Wasn't I comin' to that? Powling was with me. Platoon Sergeant I was, to begin with, till the C.S.M. got blown up by a minnie and I was promoted to the vacancy. I always 'ad a feelin' of confidence when minnies was goin' off after that, 'cos I says to myself that it ain't in nature or the law of algebra for two Company-Sergeant-Majors to be blown to pieces by a minnie in the same

battle . . . not in the same Company, that is. I remember . . . oh, but you want to 'ear about this chap Peters—Powling—young feller, eh? Well, 'e got 'is not long after, when we was back of Albert and the 'Uns was 'aving another crack at us. They couldn't move their 'eavy stuff forward over the old Somme battle-field 'cause there was only the one road, through Bapaume an' our flyin' corps 'ad it taped. But they brought up the 'ell an' all of a lot of light T.M.'s and mighty good shooting they made with 'em too. You wouldn't believe it, but they landed one slap on top of that pore feller Peters as he was doin' 'is turn on the fire-step."

The ex-C.S.M. spoke as if it had been an aimed shot, which, so far as the trench was concerned, no doubt it had been.

"I 'appened to be in the next bay at the time an they comes to me an' says: 'Peters 'as got 'is'. So I went to 'ave a look at 'im and there 'e was, a bloody pulp. We put what was left of 'im on a stretcher and what wouldn't ride nice on that we put in a sandbag, an' shoved 'im out o' the way till 'e could go down after dark. There wasn't no communication trenches then, o' course . . . but there, neither of you chaps 'ld know a communication trench, if you saw one, I suppose; one too young, t'other too old."

Mr. Haling flushed. His old friend was rather trying when it came to talk about the War. After all, the prison services couldn't be entirely denuded of experienced men; some had to stay behind.

"And Hinde, sir? Harris, I should say."

" 'Arris wasn't with us. About forty or fifty of the big draft of the regiment I crossed with was sent off to some other unit that 'ad got smashed up. 'Arris went with 'em and we never saw 'im again, nor most of the others. Scuppered somewhere down on the Somme they was. A month or so afterwards, when we was refittin' be'ind the line north of Arras, about 'alf a dozen of 'em turned up. There'd been a bit o' time by then to straighten things out and get men back to their proper units. I remember we got one lot back, wearin' tam o' shanters, or whatever you call 'em—you know, them little round 'ats what some of the Scotch regiments wore. Didn't 'arf get their legs pulled by the Londons, they didn't. 'Owever, as I was sayin' . . . yes, my dear?"

The door had opened and one of the black-eyed girls put her head in.

"There's that fellow Hinks in again, father. Is he to be served? You know he hasn't paid his bill the last two times. You can't go on giving him credit."

"Tick, my girl, tick. None o' your 'Igh School language in my 'ouse. No, fire 'im out. Tell 'im, I'm comin', an' if he ain't afraid o' that, tell 'im I've

got a couple o' coppers 'ere as 'll march 'im straight off to Pentworth an' no questions asked."

The girl nodded, shot a quick look at Poole, and went out.

"As I was sayin', we never saw 'Arris again, but I remember one o' the chaps as came back sayin' 'e'd done uncommon well. Scuppered a Bosche machine-gun single-'anded and the C.O. 'ad said 'e was goin' to put 'im in for something. But they all got scuppered themselves a day or two after; the Bosche got round 'em and only a few got away. 'Arris was killed and a lot of others was taken prisoner."

"Is it certain that Harris was killed? Mightn't he have been taken prisoner too?"

" 'E might 'ave, but 'e wasn't, young Parker. They counter-attacked a week or two later and recaptured the village and found their chaps still unburied and a lot of 'Uns with 'em. It 'adn't been all beer an' skittles for Fritz either."

"And they could identify the bodies?"

"Not what you'ld call identify, perhaps, because the flies an' the rats 'ad been at 'em, but they got their identity discs and pay-books an' so on, and made out 'oo they were, and sent 'em down as per usual. I remember 'Arris was one of 'em 'cause, o' course, I was interested in 'im. Sorry about those two young fellers, I was, bein' as 'ow they was friends of yours, Joe."

That was all that ex-Company-Sergeant-Major Bowles could tell, but it was a good deal more than Poole had had any hope of hearing. It was not quite definite, of course; the survivors might have been mistaken, or Bowles' memory might, after fifteen years of garrulous reminiscence, have been coloured by imagination. It would be as well to try the official records, but that could not be done on a Sunday. All the better for the detective; here was a genuine excuse for staying another night in London. Saying good-bye, with profound thanks, to Mr. Haling and ex-C.S.M. Bowles, Poole returned to his lodgings, changed into old clothes, and spent the rest of the daylight in Richmond Park, followed by an evening service at St. Martin-in-the-Fields.

The following morning he presented himself at the Record Office of the London Fusiliers, behind Trafalgar Square. An efficient warrant-officer quickly turned up the records of Harris and Peters and confirmed what Poole had already learnt. In both cases, the identity discs, pay-books, etc., had been returned, in confirmation of the official casualty reports. The first report in the case of Harris had been: 'Missing, believed killed', but on the recovery of the bodies that had been changed to 'killed'. In both cases the

next-of-kin had been notified and in both cases the notifications had been returned, both name and address being fictitious. The Pentworth authorities had been notified, as it was known that the men had come from there.

Poole left the Record Office almost satisfied—but not quite. In each case there was a faint element of doubt. Powling had been blown to pieces, but it was inconceivable that in his case a mistake had been made. In the case of Hinde, a body, presumed to have been his, had been found—but not actually recognised—the horrors of war had prevented that. He had been identified by the usual means of identification—disc and pay-book; nobody else was unidentified whose body this could have been, nor had Hinde—or Harris—ever been seen again.

CHAPTER XXII

WOOLHAM AGAIN

In listening to the story of the enlistment and death of John Hinde, one of the points which had struck Poole as being of particular significance was the fact that his assumed name, Harris, was the same as the name assumed by his elder brother when signing on in the *Tilford Queen* sixteen years later. Harris was a common enough name, but surely it was more than a coincidence that the brothers had chosen the same name. Albert Hinde may have been an unimaginative man, and when it came to inventing a name he might have been unable to think of any other on the spur of the moment; he might even have forgotten that it had been the name assumed by his brother; its suggestion might have been subconscious. In any case, it seemed to prove that Albert Hinde, and presumably his wife, knew of the name under which John had enlisted and it would be worth while finding out how and when they heard about his death. In this case the enquiry would not be directed towards the conviction of Albert Hinde and it would therefore be permissible for the detective to question Mrs. Albert Hinde on the point.

The rest of Monday morning was taken up with a discussion of the case with Mr. Thurston at Scotland Yard, and it was fairly late in the afternoon when Poole reached Woolham. Mrs. Hinde received him without apparent surprise or alarm, but Poole noticed that she did not ask him for news of her sick husband, which suggested that she was keeping a tight rein upon her tongue.

"I've come to ask you about a point not directly connected with your husband, Mrs. Hinde. He had a brother, John Hinde, who was convicted with him. You knew him, of course?"

"Yes", replied Mrs. Hinde quietly. Poole thought that there was an added tension in her manner, as if the change of subject were no relief to her.

"You knew that when he was discharged from Pentworth he enlisted and fought in the War?"

Mrs. Hinde did not answer, but watched the detective closely.

"And that he was killed?"

Poole paused and, seeing that he expected a reply, Mrs. Hinde again answered monosyllabically.

"Yes."

"How did you hear that?"

"The usual way—same as everyone else who lost a relation."

"Ah, you had a letter from the War Office?"

"Yes."

"Was it addressed to you or to your husband?"

"To me; my husband was in prison."

"Then your brother-in-law had given your name as his next-of-kin?"

Mrs. Hinde hesitated.

"I suppose he must have. Anyway, I got the letter."

This was interesting. Perhaps after all the Record Office had been mistaken.

"To what name was it addressed?"

Instantly a look of disquiet came into Mrs. Hinde's eyes. That look told Poole a great deal; it told him that there was something here of which Mrs. Hinde was afraid, but it told him also that he was dealing with a woman of very acute intelligence; the look had flashed into her eyes the very moment his question was asked.

"Name, sir? My name of course."

"And yet you were his sister-in-law?"

"I don't understand."

"Isn't it curious that Mrs. Hinde should be the sister-in-law of a man called . . . by the way, what was he called?"

There was no mistaking now the look in the woman's face; she was frightened, and she was momentarily at a loss. The pause lengthened till it was uncomfortable; then with an effort, she pulled herself together. She had taken her decision.

"I see what you mean", she said. "John had taken an assumed name when he enlisted; he was afraid of his trouble being against him in the army. He took the name Harris."

"The same name as your husband took when he signed on in the *Tilford Queen*?"

"Yes", said Mrs. Hinde in a low voice.

"And you had a letter from the War Office announcing the death of John Harris?"

"Yes."

Poole waited a moment, watching Mrs. Hinde with interest. Was this the obvious lie it seemed to be, or had there been a mistake somewhere?

"I asked, because the War Office say that the next-of-kin given by John Harris turned out to be fictitious, both name and address. They say their letter of notification was returned to them."

There was no doubt now. This strong-willed woman was frightened. Her body remained still, she had control of her mouth and her hands, but she could not keep the look of fear out of her eyes.

Just what had frightened her Poole did not know. She knew that she had been caught out in a lie, but why that lie should be dangerous was not clear. Probably the danger lay less in the lie itself than in the fact that she had been caught telling one, which suggested that she had something to hide. To Poole at least it suggested that, and he felt more than ever determined to probe the history of the Hindes to the bottom. As to the lie itself, she clearly had not heard of the death of John Harris from the War Office. From whom then had she heard it? Not, apparently, from Pentworth, or they would certainly have told him. Possibly from the police, either of Brodshire or Chassex, but that seemed hardly likely, as it was not their duty to notify casualties. He would find out, but in the meantime, assuming that the news had not come from them, from whom else could it have come? From some officer in the battalion? From a comrade? But those seemed unlikely, as Hinde had apparently determined to conceal his identity under the name Harris.

There remained one other possibility—that the news of Hinde's death—or rather of his supposed death—had come from the man himself. From the known facts, it was just possible that John Hinde might have exchanged his identity with that of a dead man. How it could have been done, Poole had no idea, but the fact remained that 'Harris's' body had been identified by his identity disc and pay-book, rather than by his features, which had been too far obliterated by death and its attendant horrors to be recognisable after ten days. But if Hinde had effected this exchange, what had become of him afterwards and what was his identity now? It was an intriguing puzzle, almost a fantastic one, but there was just enough foundation of possibility in it to make it worth following up.

These thoughts had passed through the detective's mind after he had left Mrs. Hinde. She had not explained the mystery of notification. In reply to Poole's last question, she had first remained silent and then declared sullenly that he had said she need answer no questions unless she wished, that she

did not know what he was trying to trap her into, and that she would say no more until she had taken advice. Poole had thought it well to leave it at that; he was not quite sure of his own position nor of how far he was justified in pressing the woman. His questions had concerned John Hinde, but it was conceivable that any answers about him might implicate his brother Albert, who was about to be charged with murder and whose wife could not be compelled to incriminate him. Better leave her alone now; he had got an important piece of knowledge from the interview—the knowledge that Mrs. Hinde had something to conceal, and that she was frightened.

What was she frightened of? What would she do about it? One of the most fruitful sources of knowledge in detective work was the reaction of a frightened person—what they did in the time—long or short, according to the character of the individual—before they recovered their balance. It was an established practice to watch persons so frightened, if possible without their knowledge. That was another reason for leaving Mrs. Hinde and giving her a chance to commit herself before she had recovered her balance.

Poole left the house and walked down the road towards the town. It was already getting dusk and before long he found a dark corner on the opposite side of the road from which he could watch Mrs. Hinde's house with a reasonable chance of being unobserved. He had not long to wait. Barely ten minutes after his departure, the figure of a woman appeared from behind the house, evidently coming from the back door, and turned, as he had done, towards the town. She was wearing a coat with a high collar, and a hat that hid a good deal of her face, but even in the half-light Poole had little doubt that the figure was that of Mrs. Albert Hinde. Where was she going? Possibly on some simple shopping expedition, or to tea with a friend? For a moment the detective was tempted to take advantage of her absence to search the house, but, apart from the fact that breaking in without a warrant was an illegal action and would get him into serious trouble if he were found out, he felt that he was more likely to get really valuable information if he followed Mrs. Hinde herself, still, presumably, acting under the influence of fear.

There was no great difficulty in trailing her; she was heading for the station and did not once look behind her. Even if she suspected that she might be followed, Poole guessed that she was the type of woman who would not give herself away by nervous turnings of the head; on the other hand she would, he felt, make some attempt to disguise her intentions. On reaching the station, she made straight for the subway which led to the 'Up' side; this, thought Poole, was where he might expect trouble. If he plunged into the subway after her, she would very possibly be waiting round a

corner, perhaps innocently reading a time-table, and he would be discovered. Giving the subway a miss, he made for the 'Down' platform and, buying a newspaper, sat down on a bench from which he could watch the head of the staircase coming up from the subway to the 'Up' platform.

Minutes passed and Mrs. Hinde did not appear. Calling a porter, Poole enquired the time of the next 'Up' train.

"5.27, sir", replied the man. "4.50's just gone."

Poole glanced at his watch. It was five minutes to five. Surely she could not have been trying to catch the 4.50? She had not appeared to be in any hurry.

"Does that subway lead anywhere else except up onto the 'Up' platform?" he asked.

"Yes, sir; it goes right through. People from the London road often use it as a short cut to the town."

Poole cursed himself for trying to be too clever. He had lost her now; impossible to make up those five minutes. She might be anywhere. There was just one more chance. He did not know his way about the town well and he again appealed to the porter.

"Will that subway take me through to the place where the Brodbury bus starts?" he asked.

"That's right, sir. The Blue Line buses start from Kensington Square; you'll do it in under five minutes."

Poole had intended to return to Brodbury by bus and, having put a time-table in his pocket, knew that one was due to leave Woolham at 5.5 p.m. Could Mrs. Hinde be making for the same thing? She would probably expect the detective to travel by car as all policemen were popularly supposed to do in these days. It was risky for her to take a bus if she did not want to be seen, but she might be so upset as to be driven to take a risk. The detective determined to approach Kensington Square carefully; he did not want her to see him if she were going by that bus.

It was by a series of narrow alleys that the subway route led to the bus-stop; just before emerging into the now lamp-lit square, Poole stopped and peered round the corner of a house, feeling like a stage sleuth. The Blue bus was already at its station, not more than fifty yards away. There was no sign of Mrs. Hinde either in the square or in the bus itself, which was almost empty. Time passed, the conductor looked at his watch and Poole realised that if he were to catch the bus himself he must emerge from his hiding-place. He was on the point of doing so when, from the house round which he

was peering, a woman ran across to the bus and climbed in. It was Mrs. Hinde. The conductor pressed his bell and the bus moved slowly off.

Poole watched it go, a feeling of excitement mounting in him. Where was she going? To Brodbury? If so, surely that must prove a certain link between herself, or her family, and the crime which he was investigating. If only he could find out whom she was going to see there, the whole story might be revealed. It should not be difficult. He could ring up Brodshire Police Headquarters and have the bus met and Mrs. Hinde trailed. But could he? How could he know that the very man he talked to at Brodbury was not the accomplice whom Mrs. Hinde was going to see? Even if he spoke to Superintendent Venning, who by no stretch of the imagination could be a resurrected John Hinde, Poole was far from certain that the conversation could not be overheard on the extension line. It would be safer to do the job himself; if he could get a car he could easily catch the Blue coach and either keep behind it, or pass it and be on the look-out at each of the stopping-places.

Enquiring for the police station, Poole hurried to it and was fortunate enough to find the Divisional Superintendent in his office. The detective briefly explained what he wanted and asked if he might borrow a police car for his purpose; if he hired, the driver would have to be told a good deal of what was up and that would lead to undesirable talk. Superintendent Mason already knew a good deal about the case. It was he who had notified Albert Hinde's failure to report change of address when he disappeared at the beginning of the month, and it was he who had first questioned Mrs. Hinde after the murder of Captain Scole. He willingly placed his own car at Poole's disposal, only regretting that pressure of work prevented him from accompanying Poole on his chase. He promised, in any case, to keep an inconspicuous eye on Mrs. Hinde's movements in the future.

"Bit of a mystery, that lady", he said. "Very respectable, never a word against her. Keeps herself to herself, of course; that's only natural under the circumstances. But somehow she never strikes one as being quite natural. One might have said that a quiet, respectable little thing like that couldn't possibly be mixed up in a murder, but somehow, Inspector, you know, that wouldn't surprise me in the least. I shall be interested to hear what you find."

Poole promised to report anything of interest, thanked Mr. Mason for his help, and drove off in the direction of Brodbury. The driver was an intelligent young constable, named Thorp; he knew the bus route and its stages and thought he could catch the Blue coach at Texborough, the second

stage out. If he could pass it when it was stationary, it should not be too difficult for the detective to see if Mrs. Hinde were inside. If the coach proved to be too high, Poole would have to get out and reconnoitre the other side from the pavement. Fortunately this proved unnecessary; Mrs. Hinde was sitting next the window on the off-side, and Poole was able to tell Thorp to drive on, feeling certain that he had not himself been seen. At Mussling, ten miles further on, the police car pulled into a side street and waited till the Blue coach had gone by, when it emerged and followed slowly, again passing it at close quarters at its stopping place. Mrs. Hinde was still there.

The same manœuvre was repeated at Ditling, a large village three miles short of Brodbury. Mrs. Hinde still sat, staring straight in front of her. At the end of the village Poole told Thorp to pull up. It had occurred to him that it might be safer to follow the coach into Brodbury, rather than precede and wait for it, in case Mrs. Hinde's destination was in the outskirts of the town; in any case she might feel disinclined to get out at the stopping place in the square, for fear of being recognised. In a minute the coach passed them again and, as soon as it had got far enough ahead, the police car followed, keeping the red tail-lamp in view, but not pressing up so close as to be noticeable.

The coach did not stop, either on the outskirts of Brodbury, or anywhere else in the town, till it reached its proper stopping place at the top of the market square. The police car stopped a hundred yards short, and, telling Thorp to wait, Poole got out and mingled with the crowd of evening shoppers, getting up quickly enough to see the conductor helping the first of his passengers to alight. Four people got out, none of them Mrs. Hinde. Poole slipped round to the off-side of the bus; she was not in her place. Signalling to the driver to wait, Poole climbed on to the step beside him and looked cautiously in; Mrs. Hinde was not in the coach.

"Police-officer", he murmured. "Hold on a second while I have a word with your mate."

The conductor was at the door, waiting to discover the cause of the delay. Poole beckoned him on to the pavement and showed his warrant card.

"You had a lady on board, wearing a dark coat with a high collar, and a hat pulled low down on her forehead. She got in at Woolham and was still in the coach at Ditling. Where did she get out?"

"That's right", said the man. "I know the one you mean. She got out at Ditling. She'd booked to Brodbury, but just before we left Ditling she got out—said she'd changed her mind."

Poole swore under his breath. For all his care, she must have noticed the car pass her at each stopping place and have become suspicious—probably noticed its number, clearly lit up in accordance with police regulations!

"You didn't see where she went?"

The man shook his head.

"All right. Off you go. Sorry to keep you."

Poole returned to the car and told Thorp what had happened. The young constable seemed as much chagrined as was the detective.

"Better get back to Ditling, sir, and make enquiries. She may be walking in, of course."

It was the only thing to do, but first of all Poole drove to his lodgings and, being lucky enough to find Sergeant Gower in, told him to keep an eye on Police Headquarters, in case Mrs. Hinde turned up there. He wished he could get a similar message to the C.I.D. detective who was watching Superintendent Jason, but he could not spare the time to look for him.

On the way back to Ditling they kept a careful look-out for foot passengers, and also for any other bus which Mrs. Hinde might have picked up, but none passed them. At Ditling they looked up the local constable and with his help made some hurried enquiries but could get no news of anyone answering the description of Mrs. Hinde. Leaving P.C. Hidger to continue the local search, they took, on his advice, a side road which would bring them round into Brodbury by a slight detour. It was an unclassified and unfrequented road, with no side turning other than farm lanes, and in order not to give Mrs. Hinde warning of their approach they ran without head- or even side-lights. Round one narrow corner they all but ran into a bicyclist who hurled threats of police action after them, but they saw no sign of Mrs. Hinde, and were soon back in Brodbury again. For an hour longer they patrolled the streets on the off-chance of finding her. Then Poole sent P.C. Thorp home, with warm thanks for his help and promise of a word to his Superintendent. Poole returned to his lodgings, realising that he had found and lost the most valuable clue that the case had yet offered. He had been tricked, and tricked by a woman, but he realised that that very trick had made more certain than ever the suspicion that the Hindes were after all the key to the problem.

CHAPTER XXIII

‘A MAN CALLED HARRIS’

Poole felt that before taking any further action he must have time to think over the case in the light of this latest development. Until he had done so he was disinclined to take even Superintendent Venning into his confidence. He had two men in Brodbury upon whom he could rely—Sergeant Gower and the C.I.D. detective, Masson, whom Chief Constable Thurston had sent down. Sergeant Gower was already on the job and, now that he had time, Poole determined to get in touch with Masson and let him know how things stood. Mr. Thurston had been particularly anxious that Poole should have absolutely no dealings with Masson, but it had been arranged that if he did urgently need him he should send a message to the detective-constable’s lodgings and meet him at a pre-arranged spot—the L.N.E.R. up-line platform. Poole sent his message and half an hour later a man dressed as a mechanic strolled up to him as he stood under a distant lamp reading a paper.

“Can you oblige me with a match, sir? Left my box at home.”

Poole handed over a box and as the man went through the motions of lighting his pipe, Poole described Mrs. Hinde and told Masson to keep a look-out for her in case she attempted to approach Jason. She might already have reached his house; it must be watched until the last train and bus to Woolham had left, and again in the early morning. She need not be followed; all Poole wanted was the fact of a connection with Jason.

That arranged, Poole walked home and settled himself down to think. He had no doubt now in his mind that the Hindes were connected with the murder. At the same time he still felt certain that no outsider could have got into Police Headquarters, murdered the Chief Constable, and got away unseen, without inside help. In other words, he felt sure of two facts: (*a*) Hinde guilt, (*b*) Police guilt. As regards (*a*), it was now certain that Albert Hinde had not committed the murder; he was on the North Sea in the *Tilford Queen* when the shot was fired. At the same time, Poole felt certain that all that spectacular business of waylaying Captain Scole and sending a threatening letter was part of an elaborate plot. The police were to be led off after a will o’ the wisp which was already safely off dry land; if and when they caught it, after weeks of wasted time and energy, the will o’ the wisp

would be able to produce an unshakable alibi. That explained the extraordinary folly of the ex-convict in advertising his presence and hostile feelings, whilst when the 'threats' came to be analysed in a court of law it would be found that they were not of an indictable character. If it had not been for the behaviour and actions of Mrs. Hinde that afternoon, Poole would have felt very doubtful of the Hinde connection.

Having satisfied himself, however, that there was a connection, of what did it consist? Albert Hinde had not committed the murder. Had Mrs. Hinde? Or, impossible as it seemed, had John Hinde? Or was it that Mrs. Hinde had planned the murder, using her husband as a stalking horse and some member of the police headquarters as the actual killer?

That brought him to (*b*). What was the police connection, first, with the crime, and secondly, with the Hindes? Had a policeman done the killing, or merely helped a Hinde to do it; was that policeman a friend or associate of the Hindes, *or was he John Hinde himself*? That was the crux of the matter. The last alternative was by far the more fantastic; at the same time, if it were true, it explained the whole problem. Poole determined to work on the long shot first.

It would probably be impossible to discover any more definite information than he had already obtained, in confirmation or otherwise of John Hinde's death. The alternative, therefore, was to discover whether any member of Police Headquarters—that is to say, of either the Headquarter staff, or of the Brodbury Station which was connected with it, could conceivably be John Hinde. There was no question that John Hinde had been a soldier and had served in France; that eliminated Superintendent Jason, who had remained at home in the police force. The constables were eliminated on account of their age; they were all too young, just as Superintendent Venning was too old. There remained Inspector Tallard and Sergeant Pitt of the Headquarter staff, Inspector Parry and Sergeant Bannister of the Central (Brodbury) Division. Of these, Sergeant Pitt was probably too young, but the other three were all of approximately the same age—approximately Hinde's age—all were of a build that might fit the measurements of Hinde after sixteen years' development, and all had served in the War.

How an ex-convict, who had apparently been killed in France, could conceivably have been enlisted in a County Constabulary passed Poole's understanding. From his own personal experience the detective knew that strict enquiry was made into the character and identity of every candidate. Copy of a birth certificate had to be produced, and reference made to at least

two reputable people to whom the candidate was personally known. That reference was made in writing by the Chief Constable direct to the referee, so that there could be no question of forged references. And as the number of candidates always far exceeded the vacancies, only men with the highest qualifications would be accepted. As he thought it over, this theory of John Hinde being a policeman became more fantastic and Poole felt almost obliged to drop it. However, there could be no harm in examining the records of the possible suspects.

What was the alternative? That a member of the force, though not himself a Hinde, was in some way associated with them. Possibly they had some hold over him, either in the way of blackmail, or by blood relationship. A thought flashed into Poole's mind: who was Mrs. Hinde? She might be the sister of any one of them, and he none the wiser. There might even be, or have been, some guilty relationship. Again the possibility of Mrs. Hinde being the actual murderer came into the detective's mind. Hidden in the building, she might have been introduced to the Chief Constable by one of his staff in a perfectly innocent manner—perhaps as a sister, or a friend wishing to see him on a confidential matter. As a sister? The thought of Jason's sister at once occurred to him, perhaps come to thank Captain Scole for his kindness in allowing her brother to stay with her when she was taken ill. A remarkable recovery, surely! He had only returned to duty that morning.

Or Inspector Tallard, who, having introduced her, left her with the Chief and himself went downstairs to establish an alibi. He had been alone on that passage, the last known to have been with the Chief, had assured himself that Jason had no more letters for signature, and *would therefore not again go to the Chief's room*!

Or . . . was there no one else who might fit into that picture? As he thought it over, Poole realised that this suspicion covered a wide field of possibility, so wide that he dared not give *anyone* in Police Headquarters a hint of what was in his mind. From that it followed that he could not, as he had intended, ask to see the records of the officers he had suspected of being John Hinde. It would be better for him to keep away from Headquarters altogether. To whom, then, could he turn for information?

Poole ran his mind's eye over the various County Council officials. The Clerk to the County Council, who doubled that job with Clerk of the Peace, was also Clerk to the Standing Joint Committee, but in that capacity, though he would know all about the administration of the Police force, he would have no reason to concern himself with the records of individuals. Similarly,

the County Accountant, though having the finance of the business at his finger-ends, would know nothing about the personnel. In any case, Poole's experience of that official did not encourage him to go looking for help in the County Offices. A more likely source of information was the Chairman of the Standing Joint Committee. Superintendent Venning had told him about Sir George Playhurst, for whom he had great respect, and the detective thought that the old man might well know something about the history, and particularly the War record, of his senior officers. The detective decided to visit Sir George the first thing on the following morning.

In accordance with Poole's orders, Sergeant Gower had come off duty as soon as the senior officers had left Police Headquarters for the night. On his return to the lodgings he reported that no woman had entered or hung about Headquarters; he had seen Superintendent Venning, Superintendent Jason and Inspector Tallard leave, and had followed the latter to his lodging with negative results. Poole told his subordinate to eat his supper and then get out again and watch Inspector Tallard's lodging over the same periods that he had already described to Detective Constable Masson. He did not himself do any watching; he was so well known by now that it would have been almost impossible for him to escape notice, and he was particularly anxious that no member of the Brodshire Constabulary should for the moment know what he was doing.

On the following, Tuesday, morning, after receiving negative reports from Sergeant Gower and Masson, Poole hired a motor-bicycle and made his way out to Sir George Playhurst's house, Culton. It was a long ride, thirty miles, and a police car would have been put at his disposal had he asked for it, but for the reasons already given he did not want to ask.

Before starting, Poole had telephoned to Sir George and made an appointment. It was a damp, drizzling day and as there were fallen leaves on the road, making it slippery, the ride was anything but enjoyable. Culton was a large house, in the Palladian style, standing in a well-timbered park. The grounds and the house itself appeared well-kept, as if there were no shortage of staff, but directly Poole got inside he was struck by an air of loneliness that he could not at first account for. There were plenty of flowers, but they had a formal, characterless air, as if they had been arranged by a gardener who was not much interested in that branch of his job. The furniture was good and the chintzes clean, but Poole realised that there were no modern books or periodicals, no comfortable untidiness, no knitting or needlework, no sign of young people or of women. That no doubt explained the impression of loneliness that had struck him when he came in.

The butler led him straight through the hall and showed him into the study, where Sir George was sitting, writing at a large mahogany table. The baronet rose and shook his visitor courteously by the hand.

"I've heard a good deal about you, Inspector", he said, "though I haven't had the pleasure of meeting you before. Sit down. You wanted to ask me something?"

Poole noticed that he was not asked to smoke; still less was he offered a drink, as he would have been in many modern houses. He much preferred the old style. In any case, official business should precede hospitality.

"Yes, sir", he said. "I've reached a rather awkward stage in my enquiry and I want to ask your advice and help."

"I shall be very glad to do anything I can", said Sir George, "but you must understand that I have no knowledge of the technical side of police work."

"It isn't really anything very technical, sir. I want to ask if you can tell me anything about the careers of some of your senior police-officers—particularly their War service."

Sir George raised his huge bulk in the chair.

"That's a curious question", he said. "In any case, why not ask Superintendent Venning or Superintendent Jason? They know all about that."

"I ought to explain, sir. I'm afraid what I say will distress you a good deal. I have come to the conclusion that an officer, probably a senior officer, in the constabulary, is concerned in this murder, either as principal or as an accomplice."

"Good God", exclaimed Sir George. "What a shocking thing! What grounds have you for thinking that?"

Poole explained as briefly as he could, without going so far as to suggest that one of the officers might be John Hinde. Sir George passed his hand across his eyes.

"I'm rather out of my depth", he said. "I can't quite follow you. Getting old, I'm afraid. This is a very great shock to me. You want to know what War service these men had? I think all the senior men served, except Mr. Jason; I was sorry about him, but it wasn't possible for everyone to go. So far as I know, they all enlisted in the County regiment, except men who had had previous service in other regiments. Superintendent Venning had been a Guardsman—Grenadier, I think. He went back to them and got a

commission—in another regiment, of course. He finished in command of a battalion, one of Kitchener's, I think—a fine performance."

"Splendid, sir. I knew he had commanded a battalion, but I hadn't heard of his being a Guardsman before he joined the police. Do you know about Inspector Tallard or Inspector Parry?"

"I think they were both in the county regiment, the Brodshire Light Infantry, but I'm not quite sure. I tell you who would know—General Cawdon; he commanded one of our battalions in the latter part of the War, before he got a brigade. He's a member of the Standing Joint Committee, so you could rely upon his discretion."

Poole thanked the Chairman, asked for General Cawdon's address, and promised to let Sir George know as soon as possible if he found definite evidence either confirming or disproving his theory. Sir George rose slowly to his feet and accompanied his visitor to the front door. Seeing the motor-bicycle he looked at the detective.

"You must have had a trying ride", he said. "You aren't properly dressed for it either. I hope you haven't caught cold. May I offer you a whisky and soda? It sometimes helps to ward off a chill."

Poole smiled.

"Thank you very much, Sir George", he said, "but I'm really quite all right. This mackintosh keeps the wind out pretty well and it's too slippery to go fast."

"Why aren't you in a car? Surely Mr. Venning could have provided you with one?"

Poole hesitated.

"I didn't want anyone to know I was coming to see you, sir", he said, hating to hurt the old man.

Sir George's face took on a more anxious look.

"I don't like it", he said. "I don't like it at all. I can't believe that Superintendent Venning is anything but a straightforward man."

"I'm sure of that, too, sir", said Poole. "I expect I'm being ultra-cautious, but just for the moment I don't want anyone to know about this idea. It would be very difficult for him, sir, having to work with those officers, knowing what I suspected. Very likely when I've seen General Cawdon I shall be able to clear the matter up quite soon."

"I hope you will. Perhaps you're right about Superintendent Venning. I hadn't thought of it from that point of view."

Poole pulled on his gloves.

"What a lovely park you've got, sir", he said, trying to end on a less depressing note. "Have you got deer in it?"

"We used to have a herd of fallow deer. My wife and our boy used to feed them every day. I lost them in a motor accident twelve years ago—the boy would be eighteen now, just going to Sandhurst. I couldn't bear to see the deer waiting to be fed—it recalled such poignant memories. I got rid of the herd."

There was a tremor in the old man's voice that told Poole that this was a wound that would never heal. He took off his hat, and hurrying down the steps, rode away.

General Cawdon's house, on the outskirts of Bradbury, was in striking contrast to Culton, a modern red-brick villa with a neat formal garden and trees that could only have been planted in the last twenty years. The General, Poole learnt, was in the stables; going round there the detective found him, in hunting kit, examining a horse in one of the loose-boxes with a minute groom.

"Lucky to find me", said the Brigadier, when Poole had introduced himself. "My mare over-reached herself at the first fence and I came straight home. Damned rotten luck. Only two days a week at the best of times and now this'll lay her up for a fortnight at least. Wash it well out with Lysol, Jones, and bandage her up; I'll be out again soon."

He led the way into the house. The study was small but comfortable, with two large armchairs and the walls covered with reproductions of 'Snaffles' and Lionel Edwards drawings.

"I've been wanting to see you, Inspector; told Venning to send you along some time. Will you take a drink? Well, you won't mind if I do. Damn depressin', this over-reach."

A decanter and syphon were already on a table and the General helped himself to a generous tot.

"Now, how's this case going? Long time finding this fellow Hinde, eh?"

"We have found him, sir", replied Poole, quietly.

"Eh? You have? Good work! Why haven't I heard?"

"It's not been made public yet, sir, and I shall be obliged if you will keep it to yourself for the present. The man's ill in hospital at Bretosk, in the Baltic. He'll be brought home as soon as he's fit to travel. Superintendent Venning knows about it and I told Sir George Playhurst this morning. Mrs.

Hinde knows, too, but she's been cautioned to keep it to herself for the moment."

The Brigadier shrugged his shoulders.

"Seems a lot of unnecessary mystery-making", he said. "Still, you Scotland Yard fellows have your own methods. You've produced the goods, anyhow; the sooner they're on the end of a rope the better."

"Sir George Playhurst sent me to you, sir; he thought you might be able to give me some information about the War service of some of the senior officers of the police force. I understand you commanded a battalion of the county regiment?"

General Cawdon stared.

"I did; but what on earth's that got to do with this business?"

Poole had no intention of spreading his theory any wider than was absolutely necessary. He had not been greatly impressed by what he had seen of General Cawdon.

"I want some information about the younger Hinde who was killed in the War, sir; it's just for the preparation of the case—Counsel will want to know the whole story. I thought it possible that some of your officers might have come across him, but at the moment I don't want to go asking too many questions. If I knew which man to ask . . . Were any of them in the Brodshires?"

"Any of the police? A lot of them, of course. I don't know all their names, but they turn up at the Regimental Comrades' dinners."

"Inspector Tallard, sir; is he one?"

The General shook his head.

"No. He was serving, but not in the Brodshires."

"Inspector Parry, or Sergeant Bannister?"

"Parry was, yes. Bannister; is he that smart-looking sergeant in the Central Division?"

"Yes, sir. That'll be him."

"I remember his face at the last dinner. He didn't serve under me in France, neither did Parry."

General Cawdon paused.

"The funny thing is", he added, "that the only one that you've mentioned that did serve under me wasn't a Brodshire man."

Poole looked his enquiries.

“That Inspector in the Chief Constable’s office—Tallard. When he was introduced to me I thought his face was familiar. I asked him if he had served under me and he said he had, but not in the Brodshires. He was attached to my battalion with a lot of men from other units during the March retreat; we’d lost very heavily behind St. Quentin and they made us up with drafts of men of all units sent up in a hurry from the base. Curious my recognising Tallard under such conditions. I thought he was a man whom I’d put in for a decoration for a particularly gallant action, but he said that wasn’t the case. I remembered afterwards that the man I’d been thinking about was killed just afterwards. We found his body when we counter-attacked. Fellow called Harris.”

CHAPTER XXIV

THE THIRD ROUND

POOLE sat still, trying his utmost to conceal his excitement. This was far more than he had dared hope for; it amounted practically to an identification of Inspector Tallard as the younger Hinde, though it was too indirect to put before a jury. It should not be difficult now to get more direct evidence. The detective would have liked to question General Cawdon more closely about the man Harris, but he could hardly do so without disclosing the real object of his enquiry, and that he did not at the moment want to do. If necessary, he could always come back to General Cawdon. Thanking the Brigadier for his help, he took his leave.

It was obvious that John Hinde, 'Harris', had exchanged his identity with that of another man—presumably with the real Tallard. It was inconceivable that he could have got into the police under an entirely fictitious identity. The next thing to do was to find out what had become of the real Tallard, how it was that nobody knew of his disappearance, and how Hinde had managed to take his identity. The first step was to have a look at Inspector Tallard's Record of Service form at the Headquarters of the Brodshire Constabulary. That would show who had sponsored him and how he came to be accepted. Then it should be possible to discover at what point John Hinde had stepped into another man's shoes.

It was lunch-time when Poole got back, but as soon as he had eaten his modest meal of bread and cheese, he walked round to Police Headquarters, only to find that Superintendent Venning would be away till late in the afternoon. Poole did not care to ask for the information he wanted in the absence of the acting-Chief Constable, so he returned to his lodging and spent a couple of hours in writing a detailed report of his work during the past few days. As he wrote, Poole realised how rapidly the case had developed since he had begun to concentrate upon the 'Hinde' side of it. Before that, he had tinkered about with his theory of a police intrigue and had made no advance at all. It was the 'John Smith' letter that had been responsible for so much wasted time, and the detective wondered whether that was the very reason for its being written—whether it was not, in fact, a red-herring deliberately drawn across his trail in order to give the true scent

time to grow cold. Now, however, there could be no doubt that he was on the right line, and very close behind his fox.

At half-past four, Poole returned to Headquarters and found Superintendent Venning in his office. The latter greeted him with a cheerful smile; he seemed altogether in better spirits than he had for some time.

"Hullo, young fellow; you've been taking a long week-end, eh?"

Poole realised with something of a shock that he had not seen the acting-Chief Constable since Saturday morning. He had, in, fact, deliberately kept away and had told him nothing of the latest developments. However, Superintendent Venning did not wait for an answer.

"Telephone message came through from the Yard just now. That fellow Hinde's dead."

"Dead?"

"Yes. Harris they call him. The Consul at Bretosk reports that he conked out suddenly. Save him coming back for trial, anyway, poor devil."

Poole remained silent, thinking over how this event would affect his case.

"I suppose we can take it that that more or less winds up the case", continued Venning. "I'm not altogether sorry myself that he didn't have to come up for trial. Meant stirring up old mud, it would."

Poole stared. Then suddenly it dawned upon him that he had gone off on Saturday morning, after his second telephone conversation with Chief Constable Thurston, without even telling Superintendent Venning that the *Tilford Queen* had sailed, with Albert Hinde on board, *before* the murder was committed. It had been a most reprehensible lapse on his part and he felt thoroughly ashamed of himself. Now he would have to break the news, not only that Albert Hinde was not the actual murderer, but that a senior member of the Brodshire Constabulary was deeply implicated in the crime.

"I'm afraid, sir, that I've got bad news", he said. "The case isn't finished and it's taken a turn that will be a severe blow to you, I'm afraid."

It was Venning's turn to stare. Poole continued:

"This man, Albert Hinde, sailed from the Port of London on the 10th of November—three days before the murder was committed."

Superintendent Venning gasped. Poole hurried on, giving him no time to speak.

"You remember my enquiring about the other Hinde—John Hinde, who was reported killed in France, sir? I've been following that up and I've

reason to believe that he wasn't killed at all and that he's mixed up in this business."

Venning sat silent now, staring at the detective with wide-open eyes.

"Not only that, sir, but I believe he managed to enlist into your force, under another name, of course. I mean . . ." Poole hesitated, hating his task. "I'm afraid it's Inspector Tallard, sir."

"Tallard?"

The word was little more than a whisper. The colour ebbed from Superintendent Venning's face. His lips moved, but for a moment no sound came from them. Then:

"Tallard! John Hinde?" he said hoarsely. "It isn't possible! John Hinde was a weedy fellow, with a stammer and . . . and . . ." his voice trailed away into silence.

"That was twenty years ago, sir. They told me at Pentworth, where he did his stretch, that he developed into a fine young fellow. I saw one of the Prison officers, Haling, who had taken an interest in him. It was he who got him into the London Fusiliers when he was released in '17—Powling, too. He—Hinde, I mean—was supposed to have been killed early in '18, as you know, but I believe he managed to get away somehow—deserted, I suppose, leaving his identity disc on another man's dead body. How he got taken on here I don't know. I wanted to ask you, sir, if I could see Inspector Tallard's Record of Service and references."

"References?"

The Superintendent's voice was vague, as if his thoughts were wandering.

"Particulars of enlistment, sir; where he came from, who recommended him, and so on."

"Yes, I see. Jason will have those. No harm in his knowing?"

"I don't see how it can be helped, sir, but I'd rather he didn't know yet what we want it for. If I go away you might be able to get the papers as if it were for some routine purpose. Question of transferring him to a Division, or promotion, or something like that."

Superintendent Venning nodded. He seemed to have pulled himself together.

"Yes. I can do that", he said. "Poole, you know, I . . . well, never mind that now. Come back in half an hour."

The half-hour dragged slowly, but when he returned, Poole found Superintendent Venning once more his own master.

"I've had a look at these papers", he said. "There must be a mistake. Tallard is the son of an old Brodshire Light Infantryman, Captain Scole's Company-Sergeant-Major. It was the Chief himself who took him on, just after the War. He'd promised the father to, if his son came through the War. The father died in 1917, but Tallard brought along the letter which the Chief had written to his father; here it is, attached to his Record of Service. Then there are letters from the Vicar and the schoolmaster in Clapham where the boy lived after his father retired. Copy of birth certificate, too. Quite impossible that he could have faked all this, Poole. There's a mistake somewhere."

"I'll have to look into it, sir. The best thing will be to get the Yard to do that. Can I have the papers, sir, to send to them?"

Superintendent Venning looked as if he would have liked to refuse, but after a moment's hesitation he handed over the file without a word. Realising that he was not in the acting-Chief Constable's good books, Poole took his leave. Returning to his lodgings, he got hold of Sergeant Gower and sent him up to London with the Tallard papers, telling him to go straight to the Yard, explain what was wanted, and return.

He himself settled down to think what his next step should be. Assuming that the Yard reported that Tallard's references were genuine, it would be necessary to find out—and prove—at what stage the exchange of identity had taken place. He had noticed that Tallard had served in the London Fusiliers, and it was fairly clear that somewhere in France the two men had been together—probably at that terrible time of confusion during the German attack in 1918, when reinforcements were rushed up to units which had been cut to pieces and were themselves wiped out before their names were even on the battalion books. Poole thought again of the story which he had heard from ex-Company-Sergeant-Major Bowles, and from General Cawdon, of the little draft of London Fusilier reinforcements which had joined the Brodshires on the Somme and been cut to pieces in a few days. He thought of the counter-attack, when the dead bodies had been found and buried, one of them bearing the identity disc and pay-book of John Harris. That body, Poole guessed, was really the body of William Tallard.

What had become of 'Harris' after that? If his guess was correct, it would only be necessary to ask Inspector Tallard what his career had been after that fighting. That, of course, Poole did not want to do; it would put Tallard on his guard and there must be other ways of discovering the truth.

The really important point was to establish the identity of Tallard as John Hinde. The surest way of doing that was to have him seen and identified by the Pentworth officer, Haling, but before he took that step Poole wanted to take one further step towards assuring himself that he was on the right line. He thought he knew how that could be done that very night.

Putting on his hat and coat, the detective walked round to the Territorial Drill Hall which, he knew from Sergeant Gower, was used as a Recreational Centre for the unemployed of Brodbury. There were sixty or seventy men of all ages in the big hall when Poole went in; at one end a long carpenter's bench had been fitted up and half a dozen men were at work under the direction of a skilled carpenter. In other corners other trades were being taught and in the centre Inspector Tallard, in flannel trousers and a thick white sweater, was putting a squad of thirty young men through a course of 'physical jerks'. Poole felt a pang of compunction as he watched the erect but supple figure of the instructor showing his class how each movement should be done; his body was so magnificently proportioned, so graceful in its movements; it was terrible to feel that by his efforts it might be destroyed. Besides, the man was doing fine, unselfish work; whatever his sins, he had fine qualities and in some ways the world would be the poorer for his loss.

When an interval for rest occurred Poole strolled up to the drill instructor.

"I heard you were doing this job", he said. "Thought I'ld come down and watch you."

Tallard grinned.

"More use if you lent a hand", he said. "We're just going to do some boxing. You'd better take a turn."

Poole glanced down at his tidy dark blue suit.

"Not in these trousers", he said with a laugh.

"I've got some clean flannels and a singlet in the dressing-room", replied Tallard. "Come on; show them what you learnt at Oxford."

Poole hesitated. This was not at all what he had intended, but he felt ashamed to back out.

"The fellows'll love it; they all know who you are."

"They don't!"

"Of course they do—and don't think much of you, either. Nothing to show for your week's work, for all your C.I.D. brains; that's the way they

look at it."

Poole shuddered inwardly. Nothing to show! And he on the point of bringing this very man to justice.

"All right", he said. "I'm no boxer but I'll stand up to be hit."

Five minutes later, feeling ten years younger in his borrowed boxing kit, he was having a vigorous set-to with a young artisan full of enthusiasm but of little skill. Poole had not told the strict truth when he said he was 'no boxer'; though never in the running for a blue, he had boxed for his college as well as for his public school. He had no difficulty in fending off his young opponent's attack, and slipped in one or two neat leads and punches on his own account. After a short rest he had another turn with an older and heavier man who hit harder than was altogether comfortable. Poole had not had the gloves on for some time and after this second bout he was thinking about changing back into his own clothes when Tallard came up to him.

"The lads want us to box three rounds", he said. "Any objection? London *v.* Brodshire is their idea."

"Good lord", said Poole. "I'm to be butchered to make an unemployed holiday, am I?"

"Butchered nothing! You can look after yourself all right; I've seen that. Come on; only a friendly. Great treat for them."

All the men in the hall gathered round to watch the 'friendly', Poole's late antagonists acting as his seconds. The first round had not gone far when the London man realised that he was a child in the hands of the Brodshire policeman; Tallard could put him out at any moment he liked. But the fight remained a 'friendly', and he was thoroughly enjoying the give and take of light blows, with the cheers of the 'crowd' when, in the third round Tallard led to his heart, feinted to repeat the blow with his left and brought a right hook up to the point of the jaw. Poole's head jerked back, stars swam before his eyes, and his knees were buckling under him when his opponent put an arm round him and half led, half carried him to a chair.

"Sorry, old man. Bit harder than I meant", he said. "Lean back."

Poole leant back and felt the rush of air on his face and chest as Tallard flapped a professional towel at him.

"Take a drink of this. Won't hurt you if you're not going to fight any more."

Poole opened his eyes and saw a glass of clear water close to his mouth; he looked at the hand and arm that held it, and saw a faint, almost invisible scar on the inner side of the wrist.

CHAPTER XXV

THE LAST ROUND

POOLE walked back to his lodgings, feeling sick and miserable. Physical sickness from a blow on the chin was no new sensation to him, but it was mental sickness that made him feel so miserable. He felt like an Iscariot. Tallard had acted the Good Samaritan to him and on the hand that held that glass of water to his lips Poole had seen what he had set out to look for, the scar that would send John Hinde to the scaffold. For to the scaffold he would go; of that Poole felt no shadow of doubt. Tallard could not have fired the shot; his alibi was unshakable; but that he was an accomplice was past all doubt.

Who, then, had fired the shot? Not John Hinde. Nor Albert Hinde. What of Mrs. Hinde? From what he had seen of that quiet, iron-willed woman, Poole believed that she was capable of such an act. Had John Hinde—Tallard—smuggled her into Headquarters that Sunday night, hidden her in the store-room, or on the roof, and on Monday afternoon given her the signal that all was clear? It was possible. It was not even unlikely. Even if Tallard had not actually introduced her to Captain Scole, the Chief Constable might well have been so astonished at the sight of this woman—this quiet, meek-looking woman—coming into his room, that there would have been time for her to walk right up to his table before the two shots were fired. Then—how out? Down the water-pipe? Surely that was not possible for a woman. Or had Tallard contrived to hide her in some way as yet unguessed? It was Tallard who had searched the store-room and the passage; Tallard who had reported the side door locked, though how she could have escaped unseen by Superintendent Jason passed comprehension.

Poole went to bed, but not to sleep. For hours he lay, tossing from side to side, turning over in his mind the problem of how these two relentless enemies had carried out their long-cherished revenges. Even when at last he slept, in his dreams Poole saw that white, expressionless face staring at him, the cold blue eyes gleaming hatred through their gold-rimmed glasses. And again, the beautiful, sculptured body of the drill instructor, now bending and turning in the graceful movements of the Swedish exercise, now writhing and jerking at the end of the hangman's rope.

Haggard and unrested, Poole woke at an early hour and got what refreshment he could from a cold bath and a quick walk. Swallowing some breakfast, he went round to Headquarters and told the acting-Chief Constable that he was personally convinced of the identity of Inspector Tallard as John Hinde, but that to get certain proof he wished the Pentworth officer to come down and identify his old charge. He proposed to ring up Scotland Yard and ask for Haling to come down. In the meantime he wished to search the room in which Inspector Tallard worked, and would be glad if the latter could be sent on some duty which would leave the room free to the detective. Cold and angry, Superintendent Venning agreed, and within half an hour Poole saw Tallard drive away in a police car, bound on some inspection invented by his Chief for the occasion.

Poole had little hope of finding anything in the room. The plot had been too carefully prepared and carried out to leave any likelihood of incriminating clues being left undestroyed. Still, it was a routine duty and must be carried through. It was a large room, wastefully large for the use of one comparatively subordinate officer, but the walls were lined with shelves and cupboards which were used for the storage of records. These Poole examined carefully, but found nothing that was not official. The writing-table contained only two drawers, holding stationery and a few files of Inspector Tallard's special work, such as Motor Patrol schedules and current Aliens' records. There was no sign of private correspondence, no weapon, no cartridges, nothing to connect the occupant of the room with the crime.

Poole walked across to the window and looked out. Directly opposite to him was the window of the room used as an office by the Superintendent in charge of the Central Division—Superintendent Venning's old room. Above it was the window of the Chief Constable's room, the window in front of which the murderer must have stood when Captain Scole fired that shot into the wall above it. From where he stood, Poole could see barely more than the ceiling of that room and a little of the back wall; impossible for any shot to have been fired at Captain Scole from here, even if it had not been known that that shot was fired at a range of a few feet. Impossible, too, for Tallard, by whatever feat of acrobatics, to have got from here to that upper room and back during the few seconds that elapsed after P.C. Hookworthy left him here and before he himself dashed out into the waiting-room after the firing of the shots. No, guilty as he must be, it was not Tallard's hand that had killed his chief. An accomplice there must have been.

Turning his eyes up to the right, Poole saw the passage window. It was open, and the fact reminded the detective that it had been open at the time of the murder—and that no one could be found to have opened it. At the time

that fact was believed to have some connection with the murder, but it had no place in the crime which Poole had reconstructed. Like Superintendent Jason's door, it must remain unexplained—the one, perhaps, coincidence; the other, less credibly, hallucination.

Turning back into the room, Poole gave one last look round to see that he had missed nothing. His eyes rested on two Fire buckets which hung on the wall beside the window. Getting on to a chair, Poole looked into them; one contained water, the other sand. Lifting them down so that he could examine them carefully in the light of the window, the detective saw that the water bucket contained nothing but water, covered with a fine scum of dust and the odd match that always seems to find its way into such receptacles. Plunging his hand into the sand, Poole groped about but found no object hidden in it. Fetching a large sheet of brown paper from the roll which he had noticed in one of the cupboards, the detective emptied the sand on to it and carefully spread it out. The only foreign body it contained was a small fragment of brown material, its edges black and apparently charred. Picking it up, Poole examined it carefully; it appeared to be leather and his pocket lens showed that the edges were indeed charred. Putting it to his nose, he sniffed and at once recognised the unmistakable acrid smell of gunpowder.

His pulses throbbing with excitement, Poole sat down on Inspector Tallard's chair and tried to interpret his discovery. A tiny scrap of leather, charred at the edges, and smelling of gunpowder; what was the interpretation? The leather in itself was nothing, and the charring not much; such a scrap might have got into the sand in a hundred different ways. But the gunpowder was a very different matter; taken in conjunction with the rest of the story, and the undoubted implication of the occupant of this room, it was impossible to believe that there was no connection between it and the crime. A piece of powder-scorched leather . . . in a bucket of sand . . .

Suddenly into Poole's mind there flashed the recollection of another reference to sand. Mr. Westing, the gunsmith, had reported finding some grains of sand in the pistol found on Captain Scole's table. Could there be a connection between that pistol and this bucket? And where did the scorched leather come in? The scorching must mean that a shot had been fired through the leather; why? To muffle the sound of the shot? But the shots had been heard; and in any case no amount of leather would muffle the crash of a pistol shot . . . unless . . .

Poole's thoughts were racing, flying from side to side in search of an explanation.

Leather would not muffle the sound of a shot, but something else would —a silencer! But they had not been silenced; both shots had been clearly heard—'crashes', P.C. Hookworthy had called them. Still the thought of a silencer flew round the detective's brain; did it fit in anywhere else? Were those crashes not shots at all, or shots fired to deceive people as to the time the killing was done? Could the real shots have been fired through a silenced pistol at some other, earlier time? No, that was impossible; the Chief Constable's shot could not have been silenced. But had he fired at all? Had both the bullets been fired from the murderer's pistol? No, Westing had said that they had been fired from different pistols. So they might have been, *after the Chief Constable's death*. One shot fired from a silenced pistol into the Chief's head, then the silencer changed on to his own pistol and a shot fired through it at the wall above the window, to give the impression of his having fired at Albert Hinde. Both pistols were the same make and calibre; a silencer was merely an adjustment which could be fitted over the barrel in a moment.

But why all this talk about silencers? Where did the two loud shots come in, and the scorched leather? Were those shots fired from somewhere else; not from the Chief Constable's room at all? From the passage, perhaps, at the top of the stairs? Surely that was not possible, with those two constables standing in the waiting-room at the foot of the stairs; they must have known the difference.

Poole walked to the window and looked up at the passage window on his right. It was open; it had been open—inexplicably open—on the night of the murder; why? Suddenly Poole pulled himself up on to the sill of Inspector Tallard's window; it was open at the top. He thrust his hand out; it did not reach far. Getting down again he heaped a pile of books and papers on to the sill and climbed on to them; now his head and all his arm went out of the window and he could thrust his hand well round the corner and towards the open passage window above. That must be it; those two crashing reports had been fired, not from Captain Scole's room but from this, by Tallard reaching far up towards the passage window, by Tallard perched, perhaps, upon the sash itself, Tallard the gymnast! And the open passage window . . . open, not to admit the murderer himself, but *to admit the sound of the shots into the first floor passage*.

And the leather; what had been its function? Not to muffle sound, because sound was wanted, but *to mask the flash*, so that they could not be seen through that window or from elsewhere.

Poole leant back in his hard chair and tried to steady his racing pulses. That, he felt sure, was the explanation of the scorched leather, and the sand in the mechanism of the pistol; after firing the shot, Tallard had jumped lightly down, thrust revolver and leather wrap into the sand bucket, and dashed out into the waiting-room only a few seconds after the shots were heard. To the two constables standing in the waiting-room at the foot of the stairs, those shots would have sounded more clearly through the passage window and down the stairs than they would through Tallard's window and through his closed door.

When, then, were the real shots fired, the shot that killed Captain Scole and the other that struck the wall above the window? Obviously now there was no need to look for an accomplice. They had been fired, with a silencer, by Tallard himself when he was up in the Chief Constable's room in the course of his duty, discussing the motor-patrol schedules. Either then or after he had been into the Chief Clerk's room to satisfy himself that Jason would not again visit his chief—that there would be no fear of the body being found before he, Tallard, was safely provided with an alibi downstairs and was ready to fire the two unsilenced shots to give a false impression of the time the killing was done.

There were still details to be explained, tags to be tidied up, but the detective had no doubt now that he knew what had happened and could prove it to a jury. Officer Haling must come down and identify Tallard as John Hinde; then the arrest could be made.

* * * * *

Poole's interview with Superintendent Venning was terribly painful to both men. The Superintendent fought stubbornly against the case which the detective laid before him, arguing every point, resisting every implication, contesting every inch of the ground, but slowly and surely being forced to give way until at last he sank back in his chair and admitted that what Poole said was incontrovertible, that what he wanted must be done. Nothing was to be said to anyone until the definite identification had been made by Haling; till that had been done, Venning clung to the last faint hope that the whole thing was based upon assumption, that each coincident could be explained, and that this nightmare which hung over his force would yet be dispersed.

The risk of being overheard on the telephone decided Poole to go to London himself, report to Chief Constable Thurston, and arrange for the prison officer to come down to Brodbury first thing on the morrow. That should allow time for at any rate a preliminary report to come through from

Clapham. In any case Poole felt that he would be glad of the Chief Constable's opinion as to whether his case was sufficiently complete to justify an arrest. There was also the further consideration as to whether Mrs. Albert Hinde should be arrested as an accessory. That would be a matter for the acting-Chief Constable of Brodshire to decide, but Poole thought that Superintendent Venning would be largely guided by his advice.

Poole reached Scotland Yard in the middle of the afternoon and laid his case before Mr. Thurston. The Chief Constable agreed that Tallard should be arrested as soon as he had been definitely identified as John Hinde by the prison officer, but he thought that there was as yet insufficient ground for the arrest of Mrs. Hinde, though it was probable that that would have to come later; in any case she must be watched; the Chassex Constabulary would see to that. For the rest, he did not hesitate to approve what Poole had done, and let the young detective see that he was well pleased with his work.

Before he left, Poole heard that news had come through from Clapham; a Divisional Detective-Inspector had seen Mr. Wilde, the schoolmaster who had replied to the Brodshire Constabulary's enquiries about young Tallard. The schoolmaster, who was now retired, remembered the youngster well and had seen him before he left for the front in 1918. He had not heard from him again, except indirectly in connection with his application to join the Brodshire Constabulary. He had gladly signed the form sent by the Chief Constable, and strongly recommended the young man as one of his best and most reliable boys. He confirmed the fact that Tallard's father had died in 1917, and his aunt, who had kept house for the old man, shortly afterwards. William Tallard was left an orphan and presumably that was why he had never returned to the neighbourhood, though everyone would have been glad to see him. The other referee, Mr. Dance, the Vicar, had died in 1923. The information did not take the case much further, but it did nothing to disturb it. Poole returned to Brodbury ready to carry out the grim work of the morrow.

His first act on the Thursday[8] morning was to give orders to his two subordinates, Detective-Sergeant Gower and Detective-Constable Masson. It would be the duty of the Brodshire Constabulary to carry out the arrest, but Poole did not intend that there should be any mistake. Gower was detailed to watch the front of the Police Headquarter building and Masson the back; both were to keep a particular eye on the passage which led, fore and aft, from the side door and the little courtyard, on which Inspector Tallard's window gave. Both detectives knew Tallard by sight and their instructions were that if he left the building a free man, under any circumstances

whatever, they were to follow him and not leave him until he was arrested, or until they had further orders from Poole.

That settled, Poole walked down to the railway station and met Officer Haling. Getting into a taxi, they drove to the police-station entrance at the back of the Headquarter building and made their way through into the waiting-room and up the stairs to the Chief Constable's room. In case of a chance encounter, Haling was to keep a large handkerchief in front of his face and indulge in a prolonged blow if Inspector Tallard appeared. However, they met no one, and Poole introduced the prison officer to Superintendent Venning without mishap.

The interview was an uncomfortable one. Superintendent Venning, looking grey and old, had evidently determined to go through with his terrible duty, but there was an atmosphere of constraint in the room which affected all three men. A group photograph was shown to Haling, but he was unable to identify the ex-convict with any certainty, though he put his finger on Inspector Tallard as being like him. There was nothing for it but confrontation, and then immediate arrest. It was quite possible that Tallard would be armed, but that was a risk that had to be taken.

"You don't want to do the arrest yourself, Inspector?" asked Venning.

"No, sir, but I ought to be present."

Venning nodded.

"We'll have him up here and Inspector Parry shall do that as soon as Mr. Haling's identified him. Not quite my job as acting-Chief Constable, I suppose. Better have two constables in the room as well, I suppose."

He sighed and passed his hand over his eyes, then pulled himself up erect.

"I ought to tell Superintendent Jason first, I think", he said. "Tallard's on his staff."

He pressed the bell to summon the Chief Clerk. There was a moment's silence, then steps crossed the passage, the door opened, and Inspector Tallard walked into the room, and shut the door behind him.

"Mr. Jason sent word this morning that he was unwell, sir. I'm going through the post for him now."

He did not at once notice the prison officer, but in a moment he seemed to sense that something was wrong. Superintendent Venning was staring at him as if he had seen a ghost. He looked at Poole, then at Haling. The two men stared at each other, mutual recognition growing in their eyes. Poole

saw, knew what would happen, and closed up to Tallard's shoulder. He must act at once before there was trouble.

"John Hinde", he said, "I arrest you for the . . ."

Quick as a flash, Tallard spun round, his right fist shot up in a terrific hook to the detective's jaw that lifted him off his feet and dropped him to the floor. With a drive of his right leg, Tallard sent the writing-table crashing into Venning, who tottered backwards, clutching wildly for support, and struggling to pull a whistle from his pocket. The gallant old warder tried to close, but a vicious drive at the solar plexus doubled him up, gasping.

"You taught me that, sir", grunted Tallard, then whipped a pistol from his hip-pocket. The barrel, with its clumsy attachment, pointed straight at the Superintendent's stomach.

"Your turn now, Sergeant Venning", snarled Tallard, his eyes flashing wildly.

A tiny spurt of flame sprang from the barrel, accompanied by a sound like a muffled cough. Clutching his body, Superintendent Venning slowly collapsed on to his knees, and then to the floor.

Hardly ten seconds had elapsed since Poole's words had started Tallard into action, but one man was dead or dying, another doubled up, gasping for breath, and the third, Poole, lay twitching on the floor, his brain fighting to throw off the terrible, reeling nausea that overwhelmed him. Tallard, alert and almost cool again, gave a quick look round; no one in the room could stop him, not a sound came from outside; the noise of feet and falling bodies had evidently attracted no attention.

Into the passage and down the stairs, or out of the window? Tallard's mind flashed from one alternative to the other. He hadn't a moment to lose. The detective might recover at any moment, or the warder might raise a shout. No one in the building could see the window; better go down the rain-pipe and be clear of the building. With a quick spring he was on the sill and pulling down the top sash; as he did so, with a terrific effort Poole struggled to his knees, swayed there for a moment, then heaved his leaden body at the legs of the escaping man. Blindly, instinctively he grasped a leg, pulled and clung on, in spite of the vicious down-kick which just missed his head. Tallard had pocketed his pistol and could not reach it without losing his hold of the window. Poole's senses were quickly returning now; with another heave he got hold of the other leg. Tallard struck wildly down with one hand, but without effect; then the clinging, tightening knee-tackle of the old Rugger blue brought him crashing to the floor.

Unable to use his legs, Tallard hammered at Poole's head with his fists, but the detective had tucked his face tight against the opponent's thigh and though his senses reeled under the blows on his skull, he clung on. With one hand Tallard tried to tug the pistol from his hip-pocket, but the cloth was stretched tight by the detective's clutching arms and he could not get it out. He rolled over, trying to reach a chair with which to batter the man's head; the roll brought them close to Venning's body and Poole found his face within a few inches of the whistle which the Superintendent had managed to tug from his pocket before he was shot. Releasing one arm, Poole seized the whistle and thrust it into his mouth, blowing blast on blast that shrilled through the building. A chair crashed on to his head, but as his senses slipped away he was dimly aware of pounding feet, the door was flung open and blue figures crowded into the room. Then everything went black and he dived into a whirlpool of unconsciousness.

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[8] 30th November.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE TALE IS TOLD

WHEN POOLE recovered consciousness, his first question was about Superintendent Venning. Sergeant Bannister, who seemed to be in charge of him, replied that 'the Super was doing fine', but Poole could see by the look on the man's face that this was said, probably under orders, to cheer him up. He forbore to press his question and a moment later Dr. Pugh bustled in.

"Glad to see you've come round all right, Inspector", he said, kneeling down and depositing his bag on the floor. The detective realised that he was lying on a mattress, covered by a 'ration' blanket. Dr. Pugh's examination did not last long.

"Barring a 'bloody coxcomb', a black eye, a swollen jaw, and I don't doubt a splitting headache, there's nothing much the matter with you", he said. "I'm not clear what happened, but they seem to have found you locked round that fellow's legs. Lucky he didn't shoot you, too."

"How's Mr. Venning, sir?" asked Poole anxiously.

The police-surgeon's cheerful face clouded over.

"Pretty bad, I'm afraid. Severe abdominal wound. About one chance in a thousand, I should think, but it depends on his constitution and his will power. Now you've got to lie still for an hour or two; I'm going to give you something to put you to sleep. After that you'll be right as rain. If you get up now you'll be a wreck for a week, no use for anything, and might get brain-fever—whatever that is."

Poole felt no inclination, or even ability, to get up. After five hours' sleep, however, he felt an entirely different man. He still had a headache, but he no longer felt dazed and sick. Walking back to his lodging, he had a bath and some food and then returned to Police Headquarters.

Although physically recovered, mentally he felt miserable and depressed. Quite illogically he blamed himself for the attack on Superintendent Venning. If only he had read the twenty-year-old poaching case properly, he would have realised that Venning was the young sergeant who had supported the Chief Constable's testimony and so contributed largely to Albert Hinde's conviction. He had started to read the case, had been interrupted by Chief Constable Thurston's telephone call, and had then

gone off on his own line and had never completed what he had begun. He felt himself severely to blame for not acquainting himself from the very start with the full story of the Hindes; had he done so, he would have known that Venning's life was in danger too. It was curious that no one had told him; probably everybody thought he knew.

News of the tragedy had evidently been taken to Superintendent Jason, for he was back in his office, looking white and shaken, and obviously suffering from a severe attack of influenza. He ought, obviously, to be in bed, but with the acting-Chief Constable lying at the point of death and the Headquarter Staff Inspector in arrest, the work of the office must be carried on. Superintendent Ladger, of the South-Eastern Division, had come in to take over command, but he must have a senior officer, who knew the ropes, to help him.

After hearing from Poole the details of what had happened, Superintendent Jason told him that the prisoner had asked to see him. He had so far made no statement. With Superintendent Ladger's permission, Poole went down to the cell in which Tallard had been put. He was handcuffed and two constables remained with Poole in the cell; the violence with which he had resisted arrest did not encourage the police to take any further risks. Tallard smiled grimly as he saw the detective's battered face.

"Sorry I had to hit you a bit harder this time", he said. "Lucky for you I couldn't get at my gun; I might have put you out."

Poole could not help feeling a sneaking admiration for this ruthless but undeniably brave man, but he was determined to maintain a strictly official and impersonal attitude.

"I take it you've been cautioned", he said. "Much better not say anything unless you intend to make a statement. There's no need for you to."

"Quite correct, Inspector", said Tallard drily; "that was what I wanted to see you about. I heard yesterday that my brother was dead; is that true?"

"Yes. I'm afraid it is."

"You know it for a fact?"

"I saw the telegram from the British Consul at Bretosk when I was at the Yard yesterday. He died suddenly on Monday."

Tallard nodded slowly. For a minute he sat in silence, his eyes hard, mouth set in a grim line. Then he shrugged his shoulders, as if he had come to a decision.

"In that case there's nothing to stop me making a statement. Get a constable from the office . . . Hookworthy's the best of them . . . and I'll

talk."

"Better take time to think it over", said Poole. "Give it twenty-four hours at any rate."

Tallard shook his head.

"There's no point now", he said. "Bert's dead and I haven't got a leg to stand on. I'd rather get it over; don't want to make more trouble than necessary now. I'll plead guilty."

"You can't; not in a murder case."

"Not formally, no; but I'm going to tell my story and save you all trouble. Get that paper."

"I'll tell Mr. Jason. I expect he will wish to take it."

Tallard frowned.

"I'll talk to you or nobody. I've worked with Jason for years; have a heart, man."

"Very well; I'll ask if the Deputy's got any objection."

"Who's acting? Superintendent Ladger?"

Poole nodded. He left the cell and ten minutes later was back with P.C. Hookworthy and a sheaf of foolscap. The two officers sat down at a small wooden table; Tallard remained sitting on his bed, with two constables close to him.

"You know all about the poaching case", began Tallard, "because I told you about it the first evening you were here. Unwise, perhaps, but I couldn't resist it. I thought I'd been too clever for you all and could afford a bit of swank. Besides, everybody had to know that Scole only got what he deserved. I didn't tell you about Venning being the young sergeant who backed him up. I wasn't sure then whether I was going to kill him too or not. I didn't think Venning'd volunteer the information, and there was just a chance that you might miss it, which would be useful. I don't know whether you found that out, but you ought to have."

Poole flushed, but said nothing.

"We all knew", continued Tallard, "Bert and Frank Powling and I, that Scole was going to hang us if he could. When the judge sentenced Bert to death and let me off with five years, I swore to myself that I'd get Scole as soon as I came out. I was only a lad then, and a poor specimen at that, but the prison officers at Pentworth made a man of me, and I often chuckled to think that they were helping me to do what I wanted. I'd already got the idea of getting into the Police, though I'd no notion how it was to be done. I tried

to keep Frank straight too, thinking we might work something together, but he wasn't very bright and when he was killed I guessed I was better without him. I don't know how much you know, Poole; stop me if I'm not making it plain."

"I can't question you", said Poole; "you know that."

"Not officially, no; but if I sign a statement saying I've asked you to put any questions you like, that'll be all right."

Poole looked doubtful.

"Anyway; go on now", he said. "It's quite clear so far."

"Well, when we came out we enlisted in the London Fusiliers—both of us. That was in November '17. We were trained at Warley and there I came across young Tallard. He told me that he was set on becoming a policeman, and named the Brodshire Constabulary. I didn't let on who I was, of course; by the way, I'd enlisted under the name of Harris. Tallard told me that his father had been C.S.M. to Captain Scole and that just before he died he'd written to Scole and asked him to take his son on as a constable if he came through the War. Scole had replied that he would; young Tallard showed me the letter; he carried it about in his pocket-book—said it was his talisman. When the Germans did their push in March '18, a big draft of the Londons was pushed across in a hurry. There were thousands of troops at the base camp, and we were shoved up to the front as fast as the trains would take us; it didn't much matter what units we went to. Tallard and I and about fifty others found ourselves attached to a battalion of the Brodshires—the 7th. He was mighty pleased about it and I wasn't; I was afraid there might be some ex-policeman in it that'd recognise me . . . though, mind you, I'd changed a bit since they had me in the dock."

Tallard—John Hinde—glanced down at his broad chest; very different to that of the weedy boy who was sentenced to five years' imprisonment twenty years ago.

"Frank Powling didn't come with us, and it didn't take me long to realise that with all that schemozzle going on there might be a chance of doing what I wanted. Why, they never got our names on the Company books, I don't believe; not till after most of us were dead, anyway. We went straight into a fight; the battalion was holding a village called Beauchamps-sur-Somme and the Huns attacked it the night we got up. We beat 'em off and I was lucky enough—or unlucky enough, I shouldn't wonder if it's turned out—to catch the eye of the C.O.—this General Cawdon, as he is now, though I don't think I as much as knew his name at the time. He said he'ld put me in for an M.M. but, of course, he didn't; but he remembered my face when he saw me

here two or three weeks ago. Of course, I swore I wasn't the chap he'd put in, but it gave me the fright of my life."

Poole nodded.

"Yes", he said, "that was bad luck for you, but it only hurried things a bit; we were already on the line."

"*You* were, you mean. When I've finished, I'm going to ask you how you got me—if you will. Anyhow, at the time it all worked out perfectly. A day or two later Fritz attacked again, working round our flank. Tallard and I and half a dozen others were in a house on the outskirts of the village and a Minnie landed on us. I was the only survivor. It was the exact chance I had been praying for. I stripped Tallard, boots and all—because of the Regimental number stamped on them—and squeezed into his clothes; they weren't much damaged, but they were a tight fit. Then I dressed him in mine and swopped identity discs, pay-books, and so on. He'd got a small moustache. I shaved it off and smashed a chunk of the house down on his face. I had plenty of time, because the Huns barraged us for twenty minutes with T.M.'s of all sizes. When they attacked I managed to pick off three or four without being spotted and then lay down among the other fellows who were dead and let the Bosche pick me up unconscious. I was in such a state of mud and blood in any case that my rear-rank man wouldn't have known me, but there were no other men of my draft in the cages and all the time I was in prison in Germany I never saw a soul I knew."

"You're going rather fast, sir", said P.C. Hookworthy, unable to dissociate the prisoner from his superior officer.

"Sorry; I'll go slower. Of course, I gave the name Tallard and I suppose I was reported a prisoner, but young Tallard had told me that his father and aunt had both died before he joined up and he hadn't got any other relatives. When the war ended I found my way back through the usual stages and was demobbed—as Tallard, of course—at Purfleet. There were thousands of us, of course, and nobody paid much attention to you. I'd grown a moustache and got myself up as much like Tallard as I could, but it was the biggest risk I had to run. It came off. I saw one or two fellows I knew, but kept out of their way and as soon as I was back in civvies I licked off down here and showed my letter—the letter Captain Scole had written to Tallard's father—to the Chief Clerk—Franks, his name was."

"They had no reason for doubting my identity. They sent the usual forms to the Vicar and the schoolmaster at Clapham—I'd got their names out of Tallard when we were gassing together about home and all that. The Vicar and the schoolmaster replied that they knew Tallard well; there was no

question of going up to be identified by them, and, of course, no difficulty about getting a copy of Tallard's birth certificate. I didn't want them to record that scar on my wrist, which I knew was on my prison record, so before I was examined I rubbed it with a file and it just looked like a new scratch; I said I'd done it on a nail. They didn't take any notice of it. I was enlisted and settled down as Police-Constable Tallard without a breath of suspicion and very little difficulty."

"If anyone had asked me I should have said it was impossible", said Poole, the interest of the story making him forget his resolution to be severely official. "As you tell it, it seems easy."

"It was, as it happened", replied Hinde, "but it couldn't happen like that twice in a hundred years. The Almighty meant me to get that b . . ."

He rose to his feet, with the instinct to walk about while talking. Instantly the two constables closed on him. He sat down with a short laugh.

"All right", he said. "I've finished my job. I shan't hurt a fly now. Where was I? Mind you, Poole; I'd done a good deal of thinking during those eight months in a German prison. It was there that I met a chap who helped me over the biggest difficulty of the lot, though he never realised it. He was an Irishman called . . . well, I needn't give his name . . . we'll call him Murphy. He was a rebel, recruiting for the I.R.A. on the quiet. I suppose he spotted I was the rebel type. He sounded me and for the fun of the thing I let him talk. After a bit I realised how I could use him. You'll have spotted that the hardest part of my plan was to get a silencer; they don't grow on every tree. I kept him at the back of my mind and as soon as I'd got on to the Headquarter Staff here I tackled that job. No difficulty, of course, in finding out what pistol the Chief used; the Registers are kept in the General Office; besides, I'd seen the thing in his drawer. It wouldn't have been impossible to get one like it for myself . . . but it's not easy either. The silencer was the real snag and that was where Murphy came in. Not going too fast, Hookworthy?"

"All right now, sir."

"When my leave was nearly due, I wrote to Murphy and said I was fed up with England, down and out and all that, and I'ld like to come and join up with him—ready for any dirty work if he'ld take me on. He'd given me an address to write to and I used an accommodation address in London; place I'd heard of when I was inside. Wonderful what a lot of useful knowledge you can pick up in prison."

Poole itched to ask a question, but it would be contrary to the rules.

"Of course I didn't tell him I was a policeman. I made one condition. I must have a ·380 Westing-Thomas with a silencer and be allowed to keep it. I'd got a job of my own to do when I'd done one for them. They'd got thousands, of course—every shape and kind. Murphy agreed. My leave came; I slipped over to Ireland, did a job for Murphy . . ."

"Good God", exclaimed Poole, "you didn't. . . ?"

Hinde nodded.

"Yes, I did. No use being squeamish when you've got a job to do. I paid my price and I got my pistol and silencer and I came home—all inside three weeks. Smart work. I'm proud of it. Now I was ready for my part of the business. But I didn't mean to be caught if I could help it. Bert had got to help me. This is where I couldn't have talked if he hadn't died—couldn't have incriminated him. But he's gone ahead of me and it can't hurt him now. I got in touch with Bert at Fieldhurst. You'ld like to know how that was done, wouldn't you, but that's one thing I'm not telling. One of the tricks I learnt at Pentworth and I'm not spoiling the game for others. I'm an old lag, Poole, first and last; I'm on their side; a policeman only for my own convenience."

Poole saw the glint in the man's eye; he had seen it before, on their first meeting, and not recognized it. Freud would have recognised it.

"Bert had been in trouble all the time and didn't earn much remission; that's why I had to wait so long, but as soon as he was out I slipped off to see him and we fixed up his end of the business. He was to be the red-herring. I needn't tell you about that—you know what he did. Once he'd shown himself down here and uttered his threats—nothing serious; he couldn't have been indicted on 'em—he was to slip up to London and get away on the first ship he could find. You know how he got away. I'd got the bicycle long ago and kept it hidden till he wanted it. If Scole had reported that night that he had been stopped by Bert I should have heard of it and I should have got word to Bert and he'ld 've gone off to London at once, posting the letter instead of giving it to Jack Wissel. You know how he signed on in the *Tilford Queen*. He was to use a false name; why the old fool gave the name Harris I can't imagine; he's not got much imagination and I suppose when the time came he could only think of the one I'd already used. I expect that helped you."

"A bit", said Poole.

"Anyway, he was clear of the country before the job was done and could always prove a cast-iron alibi. In the same way I was careful to have a cast-iron alibi this end while he was showing himself to the Chief and the boy

Wissel, in case anyone thought that someone had impersonated Bert. By the way, I knew all about Jack Wissel bicycling into Brodbury every morning and where he could be stopped without much chance of being seen. That finishes Bert."

Poole felt certain that there had been a good deal of slurring over of the truth in this part of the story. Nothing had been said of Mrs. Albert Hinde. He had no shadow of doubt in his mind that she had done most of the communication between the two brothers, if she was not actually the brains and the instigator of the whole plot.

"I should say", continued Hinde, "that we fitted in our dates with the date of Jason's sister's wedding. I'd known about that for some time and known he'ld be away. It wasn't absolutely vital, but it was a great help in getting Bert clear. You see, I was acting-Chief Clerk when the boy brought that letter and I was able to work things for Bert. I made a great show of hurry, got Mr. Venning to send patrols up the roads Bert wouldn't be on, got Superintendent Ladger to send men to the stations he wasn't going to use, got on to Greymouth and made a fuss about their hunting the town and watching the boats, but I was damned slow getting on to the Greyshire police, and had my tail well twisted by their Chief Clerk as a result. But it did the trick; by the time Greyshire had got their men at work Bert was clear of Corsington and half way to London; of course we'd fixed the train beforehand. Same way I didn't give the Yard time to meet him at King's Cross. After that he was safe as houses."

Poole could not help a feeling of admiration for the ingenuity displayed in this desperate game. With such brains and nerve, John Hinde could have made a mark in any walk of life.

"That brings us to Monday afternoon", said Hinde. "It wasn't absolutely necessary to do it that day; once Bert was clear of the country I was ready to take the first opportunity that offered. But Monday was the likeliest time because it's then that I always took my motor-patrol schedules to the Chief. When I went up, I knew that Venning had seen him and that Jason had had his letters signed; it was he who told me to go up. I had a lot to do, so directly I got into the room I put the papers in front of the Chief, standing opposite him, and while he looked at them I pulled out my pistol with the silencer on. Then I said: 'I'm John Hinde'. He looked up, straight at the gun, and as soon as I saw the fear of death come into his eyes I shot him in the forehead. There was hardly a sound."

Poole remembered with a shudder the muffled cough of the shot which had struck poor Venning down.

"It didn't take me long to find his pistol", continued Hinde. "It was under some papers on his desk, handy for him if anyone suspicious came in. Of course, I'd counted on his not suspecting one of his own police. I fitted the silencer from my gun on to his and fired a shot at the wall above the window. The idea, of course, was to make people think that he *had* suspected the man who shot him—that it was my brother. Bert being safe out of the country with an alibi, that couldn't hurt him. That second shot seemed louder than the first and I lost my head a bit. I slipped the pistol with the silencer back into my pocket and the other under his hand. If anyone had come up it would have been just possible to get away with a suicide story before they spotted that mark on the wall. Nobody came but the mischief was done. *I'd put the wrong pistol into his hand*—my pistol; his pistol, with the silencer still on it was in my pocket. I didn't realise it till I got downstairs and then it was too late."

Poole began to realise how Venning's mistake about the bullet had been made.

"Then came the most ticklish part of the whole business. I went across the passage and quietly opened Jason's door and shut it again. My idea was to give colour to the story that some stranger had been in the building; at the time, *before* the murder, there was nothing startling in it—only a puzzle. Then I opened the passage window; you'll see why presently. I should say that some nights earlier I had swarmed up that water-pipe so as to give the impression of someone getting up on to the roof; the idea was that once up there he came down through the trap-door into the store-room, but you fellows seemed to think that passage window had something to do with it. That wasn't the idea at all and I was annoyed when Hookworthy here spotted it."

The scribbling constable blushed with mingled pride and embarrassment.

"After waiting another five minutes I walked across the passage again and right into Jason's room. I asked him if he had any more letters for the Chief. I was pretty sure there wouldn't be, but it was absolutely vital to know that he wouldn't go across and find the body before I'd got downstairs and fired the shots. If he'd said there were and I couldn't put him off, I should have had to kill him and make out he was a second victim. I never liked the fellow, but I didn't want to go as far as that. It was all right. I went downstairs, got Hookworthy in to establish my alibi and the moment he was out of the room I skipped up on to the window-sill and then on to the sash itself, so that most of my body was right out of the window. I'd already

taken the silencer off the pistol and now I'd got the pistol and my whole hand in a leather bag I'd made. The idea was partly that the flash shouldn't be seen but still more to catch the shells; it wouldn't have done for two unaccounted-for shells to be found in the courtyard."

"I never thought of that", declared Poole.

"You got that far, did you? Well, I got my hand well up towards the passage window, that's why I'd opened it—to let the noise into the top passage. I fired twice, jumped down, shoved pistol, bag, and all into the Fire sand bucket, rushed out into the waiting-room and said 'Upstairs'. The others followed me and you know what we found. Barring the wrong pistol it all went perfectly, but that was a bad snag and I didn't know how to put it right. Venning never left that room and I couldn't get a chance to swop the pistols; once it was discovered that that wasn't the Chief's pistol under his hand the whole business would've been spoilt. It was General Cawdon that saved me. He came along next morning and asked to see Venning. I shoved him into my room and got Venning to go down and see him there and leave me on guard. He'd got the pistol and bullets and all laid out on the table and, of course, it was child's play then to change the pistols."

"Oh!" exclaimed Poole. "That explains it. Mr. Venning tested *your* pistol and found that the bullet in Captain Scole's head was fired from it. Afterwards—after you'd changed them—the Yard expert tested the pistol and found just the opposite."

Hinde opened his eyes wide, then burst into a laugh.

"Poor old Venning", he said, "that must have caused some trouble."

Poole, regretting his lapse, remained silent, and Hinde continued.

"Did you ever find a letter signed 'John Smith'?" he asked. Then, as Poole nodded, "That was my second red-herring, in case Bert was caught and that line led to nothing. The idea was to suggest some vague sort of corruption and blackmail trouble in the police force. It couldn't lead to anything because there was nothing to lead to. I wrote the letter, using the same accommodation address as I had with Murphy. Of course, I knew all about clothing contracts and Brancashire's, from being in this office. I'd put down some ground-bait on the same line by talking to that old fool Vardell. I didn't say anything direct to him, of course, but I let fall a hint or two and he picked 'em up and made gossip out of 'em as he does about any bit of dirt he finds lying about. I got a bit of a fright, Poole, when I found your Sergeant, Gower, talking to him. I was afraid he might find out where the idea came from. Did he?"

Poole shook his head.

"Oh, well, you must tell me some time how you got on my line. I've got no more to tell."

Poole wanted to discover the connection of Mrs. Albert Hinde with the plot, but it was contrary to the rules to question a prisoner making a statement. Hinde may have read what was in his mind.

"Mind you", he declared sharply, "Annie's not in this—Bert's wife. You leave her alone, Poole, or I'll give trouble yet. She knows nothing at all."

"I mustn't question you, Hinde", said the detective, "but I know too much to leave her alone. For instance, she's got to tell me what she came over here on Monday for."

"Ah, yes, you know she did that, of course. She spotted your car following her bus and tricked you properly", John Hinde chuckled. "Slipped all across the fields from Ditling and found me at 'The Jovial Linkman'—knew that was my cosy corner. Walked out up the London road and took a bus to London and so down to Woolham again. Tricked you properly. But she only came to tell me you were nosing about John Hinde and Harris. She knew nothing about the killing."

A child couldn't swallow that story, but it was impossible to take it further now. The tedious form of reading the statement followed, Hinde signing it and declaring it to be made of his own free will. Poole and Hookworthy left the murderer alone with his guard.

Up in the office he was beginning to discuss the case with Superintendent Ladger and the Chief Clerk when a message came through from the Hospital to say that Superintendent Venning was conscious and was enquiring urgently for the detective. Poole hurried up there and was met by the matron, who told him to stay as short a time as possible. It was all wrong for the patient to see anyone, but he seemed greatly distressed and begged for Poole, and in any case . . . it could make very little difference.

Poole tiptoed into the private ward and was at once terribly shocked by the change in his Chief. Venning's big body seemed to have shrunk, the skin of his face was grey and flaccid, and his eyes were sunk into the skull. Mrs. Venning, pale and dry-eyed, sat beside him, holding one hand. Poole sat down on a chair on the other side and bent forward to catch the hardly audible words that came in broken whispers through the dry lips.

"Don't worry, young fellow. Not your fault. Don't know if you knew . . . I was the sergeant . . . always ashamed of it . . . deserve . . ."

There was silence, except for the fluttering breath. Mrs. Venning put a glass to her husband's lips.

"Thanks, Maggie. Thought I must be loyal . . . my Chief. Know now a man's only got . . . one Chief. He wants the truth . . . Now I'm going to meet Him."

Poole felt the tears well up into his eyes. He pressed the dying man's hand.

"No, sir", he urged. "Not if you fight. You'll get through. Fight, sir; fight."

A smile crossed the haggard face. Superintendent Venning turned his head towards his wife.

"Maggie."

"Yes, Willie, dear. I'm here, dear. What is it?"

The silence deepened, unbroken now even by that fluttering breath.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Constable Guard Thyself!* by Sir Henry Lancelot Aubrey-Fletcher (as Henry Wade)]