

AN "ARCHIE BURFORD" DETECTIVE STORY

# HI-SPY- KICK-THE-CAN



VICTOR  
MACCLURE

## \* A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook \*

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please check with a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. **If the book is under copyright in your country, do not download or redistribute this file.**

*Title:* Hi-Spy-Kick-The-Can

*Date of first publication:* 1936

*Author:* Thom MacWalter (as Victor MacClure) (1887-1963)

*Date first posted:* May 19, 2023

*Date last updated:* May 19, 2023

Faded Page eBook #20230540

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines, Chuck Greif & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

This file was produced from images generously made available by Internet Archive/Lending Library.

---

---

# Hi-Spy-Kick-the-Can

*First published 1936*

by GEORGE G. HARRAP & CO. LTD.

*182 High Holborn, London, W.C.1*

*Copyright. All rights reserved*

*Made in Great Britain. Printed by Sherratt & Hughes,  
at the St Ann's Press, Manchester*

## Prefatory Note

**THE** scene of the murder in this story is that of the garden about a house in a northern suburb of London. Although the author would rather refrain from indicating a particular district, it may help the reader to visualize Crouch End, but Crouch End leavened with Highgate and Hampstead. The house may be imagined as one for which a landlord nowadays would ask a rental, not inclusive of rates, of £500 per annum, but for which he probably would jump at £350 on a good lease. The house, in sum, is one occupied by well-to-do folk on the upper fringe of the middle class, old-fashioned enough to prefer spacious comfort in a failing neighbourhood to cramped existence in a rising one.

The young people concerned in the story are, for the most part, lads and lasses on one side or other of their majority, offspring of parents quite comfortably off. If it should chance that the author has used the name or delineated the character of any existing person it has been without any intention. The characters here, like the scene itself, are drawn from imagination.

Touching the character Mungo Methven, herein appearing, it had been entirely possible for the author to increase the indications of his (Mungo's) nationality by phonetic rendering of his dialect. The author has discovered, however, that to give accurate rendering of Scots is to invite the impatience of the general reader, and, rather than sink to the use of such inaccuracies as 'bot' for 'but' or 'mon' for 'man,' he has refrained from indicating Mungo's dialect at all. This denial extends also, and even, to the idiomatic twists that a man such as Mungo would use. But if the particular reader, wishing to

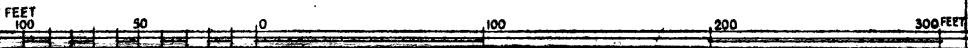
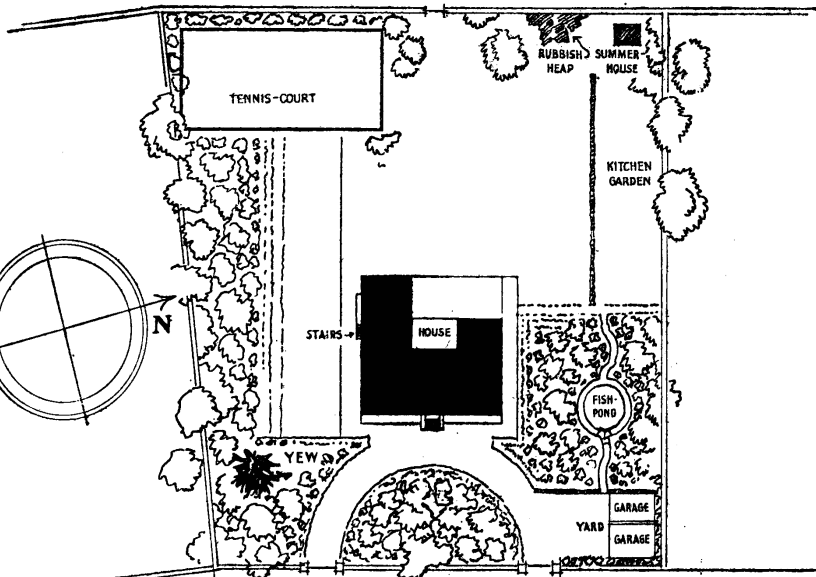
get Mungo's full value, will merely remember that all Mungo's consonants have their *written* value, none being elided, and that Mungo's vowels are nowhere attenuated by 'refinement,' Mungo may assume the nationality he is meant to have.

V. MACC.

# Contents

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. MURDER IN THE SHRUBBERY	9
II. FACTORS OF TIME	36
III. ROUTINE PROCEDURE	63
IV. OUTSIDE EVIDENCE	88
V. THE GRUMPY YOUNG MAN	116
VI. THE HIBBERT GIRL	142
VII. THE GARDEN STAIRS	170
VIII. THE BUTLER'S MOVE	199
IX. IN WARD'S LIBRARY	228
X. QUESTIONS UNANSWERED	260

LANE





## CHAPTER I

### MURDER IN THE SHRUBBERY

**DETECTIVE-CONSTABLE HILARY VANJOHN**, though concerned to manifest the nonchalance which he thought proper at once in a police officer and in a graduate of Oxford (B.N.C.), really was vastly excited by his first experience of a murder case. It was for that reason, maybe, that he permitted himself the gesture of placing the barrel of his fountain-pen under his nose and attempting to support it by an outward-curved upper lip. The effect, of course, was to give him the appearance of twirling a strange green moustache with ebony ends. It chanced just then that the superior to whom he was acting, as it were, as amanuensis, Chief Detective-Inspector Archibald Burford, glanced in Hilary's direction. Their glances met. And Detective-Constable Vanjohn, aware that the dreamily absent look in the sea-grey-blue eyes of his chief momentarily gave place to an amused gleam, hastily snatched the pen away from under his nostrils, felt a sense of heat about his ears and jowls, and became frowningly interested in the notes he had been making. It was with the utmost effort that he forbore giving a quite unnecessary cough.

The silent pause which had led Hilary into childish folly endured. It endured long enough to permit Hilary to regain some measure of the imperturbation he felt proper. It allowed him to turn again upon Inspector Burford—'Archie' in Hilary's mind, in spite of Hilary's distaste for familiar modes of address—a regard which he could feel was suitably serene. Upon which he saw something that increased his feeling of excitement. Archie for a moment was looking in some degree

like a flayed cat. That is to say, his ears were flattened against his shapely head, the result of an extraordinary settling back from his brow of his scalp.

Now in the brief period during which Detective-Constable Vanjohn had been with the Criminal Investigation Department he had heard mention more than once of this trick of Burford's. It usually meant, said departmental gossip, that "Archie was on to something." The unexpected view of Burford indulging in the trick caught Hilary's breath. He had an inward spasm much akin to, but more prolonged than, that experienced in an unwary whiff from a new-struck safety match.

There was nothing, Hilary believed, that had transpired in this very odd murder case of which he was not equally aware with his chief. He had been on the scene from the first, had followed all Burford's movements, and had recorded all the testimony which Burford had extracted from the various witnesses. He could not believe that he had failed to attach due significance to any point in evidence. If there had been, argued Hilary, a fact significant enough in itself, or in conjunction with another, to make Burford flatten his ears surely the ears would have flattened on first reception. Not, in Hilary's opinion, that the case did not bristle with significant facts. It did. This present witness's statement, for example, was full of them.

Detective-Constable Vanjohn looked at the present witness, the girl who sat on the other side of the desk from Burford. She was, Hilary told himself in the pedantic phrase of self-consciousness, a goodly wench. Suppressed emotion, perhaps the strain of masking inward fears with a show of frank unconcern, made her look paler than Hilary imagined was normal with her. A trig, a comely, an engaging mopsy, Hilary

conceded again. A pity, he thought, humanity overcoming for a moment his not yet absolute professional insensibility, that she had let herself so deeply, so demonstrably, into this messy business.

Though Vanjohn was mentally honest enough to admit that he had no immediate suggestions for bettering it, the interrogation just concluded by Burford seemed to him lacking in subtlety. Not only in subtlety, but in force. Burford, with this Daldy girl as with the other people interviewed, seemed too content to let the witnesses tell their own stories. Burford's questioning was almost lackadaisical for gentleness. Vanjohn had heard a lot from brother-officers regarding Burford's methods of dealing with witnesses and suspects. He knew that his chief had little use for the brusque methods other seniors in the Department affected, but that Burford could exhibit at need a ruthlessness as deadly as anyone's. Vanjohn conceded that Burford was a gentleman, but as a gentleman himself, a Master of Arts, a scholar trained in exact thinking, he had 'taken the liberty of doubting' whether one as irregularly educated as Burford could really exhibit the brilliance attributed to him at the Yard. This in spite of Burford's record. It was all very well to adduce his handling of the great national forgery case, with its attendant murders, [1] the body in the burned drawing-office case, [2] the film-studio murder, [3] or what not; Detective-Constable Vanjohn would have liked to see similar opportunities given to some officer with the advantage of a university training. How far had luck played a part in Burford's very rapid advancement?

With all he had heard of Burford's methods, Vanjohn felt disappointedly astonished on this, his first real experience of them. One would have thought, to see the Inspector tackling the witnesses (or suspects) in this case, that the man's chief

feeling was sympathy for the people involved. It was more like watching a physician, a Harley Street man, getting details of an illness from a patient than a Yard 'star' seeking the truth of a murder.

The train of Detective-Constable Vanjohn's cavilling thoughts was broken by a move on the part of his chief. With a delicate finger-tip, from meditative contemplation of the crude and very bloodstained dagger on the pad before him, Burford gently rolled the weapon over. His eyes, when he raised them to look at the girl facing him, were as sympathetic in expression as ever.

"You are sure, Miss Daldy," he asked, quietly matter-of-fact, "that you have never seen this weapon before?"

"Quite sure, Mr Burford," the girl replied. Her voice, if not so matter-of-fact as her questioner's, was as quiet.

For some reason Detective-Constable Vanjohn's internal excitement grew greater. This, he conceived, was the point to which Burford's gentle interrogation had been leading, the point which would explain the flayed look that had momentarily been about the chief's forehead. Something dramatic was about to happen. Hilary tautened with expectation. There was a further distinct pause.

Then Burford merely nodded. "Very well, then," he said mildly. His regard of the girl became a shade more earnest. "I shall take you over your statement once again," he said. "I do beg, if there should be anything to add, anything you feel you want to alter, that you will tell me without hesitation. The clearer and fuller you are now the less I shall have to trouble you later on."

"I have told you all I can," said the girl.

“I quite believe you meant to,” Burford conceded. “But it is very easy to leave out some small fact. And small facts, you see, have an odd way of being the important ones.” He turned to Hilary. “Check with me as I go, Vanjohn,” he said.

The detective-constable, dismissing his sense of disappointment over Burford’s failure to be dramatic, became alert at once—or as alert as scarcely shaken environmental habit of languor would allow—said, “Yes, sir!” and busily turned back the leaves of his notebook.

Burford, hardly glancing at the more abbreviated notes he had made for himself, leaned back in his chair and addressed the girl.

## § ii

“You are Irene Daldy, aged twenty-four,” he recounted. “You have no occupation but that of helping to run your father’s house. You have known Rupert Ward, the dead man, for about three years, but you considered him an acquaintance rather than a friend.

“To-night, at about a quarter to nine, with the rest of the young people who had gathered in this house, you took part in a game of hide-and-seek. It was not the ordinary game as English children play it. A variant was suggested by a Scotsman in the party—Mungo Methven is his name, I think. The variant, from the use of an empty tin for the purpose of marking the base, is called ‘Hi-spy-kick-the-can.’ When the game began you were on the side of the hunters. About a half an hour later, at about a quarter-past nine, your side having failed to collect all the people hiding, the hiding side was called in and the hunting side was given a chance to be the quarry. When, at the start of your side’s outing, the can was

kicked from the base you ran with Rupert Ward round the north side of the house. This was by mere accident—by no prearrangement. You separated from him at the end of the hedge which divides the formal garden from the strip of kitchen garden on that side. He turned right into the trees surrounding the little fish-pond——”

“I’m not absolutely sure of that,” the girl interrupted. “It only looked to me as if he did because he didn’t follow me.”

“That is what Miss Daldy said, sir,” Vanjohn volunteered from his notes.

“Thanks, Vanjohn,” said Burford, and turned again to the girl. “I was not trying to make you appear definite on the point. Your idea is probably right. The treed section containing the fish-pond afforded good cover. It would be natural for Ward to turn to it. Would you have noticed it, do you think, if he had turned left to hide behind the hedge?”

“That I don’t know, really. Perhaps I would.... Yes, I probably would. I was just a yard in front of him.”

“Let us leave the point. It is more your movements I wish to check,” said Burford. “From the hedge you kept straight on until you came to the wall that encloses the garden on that side. Here you turned left, or westward, and ran towards the old summer-house standing in the north-west corner.

“While discussion regarding the change of sides was going on you had taken the chance to slip into the house. You went to your room and secured a black scarf you happened to have with you, together with a pair of black gloves. Your idea was that with these and your black dress you could make yourself practically invisible in the dusk. When you reached the summer-house, however, you found you could not quite hide the white organdie neck-piece of your dress or the cuffs, so

you took them off the dress and left them on the summer-house seat. Then you put on the black gloves and wrapped the silk scarf about your head and neck.”

“Might I say something more about that?”

“Do, of course.”

“I don’t want it to look as if I had taken a fearful amount of trouble over a rather silly kid’s game,” the girl said, with a frankness that yet was touched with anxiety. “I’d like to tell you where I got the idea. It was from one of the numbers in a cabaret show in town. The girls in it were dressed in black. They were against a black curtain. They had black hats on too, that hid their necks when they turned away from the audience, and the dresses were long enough to hide their legs. Just by turning they disappeared from sight. It was this that gave me the idea, Mr Burford. It was easy to slip upstairs for the scarf and the gloves to try it.”

“I think I remember the number you mean,” said Burford. “Wasn’t it at the Trocabaret?”

“That’s it,” she nodded.

“It doesn’t sound so elaborate a preparation now you say where the idea came from,” Burford allowed. “I take it there’s no great difficulty about removing such things as these from a dress?”

He put a finger on the little heap of white fabric which had been brought to him from the summer-house by one of his men.

The girl smiled faintly, as if at male ignorance in general. “No,” she said. “They were merely tacked on.”

“I see. Very well, then. Having put the scarf about your face and neck and the gloves on your hands, you left the summer-house and began to creep along the west wall, that

next the lane behind the house. You came to a heap of rubble and earth piled against the wall, and you climbed up that. You even thought of climbing the wall. It was here, you think, that you cut your hand—on a piece of glass stuck into the cement coping.”

“I can’t be sure that I cut my hand then. I do remember a sort of tug at my glove—some difficulty I had in finding a hand-hold. But I don’t remember any serious hurt.”

“It was, all the same, rather a gash. Must have been.”

“It is nothing, really,” said the girl. She looked down at her bandaged hand and shook her head. “The thing is, I didn’t really know I’d done it until it began to smart. And that was some time later.”

“There’s a point about this wall-climbing incident I’d like to have clear,” Burford went on. “Since you had taken the trouble to put on the scarf and gloves, why did you risk rather spoiling the experiment? On the wall you would have been silhouetted against the sky, perhaps—easily spotted. You say you had no intention of getting into the lane?”

“The lane was out of bounds in the game. That’s why I wanted to look over the wall. I told you I thought I heard some one running in the lane—two or three people. I was excited then. I hadn’t any real idea where I should hide. I had climbed the rubbish-heap without thinking. I thought I’d just sit on the top of it motionless and see if my trick would work. Then I heard, as I thought, people moving—running in the lane—and I tried to look over the wall.”

“But you didn’t see anyone?”

“No. I didn’t get up on the wall. Couldn’t. My dress caught.”



“Yes, yes,” Burford said almost absently. “You came down off the rubbish-heap after that, crept by the wall and from bush to bush behind the tennis-court till you came to the south-west angle of the garden. Then you turned eastward. About that time you heard the church clock strike the half-hour—half-past nine. You had gone some way eastward when you saw a head over the shrubs edging the lawn. You stood still under a tree, and the somebody you saw, although he parted the shrubs and peered right at you, didn’t discover you, but went on towards the back of the garden. You waited a little, then worked gradually down to the south-east corner. It was there that you came upon Ward. You came upon him so suddenly, you say, that you startled him. He was on his knee, and you almost fell over him. He got up and caught you in his arms. You say you had no quarrel with him over that——”

“No quarrel,” said the girl; “but that’s not to say I liked it.”

“I hadn’t taken it for granted that you did,” Burford replied.

“Better be frank about it, perhaps. He wanted to be sloppy. Rupert was like that. I pushed him away and left him. We hardly exchanged a word.”

“But you are sure it was Rupert Ward?”

“Oh, definitely. He called me ‘Dolores.’ Nobody else does. Oh, besides——” She broke off impatiently. “I knew him, anyhow.”

“All right. You left him standing by the yew and moved down towards the entrance gate. You waited until you thought the coast was clear, then crossed the drive into the semicircular patch of tree and shrub which lies between the entrance gate and the garage. While you were with Ward in the south-east corner you saw nobody but him—not in that part of the garden, at all events. There were two people by the

porch of the house—the person guarding the can and one captive. The guard, we know, was Miss Hibbert, and the captive was Mr Arthur Wing. With the idea of getting at the can to throw it off the base and thus free Mr Wing——”

“I didn’t know it was Arthur. I only guessed there was a prisoner in the base because of the talking,” the girl interrupted.

“I understood that, yes,” Burford said patiently. “With the idea of freeing this prisoner, whoever it was, you were making for the edge of the half-circle patch that was closest to the porch. You then became aware that some one was to one side of you, a little ahead. You froze, and weren’t seen. You don’t know whether this person beside you was hunter or hunted, man or woman. A little later, this person having vanished, you heard the sound of the can being kicked or thrown and the scuffling of feet in the drive about the porch. You cut back deeper into the shrubbery and round by the garage towards the little fish-pond. That is to say, you almost completed the round of the garden. In that time, or on that round, you had actual contact with only one person—Ward—and saw merely two others—the man who peered in your direction from the bushes edging the lawn on the south side and then went off towards the back wall, and the other person who was to the right ahead of you in the half-circle patch facing the porch. We leave out of account the base-guard, Miss Hibbert, and the prisoner, Mr Wing, who were by the porch while you were in the half-circle patch. Apart from them, you saw only three persons?”

“I did say, I think, that I fancied I saw people about the house, moving round it, between the time I left the rubbish-heap and reached what you say is the south side of the garden?”

“Yes, you mentioned that. You can give me nothing more definite?”

“No. There must have been heaps of people about, and more than once I was sure I saw somebody when there wasn’t anybody. I have told you only what I’m sure of.”

“That is the right idea, Miss Daldy,” Burford nodded. “But to return to your movements. You had been lingering behind the fish-pond for some minutes when you heard the outcry from the south-east corner of the garden. You realized something was wrong, and you came out of hiding and went over to the porch. You were joined by others, and you heard that Rupert Ward had met with an accident. Then some of the men came carrying Ward into the house, and you heard he was dead.

“That,” Burford concluded, “is your statement, Miss Daldy. You feel sure there is nothing you wish to add to it—there is no other point you feel has any significance. You have no wish to alter anything?”

“Not a thing,” the girl said, after a pause for consideration.

“Thank you, Miss Daldy.”

Burford rose from his chair with a smile. The girl also got to her feet. Burford went round the desk as if to show her to the door.

“I hope you have had that cut properly attended to,” he said. “The glass on the wall-top may not have been at all clean, and a thread or some dirt may have worked into the wound from your glove.”

“It’s nothing, really.”

“It must be considerable to have bled the way it did. In any case, you cannot tell what dirt your glove may have picked up

in your scramble on the rubbish-heap. Better let Dr Butler have a look at it. I'll tell him——”

“But the cut is quite clean,” the girl protested. “I washed it thoroughly with an antiseptic solution.”

Burford insisted. “All the same, you had better have Dr Butler look at it. He has not gone yet, I know. And, by the way,” he said, as he shepherded her to the door, “it might be wise to let me have the glove you were wearing—the cut one. Don't have that dress cleaned. I'd like you to let one of my men have it when you are able to change.”

The girl stopped dead by the door and turned to face him. A touch of colour crept into her face.

“Oh!” she said, in a dismayed voice. “You think I had something to do with—that I killed Rupert Ward!”

The gravity in Burford's face was relieved by a faint smile as he slowly shook his head, but his gaze did not wander from her eyes.

“I have hardly begun to think yet,” he said. “I'm merely collecting facts. Everything counts in a case of this sort, and my job is to remove suspicion from the innocent as well as to fix it on the guilty. Can't get to the last without doing the first, you see. It wouldn't do, later on, to have some one saying, ‘Yes, quite so—but what about the blood that was on Irene Daldy's dress?’ Now, would it?”

“I suppose not,” said the girl. Then, with a shiver, “It's a horrible business!”

“Terrible!” Burford agreed. “But you'll do just as I say?”

“Of course,” she said.

Burford let her out of the room.

§ iii

“Not so good, Vanjohn, not so good,” Burford commented.

“You mean, that girl—Miss Daldy, sir?”

“No, not her particularly. I meant the whole case,” Burford murmured. He had got back to the desk, and was staring at the crudely made dagger that lay on the blotting-pad. He looked up and eyed his junior. “What d’you see that’s not so good about her story?” he asked.

“Several things, sir. The fact that she was in black to begin with, especially a dress of the type she was wearing. Not the sort of dress to wear for a party that might involve tennis \_\_\_\_\_”

“Miss Bastable mentioned they were giving the court a rest.”

“Sorry. I forgot that, sir.”

“Mustn’t forget points of that sort, Vanjohn,” Burford smiled. “But go on.”

“Well, a party that might involve games.”

“Wouldn’t you say the dress was an oldish one, just the sort a girl wouldn’t mind wearing out?”

“Perhaps, sir,” Vanjohn conceded. “But, then, the gloves and the scarf—and the fact that no one saw her as she went round the garden. All the rest, both of the hiding side and the hunters, seem to have made contacts. But not she. The only person she admits meeting was Ward. Nobody else saw Ward until Methven came upon him—dead. She went out with Ward, says she went completely round the garden after leaving him. Apart from Ward, there were nine people in or about the garden, including herself, because to begin with Miss Hibbert was searching with her side until Wing was

brought into the base. With eight persons prowling about the garden it is odd that apart from Ward she saw only two—the ‘seeker’ on the south side of the lawn and the ‘hider,’ as it seems, who was in front of her in the shrubbery opposite the front door. At the start of the second game Miss Hibbert, as soon as she had picked up and replaced the can—which did not take long, because the Blake youth boggled his kick—made after those seekers who went to the north of the house. These were the Rubens girl and Miss Daldy’s brother. In front of those three seekers were Ward, Miss Daldy, and Wing. All three seekers beat for a little—not long—the treed portion about the fish-pond. They captured Wing, but saw nothing of Ward or Miss Daldy. As soon as Wing was taken—and Miss Hibbert went back with him to the porch—Miss Daldy’s brother and the Rubens girl searched up the north wall to the summer-house, but failed to spot Daldy’s sister, who must have just left it. Notice, however, that they saw nothing of her collar and cuffs. They came along by the rubbish-heap and, they say, followed the general direction Miss Daldy claims to have taken. Meantime the Bastable girl and Willie Blake had run round the south side of the house and hid in the cavity under the garden stair from the dining-room window. But Methven and the Blake girl, after searching the south-east corner, where Ward was later found dead, worked along the south wall of the garden. So you see that Irene Daldy was between two search-parties: her brother and the Rubens girl behind her, Methven and the Blake girl making towards her. How could she manage to escape?”

“Perhaps through her black-out trick,” said Burford. “You have it nicely in your head, anyhow, Vanjohn. What does it bring you to?”

“Three of the hidiers are accounted for. Wing was in the porch most of the time; Willie Blake and the Bastable girl were under the garden stair together, engaged, as the parlance is, in necking. The whole seeking side disclaim having seen anything of Irene Daldy until she came in of her own accord, or anything of Ward until Methven found him stabbed dead. How did Ward get from the north-east to the south-east corner of the garden? Unless he came out of the fish-pond shrubbery across the yard in front of the garage—and that, because of the nature of the terrain and in spite of the poor light, would have been in plain sight of Miss Hibbert at the base—he must have worked round the narrow space between the angle of the garden wall and the garage, by the gate with the tradesmen’s entrance let into it, through the half-circle patch facing the porch, across the entrance drive, and so on. How do we know that Irene Daldy was not with him all the time, and that the state of her dress is not due to squeezing through the narrow space between the back of the garage and the wall?”

Burford nodded his interest in Vanjohn’s idea. “I’m sure you haven’t forgotten the collar and cuffs she left in the summer-house,” he said. “How do you account for them?”

“It is possible she left them there after having settled Ward. The side of the garden leading up to the summer-house was clear after the can was kicked to release Wing.”

“Ward then lying dead?” Burford asked quietly.

“Yes.”

“But don’t you see, my dear lad, what a fix that leads you into? You have Irene Daldy making for the summer-house, Ward dead, Wing held prisoner, Miss Bastable and Willie Blake ‘necking’ under the garden stair—all your ‘out’ side accounted for,” said Burford. “*Who kicked the can?*”

“Irene Daldy herself,” Vanjohn said feebly, rather taken aback by the fact of missing a point.

“Well, of course, nobody claims to have done it any more than she,” said Burford, “but Miss Hibbert and Wing thought it was a male. It was kicked, at all events—not thrown. Wing and Miss Hibbert are agreed on that. It was also kicked thoroughly and, it seems likely, with the left foot.”

“The *left* foot?” Vanjohn repeated, and considered. “Yes, of course. It went off to the left, Miss Hibbert said, from her point of view in the porch. It went, that’s to say, towards the garage. Which means that the person who kicked it—if, as Miss Hibbert thinks, he or she came out of the patch facing the porch rather towards the entrance drive—swung round to his or her right and kicked with the left foot. It would have been awkward to kick with the right.”

“Well,” said Burford, “do you think a girl wearing the shoes Irene Daldy was wearing could have kicked the can left-footed in the manner—the thorough and hefty manner—in which it seems to have been kicked?”

“The odds are against it,” Vanjohn admitted. “Still, she may have brought it off by a fluke. She looks athletic enough, quick enough on her feet to have tried it. By Jove, sir,” he added, “it would fit, too, if the person that kicked the can bolted, as Miss Hibbert believes, right across the drive to the north side of the house. I mean, fit if it had been Miss Daldy. That would give her time to get up to the summer-house and leave the collar and cuffs.”

“Come!” Burford said good-humouredly. “You imagine that the girl, having stabbed Ward, would risk bolting right across the drive, risk, perhaps, botching a kick on the way, and make into the hands of she didn’t know who coming



down by the north side of the house—she in the need of establishing a sort of alibi with her collar and cuffs? No, no, lad. You're trying to find facts to fit a theory—and that's the wrong way. What facts we have—or such supposed facts we have—you've absorbed very nicely, but you aren't setting them one against the other as you should."

"Do you mean, sir, you don't think Irene Daldy's the likely person?"

"As matters stand," said Burford, "she's the likeliest person there is. But she told her story without much hesitation. And since she admits being in the drive shrubbery when the can was kicked, admits having left Ward a few minutes before, why should she deny kicking the can if she did kick it?"

"Perhaps just to bolster her story of the second person in the drive shrubbery. There wasn't one of the hiding side about to kick it."

"Well," Burford said slowly, "what prevents it having been *one of the hunting side*? Somebody's lying. Why Irene Daldy more than anyone else?"

He walked round the desk and got into his chair again.

"Find Dr Butler, Vanjohn," he said, "and see that he has a look at Miss Daldy's hand. Get the torn glove—get both gloves. If you can persuade Miss Daldy to let you have her dress, so much the better. She intended stopping here for the night, so she will have something to change into. When you've done that I want you to rough out a plan of house and garden and to note on it the position, according to their statements, of all the persons concerned at the moment the can was kicked for the last time. If you haven't enough of the garden in your mind for the purpose take a look at the lay-out

before you start. Pace a distance or two as check measurements. Go to it, boy!”

“Very good, sir,” said Vanjohn, and rose to go. He had not reached the door, however, when it opened and the police surgeon, Dr Butler, came in. He was carrying a pair of black gloves.

“Girl. Miss Daldy. Cut hand, Inspector,” he explained. “Came to meet me on landing. Said I was to look at cut, you said. Quite a cut. But clean. Properly dressed by herself and friend. No need for me.”

“No?” Burford replied. “Did she tell you how she had done it?”

“Broken glass, she thought. Top of some wall. Damned foolish practice. Swinish. Ought to be stopped. Kids always getting cut.”

“Did that explanation of the cut quite satisfy you, doctor?”

“Particularly sharp spike of thin glass could have done it. Not ragged. Deep straight slit. Clean stab more than cut.”

“Yes, yes,” said Burford.

“Girl asked me to give you these,” the bristly little medico grunted, and threw the gloves on the desk before the Inspector.

“Take a seat for a moment, doctor,” Burford begged. “I want to talk to you.”

Detective-Constable Vanjohn, eager to hear what Burford had to make of the glove, cudgelled his mind for an excuse to linger. Luckily for him a knock came to the door of the room. He answered it. It was the manservant with Miss Daldy’s black dress. Vanjohn carried it over to the desk.

“Miss Daldy’s compliments, sir,” he murmured.

Burford, scrutinizing the fabric glove, did not look up. With a couple of fingers inside the palm of the glove his skin was giving shape to a clean cut about the ball of the thumb.

“Might have been done with a razor,” he declared. “There’s hardly a thread of the fabric drawn loose. Yes, a razor,” he repeated. “Or...”

Once again with delicate finger-tip he turned over the odd-looking but deadly weapon which from its smeared blade had dropped a blackening blot of red on the pad under it. Detective-Constable Vanjohn, watching with a recurrence of slight breathlessness, hoped to see the Inspector’s ears flatten. But at that moment some movement outside the door of the room attracted Burford’s attention. He looked up expectantly.

In came Detective-Sergeant Joseph Crowther, Burford’s preferred *aide* at all times. A giant of a man, he closed the door carefully behind him and came lumbering over to the desk.

“There’s glass sure enough on top of the wall by the rubbish-heap, chief,” he rumbled, “and there’s some of it spiky, too. But there’s no trace of blood that I can see on any of it. And there isn’t a thread to be seen from top to bottom of the wall.”

“Between the wall and the garage, then?” asked Burford.

“Somebody,” said Crowther, “has squeezed round there. The shrubs growin’ in between’ve been brushed past and the ground’s been trampled. No good me shovin’ round there, chief. I’m too big. Couldn’t turn round without mebbe rubbin’ out something important. ’s a job for a light-weight. Young Hoxford ’ere might do—for size, anyhow.”

Detective-Constable Hilary Vanjohn did not like being called “young Hoxford.” He liked it even less than he liked

the burly sergeant's large contempt of himself as shown in the imputation that, however easily he, Vanjohn, might be able to slip between the garage and the wall, the full likelihood was that he would miss everything that mattered in observation. There was, however, nothing for him to do in the matter. Nothing much, anyhow.

Detective-Constable Vanjohn assumed the air of supercilious languor that he had found so effective in the Union. He addressed Burford as if that officer had been in the chair.

“Does young Hoxford, sir,” he inquired, “insinuate himself where hold 'Oxton fears to tread?”

Burford grinned. “Young Hoxford does,” he replied. “To it, young fellow!” Then, as Vanjohn hastened towards the door, he added:

“But see, will you, that you don't support the sense of your mangled quotation?”

## CHAPTER II

### FACTORS OF TIME

**WITH** the departure of Vanjohn, followed, on a nod from Burford, by Sergeant Crowther, the Inspector could attend to Dr Butler.

“What chance is there, doctor,” he asked without preliminary, “that the stab could have been self-inflicted?”

“Not a lot, though possible. cursory examination, looks as if the knife had been driven straight down behind collar-bone into chest cavity,” replied the medico, in his snappy way. His snappy speech, however, was not the result of irritability. “Severed main vessels of the heart, I’d say, from the amount of blood gushing from mouth and nose. Not by any means a common way of committing suicide. Difficult to do, ’specially for short-armed fellow like that. Why take difficult way when he could’ve cut his throat easier, or have stabbed himself up through ribs, hey? Knife capable of doing either.”

“Much force needed?”

The little doctor shook his bristly black head. “No. Determination, rather. Easy as slicing butter. Find the spot. Sure hand. Steady push would do. ’Specially with that weapon. Inside the coat collar, you’d notice. Nothing to stop it but silk shirt.”

“Yes,” said Burford. He gently turned the knife over once again.

Dr Butler took off his steel-rimmed spectacles, revealing a deep-dug furrow on the bridge of his nose. The edges of the lenses, where they met the rims, were coated with a brown

and gluey accumulation of dirt. Dr Butler breathed “Huh!” at each pebble, and with his handkerchief polished a small space in each centre. Then he donned the spectacles again and peered at the knife.

“Queer instrument,” he commented. “Home-made. Small hope of finger-prints on *that* handle, hey?”

“Hardly any, doctor,” Burford agreed. “Still, we’ll see what can be done with it at Centre.”

“Wish you luck. You’ll need it—the way these young stupids swarmed round the body, besides carrying it off the spot.”

“Pretty well messed up all the ground clues, yes,” said Burford ruefully. “But I don’t know that I blame them. They thought Ward had been climbing the yew and had fallen, hitting his mouth and nose against a branch. Then, of course, when they lifted him the push of his coat would put the collar over the knife-handle. I can quite see how they didn’t notice it until they got him to the porch and laid him down.”

“Nobody claims the knife, I suppose?”

“No.”

“It will be the devil to trace its owner,” Dr Butler ventured.

“Heavens, yes,” Burford grinned wryly. “You see what it’s made of?”

“Can’t say I do.”

“A flat file, such as one might buy for sixpence at Woolworth’s or any ironmonger’s, driven firmly into a handle one might buy for threepence in the same way,” Burford declared. “The file then put to the grindstone and given a double edge and a needlepoint, and whetted both sides like a razor. I know a dodge something similar. As a lad I used to

make oblique chisels from small files in much the same way for chip-carving.”

“The thing couldn’t well be carried about without a sheath of some sort,” the doctor pointed out.

“We’re hunting for the sheath now. The point may merely have been stuck into a cork, or a block of soft wood.”

“Not the sort of thing a woman would make or carry?”

“Make, no. Carry, possibly—if she were resolute of purpose,” Burford maintained. “I’ll agree that the determined nature of the killing, the choice of weapon, and the selection of that particular point on the victim’s neck all make it look like the work of a man. But I mustn’t dismiss the possibility of it being a woman’s on that account.”

“No,” the doctor nodded, and rose. “You got on the job mighty quick, Inspector,” he said. “It wasn’t reported to the Yard as fast as all that?”

“It happened that I was at the station when the news came in. Sergeant Crowther and Constable Vanjohn were out here on the burglaries that have been happening in the district. D.D.I. is away on sick leave, and they’re short-handed otherwise. I came out to give a hand, and—well, here I am.”

The generality of his fellow-officers, both in the Central branch and in the divisions, were apt to envy Burford’s knack, as they saw it, of being on the spot when major crimes took place. They called it ‘Burford’s luck,’ forgetting the many times he had been called upon to direct the investigation of country cases that had gone stale. There would be, Burford knew, quite a number of sour faces pulled or thighs slapped over his ‘luck’ in this instance. And there would be some who would accuse him, openly or in their own minds, of butting in on a case that might have been left in charge of a less

prominent officer. But, indeed, in the absence from the local station of the overworked and rather harassed acting District Detective-Inspector it was Burford's plain duty to take charge in the emergency this odd murder case created.

It was manifest already that the case was a difficult one. Its nature was such that the first report of it to headquarters would certainly have led 'Centre' to send out a senior officer to take charge. It was almost equally certain that that officer would have been Burford himself. He acknowledged the luck, therefore, in the fact of being on the spot so early. But Burford had a feeling that there his 'luck' with the case was likely to end.

"I have sent word to the coroner," he said to the doctor. "I'll get a message through to you in the morning about the *post-mortem*. We'll have the body taken to the mortuary straight away."

"Very well," the doctor agreed, and departed. Burford went out with him to issue orders.

When he got back to the room in which he had established himself he sat down to look over the notes on the case, his own and Vanjohn's, then fell to tabulating some of the matters most exercising his mind. Before the story can touch on these matters, however, it must needs deal with a few facts that may lead to a clearer view of the case generally.

## § ii

The house, named the Laurels, stood in grounds that in area approximated closely to an acre. The shape of the grounds, or garden, was almost a square. The distance from the road which the house faced to the back wall, which separated the garden from a lane, was a trifle longer than the distance



between the walls on either side. The orientation of the house, as may already have been gathered, was: the porchway face looking east, the kitchen side to the west, and the other faces north and south accordingly. The front of the house was some fifty feet back from the roadway, so that the major part of the garden lay behind the house. The shape of the grounds being approximately that of a square, and the extent being nearly an acre, it follows that each of the boundary walls must have been about two hundred feet in length.

The owner of the house, John Bastable, merchant in the City of London, had bought it some dozen years before, having seen possibilities in it that apparently had been missed by other house-seekers during the half-dozen years previous to his purchase. In those half-dozen years the house had stood empty, the grounds and garden surrounding it growing wilder and wilder. Bramble and briar, springing up by the boundary walls for those six years—and perhaps previous to them—had been allowed to encroach at will upon the central lawn and garden beds. After setting the house itself in order Mr Bastable had gone by degrees about the work of reclaiming the garden. He had caused patches to be cleared as he wanted them: first, the kitchen garden and the lawn and the beds edging the entrance drive, then the formal sections of garden lying closest to the house. Gradually the wild and thorny growths were driven back to the surrounding walls. In the extreme south-west corner of the grounds, on the insistence of his growing children, a tennis-court was laid out. The last part of the garden to be tackled lay east of that. This was a widish strip of trees that ran along the south wall to widen out into that south-east corner where stood the venerable yew already noticed.

The summons by telephone for the police had reached the local station between three and four minutes to ten that night at the end of August. Burford, acting in the absence both of the D.D.I, and his deputy, arrived at the Laurels not long after ten, bringing with him his usual *aide*, Detective-Sergeant Crowther, and that beginner in detection Detective-Constable Hilary Vanjohn, and also two of the local C.I.D. men. The word over the telephone had been “Murder.”

It did not look like suicide. The dead man, his face covered with a white handkerchief, lay on a rug in the hall of the house, a cushion under his head. On removing the handkerchief from the dead man’s face Burford was left in little doubt as to the nature of the crime. That the weapon, the handle of which lay along the neck behind and below the ear, had gone deep was plain from the flow of blood which had issued from mouth and nose. There was a calculated determination in the fatal stroke, a selection of locale for the thrust, which seemed to bar all notions of suicide immediately.

While waiting for the arrival of the surgeon Burford had made a start on his investigations.

Apart from the two servants then in the house, a butler-valet and the cook, the party so horridly concluded had consisted of ten people, five young women and five young men. It will save re-enumeration later if the division of the ten into the ‘sides’ adopted for the game they had been playing is given at once:

- (A) Rupert Ward, the apparently murdered man
- Willie Blake
- Arthur Wing

Sally Bastable, daughter of the house

Irene Daldy

(B) Mungo Methven

Tom Daldy, brother of Irene

Jacky Blake (Jacqueline), sister of Willie

Vicky Rubens

Joan Hibbert

The ages of these young people, with the exception of the dead man, who was older, ran from twenty years to twenty-five.

Rupert Ward, whose age, as it afterwards transpired, was thirty-five, had reached some celebrity as a writer. Starting as a free-lance journalist, writing mostly for humorous papers, he had sprung into prominence with a series of books about young children. *Almost Five*, *Google Dan*, *Dinkery-donk*, *Mau'wiss the Mice*, were some of the titles. Ward also had written plays with varying success. The popularity of his books afforded him in the theatre a hearing that he had no ability as a playwright to better. The sentimentalized delineations of young children which sold his books could not, of course, be reproduced on the stage, but the delusion among theatre managers that a person successful in one type of writing necessarily should be able to write successful plays enabled Ward for a time to see his name quite a lot on the billboards. The favoured adjective for describing this author and his stuff was 'whimsical.' Middle-class mothers, fancying they saw something of their own brats in Ward's brain-infants, bought his books by the thousands to read them to their offspring. Possibly large numbers of these offspring were interested enough in the sayings and doings of Google Dan

and Mau'wiss the Mice, and lavished affection on the Dan and Mau'wiss dolls that were given them, but possibly still larger numbers of infants were allowed to develop 'whimsy' by natural process of their own healthily fertile imaginations. In a blunt word or two, common-sense parents found Mau'wiss and his companions a trifle sickly and Ward's brain-children a morsel too falsetto.

In beginning his investigations Inspector Burford naturally looked for the member of the party most likely to be in charge of affairs. In an ordinary way that would have been the daughter of the house, Miss Sally Bastable. The girl, however, was not then fit to give a coherent account of the evening's events. Her father and mother, with a younger brother, had gone off in the early afternoon for a visit to the country, and were not expected back until after midnight. Another brother, a little older than Sally, had gone off on affairs of his own just about the time that the game of hide-and-seek was decided upon. He had thought the idea a silly one. With one exception, the members of the party were in little better control of themselves than Miss Bastable. The exception was the young Scotsman named Mungo Methven.

It was Methven who had called the police by 'phone, and he who first had come upon the dead man under the yew. Methven, on being tackled by Burford, expressed contrition for having allowed the body to be moved and for having permitted the crowd to tramp about the spot.

"But, you see, Inspector," he had explained, "although it was plain even in the dark that Ward had had some sort of bad knock, it didn't dawn on any of us that he was dead. The only light I had was from my cigarette-lighter, and that was almost out of petrol. He was lying on his face when I fell over him. I didn't know who it was at first, so I turned him over. Then I

snapped the lighter and saw it was Ward. I didn't want to alarm the girls, so I went over to where Miss Blake was standing waiting for me and I told her to fetch her brother and Tom Daldy. She had to yell for them, of course, and that started it. It got round that Ward had met with a mishap, and presently they were all there. By then I had felt under Ward's shirt, but though I couldn't feel his heart beating he still felt warm. I thought he was only unconscious. Of course, I hadn't seen the knife sticking into him. Turning him over, I must have forced his jacket up about the haft of the knife, and then the blood that I'd seen seemed to have come mostly from his nose and mouth. I'm sorry, Inspector—but, you see—I've never seen a man killed before.”

“You kept your nerve admirably,” Burford had said.

“Yes, but I shouldn't have let them shift him. I know that. There was some arguing back and forth about what should be done, and it was some few minutes before Tom Daldy turned up to help me. We decided, anyhow, that it would be better to take him indoors. So I took his shoulders and Daldy and Blake took his legs. It wasn't until we got him into the light in the hall that we saw the knife. Then, of course, there was an awful scene. I had to get the girls and the rest of them away and quietened down before I could get on the 'phone to the station. It wasn't much use trying to get a doctor first. It was plain then that the man was dead. And I thought it certain that you'd bring a doctor anyway when I said that Ward had been stabbed.”

“You said, I think, that you thought it was murder,” Burford had remarked. “Can you tell me your reason for thinking so?”

“The knife—and the place it was in,” Methven had said solidly. “The thing didn't look like a weapon a man would

carry about with him—not a man as pernickety as Ward was—and the place didn't seem one a man would pick to stab himself in.”

“Thinking it was murder, it didn't occur to you to make a search of the garden at once?”

“I did think of it,” Methven had admitted, “but I was taken up with accounting for all the other members of the crowd. By the time I'd got Daldy and Blake and Wing together, and found the butler, Horlick, you and your men were at the door.”

“I see. Horlick the butler had been missing, had he?”

“Oh, no. It was him that let us in by the front door with the body. But after he'd helped us to get Ward laid out in the hall he had to take the cook back into the kitchen and soothe her down. She had come into the hall to see what was the matter, and the sight of Ward had upset her.”

The party, Methven had explained, had begun with tea and tennis in the late afternoon. It had not been an invitation party. He himself had drifted in with the Blakes at about five, to find Wing and Miss Hibbert with the Bastables, Sally and Roger. Sally Bastable had 'phoned the Daldys, and they brought Vicky Rubens. Then Ward, having apparently looked in at the Daldys and found where they were, had asked Sally Bastable by telephone if he might join the gathering.

“Anyone resent his coming?” asked Burford.

“Irene Daldy pulled a face. That's all. Ward had been chasing her a bit in the last few days. But Sally had gone to the 'phone without knowing who it was calling her, and she asked him over without thinking of Irene.”

There had been no quarrelling or bickering of any kind, Methven declared. The only approach to ill-humour had been

on the part of Roger Bastable, who had been scornful of the hide-and-seek idea, declaring it childish nonsense. They had played tennis and sat about until a minute or two after half-past seven. Then Sally Bastable had said the court needed watering and a rest, and had called them all in to cold supper. The question of what they should do after supper came up. Dancing was suggested, but the Bastables' radio was out of action, and there was no gramophone. Some one suggested hide-and-seek—one of the girls—and Methven had put forward his variant of it.

In the ordinary way Hi-spy-kick-the-can was played with only one person seeking, the idea being that if anyone of the 'outs' could contrive to kick the can before the 'down' person could spy him the people already spied were released. The spy was debarred from spying as long as the can was off its base. It had to be returned with a special knock—something like the beginning of the 'miners' rap'—"Hi! Spy! Kick-the-can! One! Two! Three!" The timing was something like MSO in Morse code. The suggested variation of the game with adaptations for two equal sides met with general approval, except on the part of Roger Bastable. He thought hide-and-seek silly enough, but Hi-spy-kick-the-can sillier still. He expressed his intention of "leaving the infants to it."

"Roger's a grumpy sort anyhow—a born knocker," Methven explained. "Of course, he's a trifle older than most of us, but he's never had the knack of *desipere in loco*, if you see what I mean, Inspector."

Burford nodded his understanding, and bade Methven continue.

The game had started towards the quarter to nine, with the division of sides as already set out. Methven's side won the

toss for first chance to do the hiding, and that which numbered Ward in it was given the task of hunting. The outs, by good hiding and by some kicking of the can, contrived to keep the game going in their favour for half an hour. Then, as it was growing dark, it was thought that the hunting side should have a chance, and a swop-over was made.

After that point in his narration Methven could account very little for the movements of anyone but himself until the time when the tragedy was discovered. Methven's movements in that time must be examined in relation to those of the others, particularly those of Irene Daldy. And here we return to the matters that were said to be exercising Burford's mind, with the facts attached to them.

### § iii

It will be remembered that in giving account of her movements up to the time when Ward's body was found Irene Daldy said she heard the clock of a near-by church strike half-past nine. She was at that moment at the point of turning east round the south-west angle of the tennis-court. She was outside the wire netting that enclosed the court, and was making along the south wall of the garden, between it and the screen. In Methven's idea, and in that of the rest of the party, he had come upon Ward at about a quarter to ten. This meant, on the face of it, if Irene Daldy's story of coming upon Ward alive was true, that Ward had been stabbed within very few minutes of the discovery of his body.

Working out times, as he had to, Burford came upon a seeming discrepancy for which it was hard to account. He had only one certain point of time to work from, and that was Methven's 'phone-call to the police-station. Burford himself



fixed that at between three and four minutes to ten. He had also Methven's check by his wrist-watch, and the watch was in accord with the near-by church clock.

Methven, whose account seemed clearer-minded than most, was not, as may be gathered later, quite free from suspicion of the murder, but up to a certain point his testimony was corroborated. From the moment when the can was kicked to begin, as it were, the second half of the game he had been in the company of Miss Jacky Blake. With her he had begun his search in the shrubbery that opposed the porch, and had worked through it, across the drive, and into the corner where grew the yew. He completed search of this south-east corner, he said positively, a few minutes after the half-hour. He had heard the church clock while in the thicket.

Still in close touch with Miss Blake, Methven now began to work up west through the strip of trees and shrubs by the south wall, but not, he said, so deep in it as to be hampered by the wilder growths. Miss Blake was nearer the lawn. They were approaching the tennis-court when Miss Blake complained of something having attached itself to her shoe that she could not get off. Methven went out from among the trees and joined her on the lawn. From bending down to help the girl detach some wire which now had coiled about her ankle Methven had risen. And at that moment, he said, he thought he saw some movement among the trees close to the wall. He parted the bushes and peered steadily for a second or two, but, seeing nothing, he bent down again. His companion was whispering to him to ask what he saw.

Burford had reason to believe that this coincidence in the statements of Irene Daldy and Methven had not been concocted.

Having regard to the distance Methven had travelled after hearing the half-hour struck, and having regard also to the bushy passage Irene had to negotiate between the wall and the tennis-court wire, it must have been some few minutes after the half-hour that they saw each other. Estimating conservatively, Burford put the time at 9.33.

Between 9.33, then, and some few minutes before 9.45—if, indeed, at that time Methven discovered Ward's body—Irene Daldy had to get from the point where she had seen Methven to the middle of the porch shrubbery, in the course of the journey falling over, being embraced by, and leaving Ward. She had to be, if her story was true, in the porch shrubbery when the can was kicked. But the can was kicked, from all accounts, several minutes before Methven came on Ward.

There were good reasons for estimating that the can was kicked four or five minutes before the discovery of Ward's body. The two people who had been by the porch, Miss Hibbert and Arthur Wing, were firmly agreed that the kick had been quite a hefty one. Miss Hibbert, whose duty it was to replace the can, said it took her some time to find it, for it had been kicked under some bushes on the far side of the drive above the garage. She thought quite three minutes passed before she could give the rhythmic rapping that would tell the hunters to get busy again.

Methven was in agreement with this estimate. After bending down again to hear what his companion was whispering, and having told her he had been mistaken about seeing something, he had set out with her towards the tennis-court by way of the lawn. Reaching the wire netting, he and Miss Blake had parted, he to squeeze round between the screen and the wall and she to stand at the other end of the passage to catch any quarry he might put up. When they came

together again they were kept quiet for a time by the sound of footsteps in the lane. They were discussing whether the sound might not come from some one of the opposing side breaking the agreement to keep the game in the garden when they heard the rattle of the can being kicked. Faithful to the rules as he had explained them, Methven had remained still until he heard the rap of the can being replaced, and he had made Jacky Blake do the same. This in spite of some impatience on Jacky's part. Her impatience might account for her estimate of the time as five minutes. Methven, however, would allow the time to be no more than three minutes. As this was also Miss Hibbert's estimate, and as others of the party were inclined to agree, Burford accepted the figure.

The can, then, was kicked at 9.40—if it was at 9.45 that Methven had come upon Ward lying dead. Because at the rap of the replaced can Methven, followed by Jacky Blake, had run across the lawn and round the south face of the house to catch any of the other side coming that way. Two minutes after the rap of the can he was by the yew.

On this figuring it appeared that Irene Daldy, within seven minutes of seeing Methven peer over the bushes, had negotiated the difficult strip on the south side, met Ward, and got to her place in the porch shrubbery.

Burford did not believe it.

According to the girl, there was no point in her complete circle of the garden, except when crossing the entrance drive and the clear space by the garage, at which she had hurried. It was certain that there was no part of her journey where she would least be able to hurry than from the tennis-court to the south-east corner. Apart from the hindrance of the undergrowth, hurry would have been impossible without a lot

of noise, and she knew that Methven, although unidentified by her, was well within hearing of any crackling she might cause. The fact of having seen Methven peering over the bushes would probably make her stop still—‘freeze,’ as she called it—for some little time, and in this regard it did not matter whether her interest in not being caught was of innocent or guilty purpose. The distance from the place of encounter with Methven to her position at the kicking of the can was a good deal less than a hundred yards, but, taking hindrance and needful precaution and the events of her travel into consideration, Burford was sure she could not have covered the distance inside the time generously allotted.

It was a feeling of this doubtful element of timing rather more than the girl’s admission of having seen Ward so near to what must have been the moment of his death that, even before he had chronological data to work from, focused Burford’s attention on Irene Daldy.

There was, he felt, something astray somewhere in her story. He had to get it into order as quickly as he could. Because it would be apt to throw him out of reckoning in other regards.

Short of considering the girl the murderess, Burford had to believe her story. He wanted to believe her story.

It did not help him greatly when he began to calculate back from that one point of evidence on which he could be completely certain, the time of Methven’s call to the police-station, because this,

Taking	9.57 p.m. as the time of the call,
less	10 minutes for the bringing in of
	—— Ward to the house,

gave	9.47 as the time of the body's discovery.
This, less the	2 minutes it took Methven to —— reach the yew from the tennis-court,
gave	9.45 as the time when the returned can was rapped.
This, less the	3 minutes Miss Hibbert spent in —— finding the can,
gave	9.42 as the time when the can was kicked.
Subtract	9.33 the estimated time when —— Methven thought he saw some one move, and 9 minutes was allowed Irene to reach her place in the porch shrubbery.

This was better, but in Burford's mind nine minutes was still not enough time to allow the girl for covering the distance. And the ten minutes he had put down as the time taken in bringing Ward's body into the house, from Methven's story, seemed rather sparing.

For the moment, however, Burford had to work from this final calculation of times in order to determine at what time Rupert Ward had been murdered. And he had, for the moment, to accept Irene Daldy's story as true. Investigations were being made in the garden by his subordinates that might well corroborate the girl's story as far as the direction of her movements was concerned. The yew-tree by which Irene said

she had seen Ward was twice as far away from where she had seen Methven as it was from where she arrived to hear the can being kicked. Two-thirds of the nine minutes being subtracted, three were left. Three minutes, then, before the can was kicked at 9.42 she had left Ward alive. Ward was discovered dead by Methven at 9.47. So that in the eight minutes that lay between 9.39 and 9.47 some one had found opportunity for creeping up to Ward and stabbing him, by all appearances from behind.

Unless there had been a general lying all round and agreed corroboration between couples, the locations of the members of the party between 9.39 and 9.47 could be tabulated as follows:

JOAN HIBBERT, in and about the porch, watching the base.

ARTHUR WING, with her until 9.42, when, the can being kicked, he ran round the north side of the house.

MUNGO METHVEN and

JACKY BLAKE, by the tennis-court together until 9.45, when, the return of the can being signalled, Methven ran ahead of Miss Blake, entering the yew shrubbery to find Ward dead.

SALLY BASTABLE and

WILLIE BLAKE, under the steps coming down from the dining-room into the garden. There until called out by general outcry.

TOM DALDY and

VICKY RUBENS, sitting under a tree not far from the rubbish-heap mounted by Irene close to the north-west corner of the garden.

IRENE DALDY, moving away from Ward and making to the north side of the garden by the garage.

Burford had still two people to account for. He put them down:

LAURA GOODCHILD, the cook, sitting in the kitchen reading.  
HORLICK, the butler-valet, in his pantry dozing in a chair.

Burford added another figure:

X, the unidentified person whom Irene Daldy saw in the shrubbery facing the porch, and who presumably kicked the can.

Burford had just reached this interesting entry in his tablet when there came to him Detective-Sergeant Crowther and Detective-Constable Vanjohn.

Vanjohn's nonchalant air sat thinly over an irradiation of triumph. He took a small envelope from his pocket and a pair of tweezers. With the tweezers he extracted from the envelope a small wispy black object, and this he deposited on the black dress that was bundled on the desk close to Burford's hand. The wisp of material and the dress were of the same fabric.

"Yes?" said Burford. "Where did this come from?"

"From the back of the garage. It was caught on a projecting nail."

"M'm," Burford murmured. "Any footprints behind the garage?"

"Two sets—a man's and a woman's."

"Direction?"

"The man's moving round the garage east, then south—towards the yew."

"Check the measurement of these with Ward's shoes. Probably find they're his prints. And the woman's?"

“Going the other way, sir—north and west—away from the yew.”

“No other footprints?”

“No, sir. Only the two sets.”

“Which were the more recently made?”

“The woman’s, sir. In places they were imposed over the man’s.”

“Good lad!” Burford commended. “What following up did you do?”

“We followed the woman’s, the sergeant and I, till we lost them in the rockery and paving by the fish-pond to the west of the garage. Then we picked up the man’s entering the semicircular shrubbery across from the garage. They went straight across the shrubbery to the entrance drive, and we picked them up again on the other side of the drive entering the south-east corner patch, that containing the yew. Here they were obliterated rather by the marks of the same woman’s feet, we think, coming the other way. But the local men were in there, and we did not butt in. We found the woman’s footmarks again, crossing the half-circle shrubbery. She had entered it and made up towards the porch, then turned back and worked over towards the garage. These prints of hers were on top of the prints of a man who had gone up in the same direction, but had not turned back. And this man’s prints were on top of still another man’s prints, who seemed to have worked across the shrubbery zigzag, but nearer the porch. Neither of the two male prints I have last spoken of matches the prints of the man who went behind the garage, and both are distinct from the other.”

Burford cocked an eye up at Sergeant Joe Crowther, and that individual gave the faintest of nods.



“Very good, Vanjohn!” Burford commended. “To some extent Miss Daldy’s account of her movements is verified.”

“But, sir,” said Vanjohn, “she said she went by the garage, not *behind* it.”

“Quite. Oh, quite,” Burford murmured. “Suppose you sit down and draw me a nice plan of house and garden?”

## CHAPTER III

### ROUTINE PROCEDURE

It is a commonplace that the Criminal Investigation Department of the Metropolitan Police, New Scotland Yard, achieves the greater number of its successes in crime detection by the exercise of routine procedure. This is no less the case where homicide is concerned than in felonies likely to have been perpetrated by habitual criminals. If more and more, perhaps as a result of War-time slackening of civic conscience, or maybe from example of exploited American gangster-heroes, the amateur criminal comes into the field, defeating the usefulness of the *modus operandi* starting-point in investigation, procedure still goes by hard-and-fast rule. One detective officer, within very small limits of variation, begins on a case in the same way as another officer. It is only when routine procedure is completed that individuality finds exercise, and this usually in attaching the right significance to facts discovered in the procedure.

There is, *malgré* so many writers of criminous fiction, nothing essentially comic—and still less anything essentially foolish—about a detective officer patiently examining the scene of a murder for footprints or finger-prints. Nor is there anything inherently laughable in a detective's use of a magnifying-glass. The detective, if he knows his business, must take *everything* into account. The smallest thing can have major significance.

It was the indentation from the writing on a torn-out page upon the next page in a receipt-book that hanged William Henry Podmore in the Southampton garage murder. To go

abroad for an example, it was the finding of two little colourless insects—*such as live without light*—on the shirt of the murdered man discovered in the Bois de Boulogne that, in the Tessier case, made the police certain the victim's body had lain for a time in a cellar, and that, with other evidences equally minute, enabled them to point to the actual cellar. It was by the grooves left by his ill-kept plane upon the lumber used to make the ladder in the Lindbergh kidnapping case that fixed the guilt upon Hauptmann, but it was the patient tracing of the lumber itself—where it was grown, where milled, where sold retail—that first led the detectives to Hauptmann's door. A triumph for the principle of neglecting nothing.

Archie Burford, though certainly not a slave to routine procedure, had had too many experiences of its value ever to discard it without powerful reasons. But though in beginning his investigation of the murder of Rupert Ward he would have neglected none of the usual preliminaries, such as photographing the body where it lay, he was not greatly annoyed by the fact of the body's removal. Nor, though he probably would have covered with planks any footprints left in the soft ground about the body, preliminary to making casts of those he considered important, he showed no vexation over the mess made by the careless feet of the hide-and-seek players crowding round to see what was wrong with Ward. If he had to consider the possibility that the removal of Ward's body had been deliberate, and that the obliteration of the footprints might have been engineered, he gave no sign. He merely took up routine procedure at the next stage.

Even with the obliteration of perhaps revealing footprints in the immediate vicinity of the yew, about the rest of the garden there were bound to be other footprints which still might tell a story. Unless the murderer had entered and left the

corner shrubbery by the same route as the general crowd there should be, even there, some indication of the track he had followed. Immediately Burford learned what the activities of the party at the Laurels had been up to the time of the murder he had a load of planks on its way for the use of himself and his subordinates. He was leaving nothing to chance.

It were tedious, however, despite their value in the process of elimination, to detail all the routine investigations Burford made or caused to be made. As far as their own statements went, all the members of the party, save Methven and Irene Daldy, denied having been in the yew shrubbery—that is, before the discovery of Ward’s dead body. This general denial, curiously enough, covered that period during which the side headed by Methven had engaged to hide.

Burford’s stricter inquiries on this point were made after the men examining the yew shrubbery had reported on the footprints there. There were curious features about the pattern the footprints made when plotted out. Burford studied the diagram, then summoned all nine remaining members of the party before him.

“I am anxious,” he said, “not to detain any one of you any longer than I can possibly help. I can see that this tragic affair has upset you generally more than you care to show, and I’m sure you all want to get to your own homes as soon as you can. You can bring that about as quickly as you choose. It is a matter of giving me all the help you can.

“I am anxious to establish,” he went on, “which among you went into the south-east corner shrubbery—that is, the one containing the old yew-tree—any time this evening. I know, of course, that nearly all of you went in there when you heard something had happened to Mr Ward, but I don’t mean at that

time. I mean at any other time during the evening—during the time, for example, that the first turn was taken at hiding. You all, with the exception of two, have denied being in the yew shrubbery. But I want you now, both men and women, to think back of what you did during the whole evening—back to tea-time, if necessary—and be very clear in your minds as to whether or not you did enter the yew shrubbery.

“Perhaps,” said Burford, in rather a ‘kind-uncle’ sort of way, “I had better impress on you that denial now would take on a perhaps embarrassing significance should it become clear later that you had actually been in the yew shrubbery, however innocently in fact. I mean, don’t feel scared about having been in the shrubbery, and deny it because you’re scared. Tell the truth. And now I’ll ask you one by one this question: Were you, at any time since you came this afternoon, in the shrubbery that the yew is in?”

He turned to the Hibbert girl.

“You, Miss Hibbert?”

“No, Mr Burford.”

“Thank you. You, Miss Rubens?”

Miss Rubens, a fluffy little red-haired creature, clutched the arm of the man beside her—Tom Daldy—looked up in his face anxiously, and was dumb.

“I can answer for her, Mr Burford,” said Daldy. “We’ve been together since the game started. Neither of us went near the yew until Methven found Ward.”

“I’ll accept that,” said Burford, “You, Mr Wing?”

That young man shook his head. “No, not at any time. I hardly went into it even when Ward was found.”

“Miss Bastable?”

“No, Mr Burford.”

“Miss Blake?”

“Only when Mungo found Mr Ward.”

“But Mr Methven, with whom you were, went in,” Burford pointed out.

“Jacky stayed out, Mr Burford,” said Methven, “or, at least, kept pretty well to the edge.”

“You were there at no other time than you’ve already told me about?” Burford pressed Methven.

“At no other time, Mr Burford,” Methven assured him.

“Mr Blake?”

“Never went near it,” that youth said sharply. “Except to help Mungo to lift Ward out.”

Burford turned to Irene Daldy. “You passed through only the once, Miss Daldy?” he asked gently.

“Yes, Mr Burford,” she said, almost in a whisper.

Burford got up from his chair and took a roll of plain foolscap from his case.

“Since you all persist in denial,” he said, “I am forced to require a record of your individual shoe-prints. You will come, one by one, to the desk here and put a foot on a piece of this paper, so that the outline of your shoe can be made.”

“But, I say,” protested the Blake youth, “this is a bit thick, Inspector! It isn’t any proof—I mean—any of us might have wandered at large round the yew—to get closer to Ward’s body, I mean. I for one won’t have it!”

“You can refuse, of course, if you like,” Burford said imperturbed. “But it may only mean, according to how things turn out, a registration of your footprint later in less pleasant

circumstances. Think for a moment, will you?—and I fancy you'll change your mind. Mr Methven, what about you?"

"Certainly." Methven's reply was prompt. He walked over to the desk and put his foot on the paper spread on an atlas laid on the floor. Detective-Sergeant Crowther, on his knees, carefully marked round the foot with a pencil. When the operation was finished he grunted, "Turn round!" Methven did so, and Crowther lifted the foot off the ground to examine the sole, pretty much, except for the posture, as a farrier examines a horse's hoof.

Burford, smiling faintly for some reason or another, turned to young Blake.

"Changed your mind?" he asked.

"Oh, all right!" Blake said pettishly. Crowther went through the same performance once again.

One by one the remaining members of the party submitted to the registration, more or less meekly.

"I am obliged," Burford told them. "And now I want you to help me in another way. You all, according to your statements, have a fairly good idea of where you were when the can was kicked. I may as well be frank with you. In comparing your statements one with another I find myself a minute or two out with regard to time. I'd like to clear this up. And here is how you can help me. I want you all to come with me into the garden and to take up your positions as they were when you heard the can kicked. Then I want you to move as nearly as you can remember in the same way, and with the same timing, as you did on the real occasion."

"Miss Bastable and I didn't hear the can kicked, did we, Sally?" Willie Blake appealed to the girl.

She shook her head.

“Never mind that,” said Burford. “Every one will be doing exactly as they did when the can was actually kicked, and as they did thereafter. What was it,” he asked Blake, “that did bring you and Miss Bastable out from under the stairs?”

“Some shouting—a feeling that it meant something had gone wrong.”

“Very well, then.” Burford turned to the group generally. “Such of you as called after the discovery of Ward, will you please call in the same way this time? What I want you to do is to carry on, from the moment of hearing the can kicked, in exactly the same way as you did up to the time that Ward’s body was laid out in the hall. There’s this to it, however. I am going to start as from nine-thirty, and that means a wait of about twelve minutes before we come to the kicking of the can. Don’t move about before you hear the can. If you happen to discover any planks put down in the part of the garden where you find yourselves please try not to move them. Now, do you all understand what you have to do?”

They all said they understood, but they looked very nervous indeed.

## § ii

Burford had the party in position. Methven, with Jacky Blake, was standing by the yew shrubbery waiting for the peal from Detective-Constable Vanjohn on a borrowed dinner-bell which was to signal the supposed striking of the church clock. Detective-Constable Vanjohn, dinner-bell in hand, stood waiting the whistle from Burford which would be his cue to perform. Detective-Constable Vanjohn thereupon had another *rôle* to play besides that of the church clock. It was a *rôle* for which he could find no real liking.



In the alley-way between the tennis-court wire netting and the boundary wall Burford was moving towards the extreme south-west corner of the garden with Irene Daldy. They turned it, made a little way east, then the girl turned and whispered, "Now, Mr Burford!"

Burford put two fingers into his mouth and gave a couple of short, sharp whistles. Immediately came the clangour of Vanjohn's bell.

"Go ahead, Miss Daldy," Burford instructed.

"I must wait a moment," she replied. "I stopped here a second or two after the clock struck."

"Good! That's the way. Time it as nearly as you can."

The girl moved on. They reached the next corner of the tennis netting, and she passed quickly into the southerly fringe of tree and shrub. Her speed became slower, but still she was proceeding at a pace which, if it actually matched her former progress, indicated that she had had small regard for the black marocain frock. They got some little way into the bushes, when she stopped.

"This is the place where I saw the head," she said in a low voice.

"Wait for it," Burford answered, his thumb on the head of his stop-watch. There was a glow in the drive from the porch lamp, now lit up for the experiment, and against the glow a couple of minutes previously he had seen Methven come out of the yew shrubbery. "You've probably moved a little quicker than before. That raincoat doesn't catch as the black dress must have done."

"It doesn't," she whispered, "but it makes a good deal more noise."

"Don't mind that, and don't let the noise slow you up——"

“Ah!” the girl interrupted.

Methven’s head appeared dimly over the bushes by the lawn.

“I do see you this time, Irene,” came Methven’s voice. “You too, Inspector. That’s just about the spot.”

“Right! Carry on, Mr Methven.”

“Right!” came the reply, and the head vanished.

Burford flashed a light on his watch. Three minutes had gone since Vanjohn rang his bell. So far the experiment checked.

The seconds now ticked off, one after the other, and still the girl waited. Burford counted, as he imagined, well over a minute, then the girl turned and began to move again, unhurriedly, through the trees. Burford discovered an admiration for her steadiness. She was, he considered, too shrewd not to realize that the whole experiment was devised as a check on her story, and that it would be in her interest to get to the yew-tree and beyond it in as short a time as possible. But it was clear that she was ‘playing the game’ with him; this, not only in respect of trying to be accurate in timing, but in the matter of keeping to the directions she had followed in the first instance. Burford, behind her, was keeping track of her previous footprints by means of his flashlight. It was only occasionally that he lost sight of them. She was, he saw, trying as scrupulously as her memory would allow to repeat her actual movements, even to the point of sacrificing time in order to be accurate.

It was not until they were in the yew patch that her steadiness gave way. In the light from the porch the old conifer was dimly discernible when she pulled up with a gasp.

“Oh, my heavens!” she said in a choked whisper. “There’s somebody kneeling there!”

Burford’s grasp fell reassuringly on her arm. “It’s one of my men representing Ward,” he told her. “I’m sorry. I should have warned you. But you didn’t see Ward from here, did you?”

“No—not till I fell over him almost.”

“Go forward, please. Is my man anywhere near the actual spot where Ward was kneeling?”

“On the very spot, I should think.”

“Carry on!” said Burford. “Do just as you did when you encountered Ward.”

He made mental allowance for the time wasted in the colloquy, and checked the fact that she was still in her previous track. The girl moved forward. Even in the semi-dark Burford was aware that she was trembling.

There was no intention in Burford’s mind of making the experiment anything of a ‘third-degree’ ordeal for the girl. He therefore replaced his grip on her arm, and spoke to her soothingly.

“Don’t bother to repeat the falling-over business, Miss Daldy,” he said. “Take it as done. Get up, Vanjohn!”

That young officer got to his feet.

“Take just as much time as would count for Ward getting up and taking you in his arms, Miss Daldy,” Burford instructed. “Then tell me just exactly what happened when he did. He recognized you, grasped you, and you struggled?”

“Yes.”

“How did the conversation go?”

“I couldn’t remember accurately. It was silly, anyhow.”

“Never mind how silly. Let me have it, please.”

“I said, ‘Oh, it’s you, Rupert!’ He said, ‘Hullo, Dolores!’ By then he was on his feet. He put his arms round me. He whispered something about being mad about me. I told him, ‘Rubbish!’ He said he would keep tagging me until I gave in. I said he’d better not try, that I didn’t want anything to do with him. Then I put my hands up under his chest and pushed. He let go and stumbled. I ran across, round the tree, over to the corner by the entrance gate.”

“Thanks, Miss Daldy. Now just do that,” Burford instructed her. “Stay where you are, Vanjohn!”

The girl moved off and Burford followed her. From the time when Methven had hailed them seven minutes had elapsed. Which meant, according to the time-table, that two minutes were left before the can should be kicked.

The girl now seemed to be hurrying. Her feet were pattering on the planks put down by Burford’s assistants. She came to the corner by the entrance drive, paused for a mere second or two, then bending low, apparently to avoid being seen against the lancet-piercing which decorated the top half of the gate, darted across the drive to the half-circle shrubbery. Burford was quick behind her.

Once inside the shrubbery she turned up it in the direction of the porch, but now more cautiously. When she had gone a good way towards the edge she stopped and turned.

“I was about here,” she said, “when I saw hi—some one in front of me.”

The correction did not escape Burford’s notice, but he did not take her up on it.

“Just where do you think you saw this some one?” he asked.

“A little over to the right, there,” she answered, pointing.

“Right!” said Burford. “Now just time how long it was until you heard the can being kicked, and tell me.”

She kept still for a moment or two, then, “Now!” she said.

Burford whistled on his two fingers. There came the rattle of the can, kicked by Joe Crowther.

“Now, Miss Daldy,” said Burford, “show me how you moved next.”

The girl hesitated a while, then set off slowly towards the other corner of the shrubbery that touched on the gate beside the garage. Burford followed her. They came to the gate by the garage.

“That will do, I think,” said Burford. “Only two points I want to check on. You did, in actual fact, get away from Ward and across the entrance drive as fast as you showed me?”

“I’m sure I did. I was afraid, you see, that Rupert was following me.”

“I see. Well, then, the second point, Miss Daldy: When you heard the can kicked just now you came across the shrubbery quite slowly. Is that what you did in actual fact? Wouldn’t it have been more natural for you to run?”

It seemed to him that the girl’s hesitation in answering was unwarranted by any importance he himself had attached to the question.

“Well,” she said jerkily, “I—I just didn’t run, Mr Burford. I moved pretty much as I showed you.”

“All right. When you got here did you see any person moving about?”

Once again she seemed to hesitate. “No. Nobody,” she replied.

There came the loud rap of the can being returned to its base.

“Where were you when that happened in actual fact?”

She was at need to think of the answer to this question also.

“Over there by the garage. I was going round behind it—between it and the wall. I heard the can when I was among the bushes by the yard, I think.”

“I wonder, then,” said Burford, “that you didn’t notice anyone move as you went past the gate. Miss Hibbert, you know, was searching for the can among the bushes up by the house on this side.”

“I saw nobody—nobody,” she said, with a touch of stubbornness.

“Very well, Miss Daldy,” Burford said quietly. “Don’t bother now to squeeze round behind the garage. Go up to the porch and wait.”

He went back the way he had come—through the semicircular shrubbery. As he went he turned up the plank put down to preserve the girl’s footprints. It was perfectly clear, from some of them, scuffled as they were, that Irene Daldy had lied in saying she had made towards the garage at a leisurely pace.

The checking of her movements from the moment of seeing Methven until, having seen Ward, she found some one in front of her in the porch shrubbery surprised Burford a good deal. The movement, to the point of his signal for the kicking of the can, had taken very little over nine minutes. He was quite convinced that up to the point of the kicking of the can the girl had honestly tried to reproduce movement and timing as accurately as she could. The one time when candour appeared to have deserted her came after Burford’s intended test was

completed. Why had she lied about her speed in making for the gate by the garage?

The scuffle of feet in the drive, following upon the rattle of the can, had died down, and the murmur of voices. From the patch by the yew on his left hand Burford heard Methven's voice distinctly: "Oh, buck up, Jacky! Don't be scared! Just go and look for Tom Daldy as you did before. Nobody will hurt you." Then came the deeper tones of one of the local officers: "I'll come with you, miss, if you like."

Burford turned over the plank that covered the crossing of Irene Daldy's footprints with those of the unknown man. He flashed his torch up and down the impressions, scrutinizing them carefully. Detective-Constable Vanjohn had been positive that the girl's prints were impressed over the man's, and Sergeant Crowther had nodded agreement. Burford, for himself, saw no reason for being positive. It did look, at the one point where the tracks crossed, as if the girl had moved later than the man, for her heel-mark was clear in the middle of the bigger print. It had, however, the slightest touch of feathering, a sort of turned edge, to one side. This was hardly noticeable, but it was enough to put a doubt into Burford's mind if, in fact, the heel-mark had been made later than the bigger print. It was odd, also, to note that after crossing the bigger prints Irene's track took a slight curve higher up into the shrubbery, bringing her nearer the porch. This might have been to negotiate the clump of laurels that stood in the direct path to the gate by the garage. But, following the girl's track above the laurel clump, Burford saw no signs of haste in it. He came to a place where her feet had turned a little to one side, as if she had stopped. Slightly sideways prints ensued for the distance of about a yard, as though the girl had sidled away cautiously. Then came a deep-dug print, the soil piled

up behind it. From this point to the garage gate the girl had run.

Irene's story was that she had seen the unknown ahead of her to *her right*. If it was true, she had come up behind the unknown. At the sight of the figure ahead, she said, she had 'frozen,' not moving until she heard the can being kicked. If she had 'frozen' to the *left* behind the figure, and her tracks told anything, she had moved cautiously for several yards after hearing the can kicked, crossing the path of the vanished unknown, then suddenly had taken to her heels. The story told by her footmarks, however, was very different. The one indication of a stop on her part in the porch shrubbery was to the *right* of the track made by the unknown. The one indication of a sudden movement on her part was also to the right of it. These indications declared that it was to the *left* of her that she had seen the unknown, and the probability was, since she could not have crossed the track of the unknown without seeing him, that the unknown had come up behind her. This probability was supported by the touch of feathering on her heel-mark. The double mark lay in a slight concavity, which made it unlikely that the feathering had been done by the covering plank. More likely—no, almost certainly—the feathering had been done by the broader foot.

The probability that Irene Daldy was lying, and that the unknown—presumably the kicker of the can—had come up behind her, altered the whole complexion of affairs for Burford. He had indeed thought it important to discover who it was that had kicked the can, but only incidentally. If, according to Irene's story, the unknown was in the porch shrubbery before her—she just having left Ward alive—then the unknown could not have murdered Ward. He could not have murdered Ward, that is, before the kicking of the can. He



could hardly have murdered Ward at all on Irene's version, because Miss Hibbert and Arthur Wing had the distinct idea, probably correct, that the can-kicker went off in the opposite direction from the yew patch. To have got at Ward there he must have run right round the house, and have just anticipated Methven's move from the tennis-court. He must have passed in sight of Methven and the Blake girl.

Burford thoughtfully covered up the tell-tale prints and pushed through the shrubbery into the drive.

### § iii

The young people, it was apparent, were doing their best to reproduce their previous activities in the way Burford wanted. When Burford came out of the porch shrubbery into the drive close on five minutes had passed since the rap of the returned can. With the Blake girl, Tom Daldy and Vicky Rubens were coming round the northern side of the house. Up the garden on the other side Miss Hibbert's voice was to be heard: "Come in! Come in, everybody! Rupert Ward has been hurt!"

At the same moment as the three from the north side reached the yew patch Miss Hibbert returned from the south and met them. She went straight into the patch, followed by the other three. Then Wing came from the north side to reach the yew corner at the same time as Willie Blake and Sally Bastable, who came along the south front. Willie Blake and the Bastable girl went into the patch, while Wing hovered outside it.

Burford went down the drive a little and pushed his way into the yew corner from a new angle, unobserved. The scene was lit by the night-light borrowed from a uniformed man and held by one of the local plain-clothes officers. The party was

grouped about Vanjohn, who was lying on the ground. There was some argument going on about “You said” and “I said” and “You were over there, I think.”

Methven cut into the discussion. “Well, anyhow, it’s time we lifted him. You, Tom—and you, Willie—take his feet.”

“I couldn’t get past, remember?” young Blake said shrilly. “I had to get round the tree.”

“Well, do it, Willie,” Methven said impatiently. “We’re wasting time.”

Blake scuttled round the tree and joined Daldy at Vanjohn’s feet. Burford backed out of the bushes and crossed to the porch. Irene Daldy had left it, and was with Wing by the yew-tree patch. Presently, as the group carrying Vanjohn emerged, she joined Sally Bastable and came back again to the porch.

“Which of us was it that rang the bell, Irene?” the Bastable girl quavered.

“Neither of us. It was dark. You were all dithery, and I couldn’t find the bell-push. Joan Hibbert did it, I’m sure.”

At that moment Miss Hibbert came up the steps and made straight for the bell-push. The door was opened immediately by Horlick, the manservant.

“No, no, Horlick!” Miss Hibbert protested. In ordinary circumstances, Burford thought, she would have been precise in manner, perhaps a trifle school-mistressish. But, like the rest, she was disturbed. She was sturdy of build. Burford could imagine her being a troop-leader of Girl Guides. “It was quite a minute or two before you answered the bell,” she told the manservant. “They had to put Rup—Mr Ward down on the steps.”

“That’s right,” Methven said over his shoulder. He and the others carrying Vanjohn had just arrived at the foot of the

steps. "Shut the door, Horlick, and wait behind it until I yell."

"Very good, Mr Methven," Horlick agreed, unperturbed. He shut the door.

Methven and the other bearers came up the steps.

"Put him down," the Scot said. He seemed to have the situation well in hand, and Burford was quite content to let him manage affairs. "You, Joan"—Methven turned to Miss Hibbert—"you kept ringing the bell, didn't you?"

"Yes. You told me to keep my finger on it. You said Horlick must have fallen asleep."

"And Arthur Wing suggested going round to the back door," Methven pointed out.

"That's right," said Wing, from the foot of the steps. "I was just going when the lights in the hall went up."

It may be surmised that Burford did not miss this new factor in timing. He waited patiently.

"Now, Horlick!" Methven called, after a long pause.

The door opened. The bearers lifted Vanjohn and carried him into the house. They laid him precisely where the dead man had lain.

"That will do," said Burford. "Get up, Vanjohn!"

He turned to the group of young people in the hall. They were huddled together as if for mutual protection, and were eyeing him expectantly and with a touch of apprehension.

"I'm afraid," said Burford quietly, "that I cannot let you go just yet—any of you—but I'll try to do so as quickly as I can. Meantime you had better all wait in a room together. Perhaps Miss Bastable will arrange to give you tea or refreshment of some kind."

With a nod to Crowther to keep an eye on them, and to see that his instruction was obeyed, he disappeared into the room which he had made, as it were, his temporary office. His experiment had done nothing to clarify the situation. On the contrary, it had merely made it more involved. From the knocking of the returned can until the moment when the bearers had laid Vanjohn down in the hall had taken fourteen minutes. And Methven's story was that it had taken him a minute or two after the bringing in of Ward to get the womenfolk quietened—say, three minutes—before he put in the call to the police-station. This meant that, in the repetition, it had taken about a quarter of an hour from the finding of the body to the moment when Methven would have been ready to get on the 'phone. Which meant, in turn—since in his calculations Burford had allowed some ten minutes for the whole process—that the time allowed for Irene Daldy's progress from the moment of her seeing Methven on the southern side of the garden to her arrival at the place where she had heard the can kicked was reduced by about five minutes.

It was physically impossible for her to have completed the recorded progress in the time.

## CHAPTER IV

### OUTSIDE EVIDENCE

**WHEN** he was seated at his desk Burford spent a minute or two making notes, then sent Vanjohn for Mungo Methven. The Scot came without hesitation.

“The experiment,” said Burford without preamble, “is a flop.”

The Scot drew the chair he had taken nearer to the desk in an eager movement.

“A flop?” he repeated. “You mean, it doesn’t help you any?”

“I mean just that,” said Burford. “It is the time between your finding of Ward and ’phoning the station that worries me.”

“What way?” asked Methven. “Too long or too short in the experiment?”

“I don’t want to suggest anything or lead you in any way,” Burford replied. “Did anything strike you about that part of the experiment?”

“Well, now, I’m thinking it took a bit too long,” the young fellow said slowly. “It was all right up to the time where I was supposed to come on Ward’s body. But the rest of them came up a wee thing slower than they did in actual fact. And after that there was a lot of argy-bargy about what ‘you did’ and ‘I did’ that didn’t occur in the real circumstances. I’m inclined to think, Mr Burford, that you’d have to allow a couple of minutes for that—maybe more.”

“Is that your honest opinion?”

“Honest as blazes, Mr Burford. It isn’t easy to be sure on all points. You’d maybe think that the rest of them, knowing what they had to do, would be a bit quicker in their movements than in the actual fact, but they had begun to argue among themselves even before they got to where I was kneeling beside your fellow. I don’t want to say positively, not being able to trust to what I only took in subconsciously in exciting circumstances, but I could almost swear that they didn’t even arrive at the yew in the order they were in in the first place. Did you notice how Jacky Blake, for instance, was scared about taking up her cue from me? Well, I’ll swear she jumped to it, running, when the thing really happened. That’ll show you how the experiment was inclined to slow up all round.”

Burford nodded. “Good stuff, Mr Methven,” he said. “You use your head. You think the timing was fairly accurate up to the point when you were supposed to find the body?”

“As far as my actual movements were concerned, yes,” Methven replied. “But I’m inclined to think the time between the kicking of the can and its return was cut down a trifle—well, no, that’s wrong. It seemed to be cut down a good bit.”

“It took longer to return it in actual fact?”

“Noticeably longer. Jacky Blake thought so too. She commented on it. She said, ‘It took much longer than that, Mungo.’ Of course, she was impatient when we were waiting for the can to be rapped in actual fact—wanted to move before it *was* rapped, and I had to hold her. That previous impatience may have coloured her idea that the time was shortened in the repetition, but I thought myself it was shortened before she commented on it.”

Burford made a note of the point. It did not, of course, affect the consideration which was uppermost in his mind just then—namely, the time afforded Irene Daldy for getting to the semicircular shrubbery from the point where she had seen Methven. She was already in the shrubbery facing the porch when the can was kicked, according to her story. But the matter of how long it did actually take to return the can might be of importance, so Burford noted Methven's impression.

“You said, I think”—Burford took up a new point—“that just before you heard the can being kicked—you and Miss Blake being at that time beside the tennis-court—you were stilled by the sound of footsteps in the lane.”

“That's so,” Methven agreed.

“Miss Hibbert and Mr Wing both spoke of people passing the *front* of the house in a hurry in both directions. Did you hear anything of that before you began to work up to the tennis-court?”

“I did—now that you mention it.”

“It did not strike you as unusual at the time?”

“I noticed merely that they were in a hurry,” said Methven. “I thought for a moment—just as I did about the footsteps in the lane—that it might be a couple of the gang breaking the rules. But it turned out to be a couple of men. I could hear them talking. And that sort of made me dismiss the idea.”

“Where were you when you heard these two men?”

“Just leaving the corner patch with the yew to join Jacky Blake. The church bell had just sounded the half-hour,” said Methven.

“You aren't by any chance under the impression of unusual activity in the roadway and the lane, are you?”

“Oh, but I am under that impression!” said the Scot. “I mean, I’m under that impression *now*. The hurrying footsteps in the road, or the hurrying footsteps in the lane—they wouldn’t impress me separately. But the two together do. They make me think there must have been a fire or something.”

“Yes,” said Burford, as though absently, “yes.”

Here was a matter, he was thinking, that would want separate investigation. One and another of the deponents, so to call them, had remarked in passing of people moving in a hurry in front and behind the garden. Irene Daldy had heard two or three people, as she thought, running in the lane. It was this that had made her want to climb the wall, with the result of cutting her hand. The activity had occurred several minutes before that remarked by Methven and Jacky Blake when they were beside the tennis-court. Irene’s brother and the fluffy little person called Vicky Rubens had also heard activity in the back lane, not only that remarked by Methven, but a later movement. This meant that people had been heard passing along the lane on at least three separate occasions. Then, in addition to corroborating Methven on the matter of the two men, the Hibbert girl and Wing declared that they had noticed a transit of people unusual in that quiet road right up to the time when the kicking of the can put the matter out of their mind.

It looked, as Methven said, as if there had been a fire in the neighbourhood. Or some other cause for excitement. It might be more than coincidence, however, that this unwonted activity took place so close to what must have been the time of Rupert Ward’s death. The thing would have to be looked into, Burford decided.



“Ask Detective-Sergeant Crowther to come here a moment,” he said to Vanjohn. “You keep his post for the time being.”

He turned to Methven and asked him further questions on the point of times, but got no nearer to explaining the discrepancy. There was a chance, indeed, now that Burford came to look at it more closely, that the repetition had occupied a minute or two longer than the actual movements of the party. He decided to make further tests with other members of the party.

“That will do for the time being, Mr Methven,” he said to the Scot. “Thank you for your help. Join the others and keep them in order for me.”

“I’ll do that,” said Methven, and rose.

Crowther came in as the Scot passed out. The big officer watched Methven until he came under the care of Vanjohn, then carefully shut the door.

“Well, Joe?” Burford asked.

Crowther shook his head.

“Nothin’ doin’, Archie,” he replied. “They’re all sittin’ nearly mumchance, an’ pretty well as much in the dark as I am—either that or givin’ a damn’ good impersonation of it.”

“Get any impression?”

“Only that they all mean to stick by the Daldy girl,” said Joe. “There’s one or two of them that thinks it was ’er as did the feller in, but even they’re tryin’ not to let ’er see they think so. They’re gettin’ back their nerve, generally speakin’, Archie. And if they’re up to anythin’ you’re goin’ to have a job gettin’ the truth out of ’em.”

“Get the idea that they’re up to something?”

Again Crowther shook his head.

“Nuh,” he said. “Just that they’re not sure of each other—I mean, as to which of them done it—but that they’ll hang together. Not as I’d blame ’em for it, Archie. They’re a nice set o’ youngsters, generally speakin’, and they think friends should stick together.”

Burford laughed. “Let’s hope they are concocting something, Joe,” he said. “It will be easier to trip them. Now, listen. There’s an odd thing I want you to look into——”

But Burford did not get the length of telling Crowther to investigate the odd activity about the house. He was interrupted by the entrance of one of the local detective officers with information leading to explanation of a kind for all the running about. The first piece of information was of a rather startling quality.

“There’s a man outside, sir,” said the district detective—“local man, sir—who says he saw somebody climbing the garden wall just about the time of the murder, sir.”

“Bring him in, Sterret,” said Burford. “That’s news indeed.”

## § ii

He said that his name was “ ’Arry Binns.”

“I’m well known round ’ere,” he said. “I works fer Mr ’Ammick, the greengrocer, an’ runs a pretty fair bit of a nallotmint on the side. Mr ’Ammick, ’e buys a good lot o’ my stuff, ’e does, an’ ’e always ses as my beans an’ whatnot is miles ahead o’ wot ’e can git in the Market. Larst year, f’rinsteince, it was my marrers as took the first prize at the \_\_\_\_\_”

“Come, now,” interrupted Burford, “we may hear about your marrows later. At the moment what we’re after is this story of yours about somebody climbing the wall of the garden here. Which wall was it?”

“Well, I’ll tell yer. It was that bit o’ wall between the front gate—I mean the one as is generally used—an’ the dividin’ wall between this ’ouse’s garden an’ the next. That’s the ’ouse nearest the Bricklayers’ Arms—Acacia Lodge, it’s called—if you takes my meanin’.”

“At what time was this?”

“As near as no matter to twenty-five to ten.”

“What makes you so sure of the time?”

“ ’Oo wouldn’t be sure o’ the time arter wot ’appened at the Anchor?” Mr Binns demanded with indignation. “It was just about the ’arf-hour when that there joker ’phones about free drinks a-goin’ at the Bricklayers’ Arms. At least, it was a minute or so past the ’arf-hour before I got goin’. I know, because I looked at the clock. Mr Coram, ’im as keeps the Anchor, always ’as the clock in the bar five minutes forrard, but I’m allowin’ for that. Some o’ the others were well away afore I got to believin’ the story—an’ I wish I’d never believed it, neither. I might’ve knew it were a swindle, same as I thought at the start.”

“What’s all this?” Burford demanded. “Are you telling me that some one ’phoned the Anchor with a false story about free drinks at the Bricklayers’ Arms?”

“That’s wot I’m tellin’ you, mister,” Mr Binns replied. “An’, wot’s more, ’e not only pushed the story over to the Anchor, but ’e pushed it over to the Bricklayers’ Arms as well. An’ there we was—crahds an’ crahds ov us—’urryin’

like mad between the Anchor an' the Bricklayers' Arms. A proper sell, it was."

"How did you come to fall for a thing like that? The story must have been amazingly plausible."

"Amazingly wot, mister?"

"Easy to swallow."

"Ah!" said Mr Binns. "I wasn't for believin' it, I tell yer—not at first. But when I sees the others a-swallowin' of it—well, free drinks don't come that often my way as I'd want to miss any. Bloke asks for Bill Summers to speak to 'm. Sez 'e's Bert Gollop a-talkin'. Well, when we gets to the Bricklayers' we finds it was supposed to be Bill Summers a-talkin' on the 'phone, an' it's Bert Gollop 'e arsk for. Cunnin' swine! 'E must've knew that Bert an' Bill is brothers-in-lors, though usin' different 'ouses of an evenin'. Must've knew Bill uses the Anchor an' Bert the Bricklayers'."

"Sounds as if it had been a local man."

"Sure!" said Mr Binns. "An' some of the lads'll local 'im if they lays 'ands on 'im."

"All right, then. Come to the matter of seeing some one climb the garden wall. I take it you feel fairly confident about the time?" asked Burford.

"Oh, yes. Say it was just about twenty-eight minutes to ten when I left the Anchor. From there to the gate is a bit over a quarter of a mile—say, a third. Bein' in a 'urry, it'd take me just about four minutes to get 'ere."

"How far away were you when you saw this person climb the wall?"

“On the far side of the street lamp that’s along the road a bit from the garage gate—that’s maybe sixty feet or so from the garage, mister.”

“I know,” Burford nodded.

“If I’d been past the lamp I might’ve seen more distinct-like, but the glare was in my eyes. Anyhow, I sees a fellow sprint across the road an’ ’op up on the wall. ’E stops there for a second or two, then pulls ’isself clean over.”

“You could see it was a man. Didn’t you recognize him?”

Mr Binns seemed to hesitate for a moment or two, then he shook his head.

“No, mister,” he said finally. “I didn’t reco’nize ’im.”

“I feel certain that there’s some notion of his identity in your mind,” Burford said quietly. “You have some idea who it was.”

“No, mister,” Binns repeated, with some hint of stubbornness. “I didn’t reco’nize ’im.”

“You didn’t recognize him at the actual moment, but you have since then formed an idea of who it was. Isn’t that so?” Burford pressed him.

“No, mister. It isn’t so at all. I’m tellin’ you I didn’t reco’nize the young feller, an’ I mean it.”

“But you could see it was a young fellow——”

“ ’Twasn’t likely to be an old feller, was it, the way ’e nipped up on the wall?” retorted Mr Binns, with a feeble grin for his own acumen.

“That, of course, is true.” Burford grinned in return. “But I still have a feeling that you’re keeping something back, Mr Binns. Let’s get to it this way: Had you time to notice how he

was dressed, for example—in dark clothes or light-coloured clothes?”

“ ‘E ’ad on light-coloured trousis. I mean to say, they was lighter than the jacket.”

“Grey flannel trousers, perhaps?”

“That sort o’ thing.”

“And perhaps what’s called a sports jacket?”

“That sort o’ thing.”

“Any idea of the colour of the jacket?”

“Couldn’t say. Might’ve been anythin’ under them trees.”

“Would it be as dark as dark blue, for example?”

“Oh, no. Not as dark as that.”

“How about a brown—or a green?”

“Well, it could easily’ve been a brownny-green.”

“How about a check pattern?”

“I didn’t see no check,” Mr Binns said, perhaps a trifle hurriedly.

“But you’d say, on the whole, that this young fellow you saw climbing the wall was dressed in flannel trousers and what’s called a sports jacket?”

“That’s about right, mister.”

“Was he wearing a hat?”

“I don’t think so. I’d’ve said ’e was bare-’eaded.”

“Fair or dark?”

“I don’t know as I noticed,” Mr Binns replied, again with hesitation.

“But you did notice he wasn’t wearing a hat,” Burford pointed out. “You’d have said he was bare-headed. Could he have been wearing a cap?”

“No—bare-’eaded.”

“Come, now!” Burford urged gently. “Don’t you see how hard you make it for me to believe that you aren’t holding something back from me? You did notice that the trousers were lighter than the jacket. And you saw that the jacket was of a brownish-green. Am I to take it, then, that his hair was neither darker nor lighter in tone than the jacket, but just about matched it?”

“That must’ve been about it, mister. Because I didn’t notice. Honest, I didn’t.” Mr Binns brought his hands out from his sides, palms forward, as though thereby emphasizing his honesty. One of the hands held a singularly greasy bowler-hat.

“We say, then, that the man had brown or mousy-coloured hair. Nondescript, we might put it,” Burford said, and made great play of taking an accurate note. “How about his size, Mr Binns? Was he a big fellow or a little fellow?”

“I’d say a fairish ’eight.”

“As tall as the sergeant here?” Burford indicated Crowther.

“Not as tall as ’im, but still fairly tall. An’ not a bit nearly as ’eavy-built.”

“About my own rig, perhaps?”

“If you’ll igscuse me, sir,” Mr Binns apologized, “I ain’t seen you nohow but a-sittin’, sir.”

Burford got out of his chair and showed himself.

“That’s about ’is size, sir!” Mr Binns said eagerly. “I’d say a bit more thickish-set, though.”

“We’re getting along, Sergeant Crowther,” Burford said, with pretended enthusiasm, to that officer. “We could almost send out a description on what we’ve got.”

“Pretty nearly, sir,” Crowther said solemnly, taking his cue. “Let’s see: ‘An active young man, half an inch under six foot, strongly built, with brown or nondescript hair——’ Would you say ‘probably sanguine complexion,’ sir?”

“ ‘Probably sanguine complexion,’ sergeant,” Burford agreed, with a nod.

In his earnestness he seemed to have forgotten Mr Binns for the moment. That individual was shifting his weight from foot to foot and waving his greasy hat with anxiety.

“ ‘Last seen wearing light grey flannel trousers and a brownish-green sports jacket. No hat,’ ” Crowther concluded.

“ ‘No hat,’ ” Burford agreed, as if making a point of the fact. “ ‘Bare-headed.’ That’s pretty good. It will almost do.” He turned to Mr Binns again. “There can’t be so many young men of that description in the district,” he said casually. “There can’t be so many who wear grey flannel trousers and a brownish-green sports jacket, surely?”

“There’s plenty as wears flannel trousers an’ sports jackets,” Mr Binns argued. “Nearly all the young fellers does. In course, the trousers an’ jackets as the young workin’ fellers wears ain’t so—well—ain’t so elegant as the young gents in the big ’ouses wears.”

“I see,” said Burford. “It wasn’t one of the young working fellows that you saw climbing the wall. It was a young fellow from one of the big houses. That’s your impression, Mr Binns?”

“I—I dunno!” Mr Binns said desperately. “It looked to me like it was. I—I wouldn’t swear to it. I never said——”

“All right, all right, Binns,” Burford said soothingly. “I know exactly what you said. And I’m going to tell you who it



was that you saw climbing the wall. It was Mr Roger Bastable, wasn't it?"

This was a shot at a venture, but it took effect.

"I never said it! I never said it!" Mr Binns protested wildly, sawing the air with his greasy hat. "You ain't got no right to put words in my mouth as I never said! 'Tain't fair! 'Tain't jonnick!"

"That's all right, Mr Binns," Burford said mildly. "I'm only guessing who it was from what you've told me. I merely want to know. You did have the idea, didn't you, that it was Roger Bastable you saw climbing the wall?"

"Yes, I did; but that ain't to say——"

"Come, now! What other young man of the district would fit your description so well?"

"None on them; but——"

"That will do. I don't want any more than that. I take it that Roger Bastable stands you a drink now and then at the Anchor, hey?"

"Yes, 'e do. There ain't a nicer young gent than Mr Roger in the district."

"All right, then. You can go now, Mr Binns. It may be that I shall want to see you again, but I have your address. Better get home to bed," said Burford. "But don't talk, you understand?"

"I won't talk," mumbled Mr Binns. "Made a puppy-show of meself, I 'ave, the way I've let you turn me inside out!"

Burford nodded to the local officer, who conducted Mr Binns from the room.

"That's so much, Joe," said Burford to Crowther when the door had closed. "I expect we'll be seeing young Bastable

presently, but just give the word to Detective-Sergeant Harman that I want him found and brought in, will you? Meantime I'll have another word with that girl Daldy. Send her in, Joe."

### § iii

The girl was a great deal less at ease than she had appeared at Burford's previous interview with her. That may have been because she found herself in the presence of a much sterner Burford.

"I have sent for you, Miss Daldy," Burford said directly she was seated, "because I have discovered that you have not been quite frank with me."

He turned over the pages of his notebook on the desk before him, came to a particular page, and flattened the book open with his palm.

"I refer you to this part of your statement to me. It deals with the moment before the can was kicked—when you were in the semicircular shrubbery which is opposite the porch. 'I was making for the edge of the shrubbery,' you said, 'with the idea of kicking the can and freeing the prisoner in the porch. Then I saw somebody in front of me, a little to my right ahead. I froze. I don't know whether the person ahead of me was on my side or the hunters', or whether it was a man or a woman. At any rate, I wasn't seen. Whoever it was disappeared, and presently I heard the can being kicked or thrown and the scuffling of feet in the drive beside the porch. I cut back deeper into the shrubbery, then ran round by the garage to the little fish-pond.' That is what you said, and what you maintained when given the chance of checking the statement?"

“Yes. That’s what happened, Mr Burford.”

“I’m sorry to tell you that I cannot accept it, Miss Daldy,” Burford said quietly. “I now know that it was a man whom you saw in the shrubbery. I know, moreover, that when you first saw him he was not in front of you to your right, but was coming up behind you to your left. You did not freeze when you saw him in front of you, but when you heard or saw him come up behind you. You were already well up into the shrubbery. You had gone up, bearing off to the right, and had negotiated the porchway side of a clump of laurels. It was then that you heard or saw the man behind you. You sidled off quietly, still bearing right; then when the can was kicked you actually ran down towards the garage gate. Isn’t that the true version of your movements there?”

“No, it isn’t,” said the girl. “I have told you what I did.”

“Your version does not agree with the evidence I have.”

“What evidence?” Her scorn was something timid.

“That I may not tell you,” Burford replied. “But it is evidence that cannot lie. Let me put it to you very plainly, Miss Daldy. I was prepared to accept your story up to the point where you reached the laurel-bush in the semicircular shrubbery. It was my duty, of course, to accept it with reservations—that is, accept it subject to checking. When, however, I come on evidence—which, I tell you again, cannot lie—evidence that you have not been absolutely frank on a very important point in your story, doubt is cast on the whole statement. I don’t want to bully you or to take you over your story again from point to point with questions designed to trip you. I had much rather that you gave me the truth yourself. It may, indeed, come to this, if you are not frank, that I must charge you with the murder of Rupert Ward.”

The girl gave a little whimper.

“I don’t say that to frighten you. I say it to show you the peril you put yourself in by trying to cheat me. If it came to that I should have to warn you that you needn’t say a word unless you wanted to, because anything you said would possibly be used in evidence at your trial. But I don’t really think you are concerned about your own peril. I believe you are trying to shield some one. That, believe me, is a foolish thing to do in a case like this. You, clever and plucky as you are, would not have the faintest chance of covering the truth from a skilled counsel of the criminal court. The truth would be extracted from you. The fact that it had to be extracted from you would magnify the thing you were anxious to hide. It would make the thing loom large in the mind of a jury, and the result would be great disservice to the person you meant to shield. I have seen this happen perhaps a hundred times in criminal trials. It isn’t for my sake that I want you to tell me the truth of what happened round the time when the can was kicked. I *know* what happened. I know it as well as if I had been there to see it. But I don’t want to see a girl like you floundering in what looks like a mesh of lies. It is neither seemly nor useful. It can do nobody—least of all the person you want to help—anything but the most grievous harm.”

He left the matter there, and fell to conning his notes.

For a long time the girl sat in silence, tugging at the bandage on her injured hand.

“I can’t—I can’t!” she muttered at length.

“Come, I’ll help you,” Burford said kindly. “Three questions will do. It was a man you saw in the shrubbery?”

“Yes.”

“He came up behind you?”

“Yes.”

“It was Roger Bastable?”

“I don’t know—I thought——”

“Please!” Burford insisted.

“Yes, it was Roger,” the girl said tremulously. “But he would never do that to Rupert Ward, Mr Burford. Roger isn’t like that. He might have hit Rupert, but he would never have stabbed him. Never!”

“I shall try to believe that,” said Burford. “But please notice the difficulty you have put me into by lying. If you believe Roger Bastable incapable of murdering Rupert Ward, what was your purpose in hiding the fact that he passed you in the shrubbery? Don’t you see it gives the impression that you believed Bastable was there for some guilty purpose?”

“Yes, Mr Burford, I see that now. I didn’t at the time.”

“What made you, in the first instance, hide the fact from the others that it was Roger Bastable who had kicked the can?”

“I had run away before it dawned on me that Roger had no business kicking the can. Then I thought that I wouldn’t spoil Roger’s joke. He’s nice, but he has a sort of weird notion of humour: he likes to spoil things for others. I don’t know where Roger went after he kicked the can, but after I got round the garage to the fish-pond I went to look for him. I was going to scold him, then call the two sides in. The game wasn’t being played properly, anyhow.”

“In what way?”

“Some of them weren’t taking any interest. My brother and Vicky Rubens were just sitting under the tree by the rubbish-heap taking no notice of the game.”

“Well, then?” Burford urged.

“Well, then, I heard somebody shouting that Rupert had been hurt, and that drove what Roger had done out of my head. Then when we got Rupert into the house and it was found he was dead—stabbed—I didn’t know what to do about Roger. You see, I had left Rupert just a minute or two before Roger came up behind me. I thought—I thought that maybe Roger had heard me talking to Rupert——”

She hesitated, confused.

“You thought that perhaps Roger had been in the yew shrubbery when you were struggling with Ward, and that he might have resented it?”

“He wouldn’t have resented it in the way you may think. Roger might have punched Rupert, but he’d never have stabbed him. Never!” the girl said tearfully.

“Was it, then, that you thought perhaps there had been a struggle between the two men, and that in the course of the struggle Ward had somehow been stabbed?”

“I didn’t know what to think,” Irene replied. “I was bewildered. If Roger had hurt Rupert at all he wouldn’t have hidden it. He wouldn’t have taken the trouble to come up and kick the can after that. Besides, there wasn’t time for him to have stabbed Rupert and then come up into the half-round shrubbery behind me as soon as he did. I left Rupert alive less than two minutes before I saw Roger. Do believe that, Mr Burford!”

She brought the argument out with such apparent relief that Burford realized she had only that moment thought of it.

“That’s a very good point, Miss Daldy,” he admitted, and her face lit up. “I take it, from your idea that Roger Bastable

might have resented Ward's attempt to embrace you, that Roger is—well, in love with you?"

"Roger's rather keen on me—yes."

"And you on him?"

"I don't know. Roger's difficult. A girl would have to take a lot for granted with Roger. He's grumpy, and his way of showing he likes a person is by swearing at her—or him. He calls me 'brat' or 'bitch,' " she said, with a faint smile. "But I like him—yes, Mr Burford, I like Roger a lot."

"Enough, at all events, to want to protect him," Burford commented. "And Ward—he also was keen on you?"

"Oh, him!" the girl said contemptuously, then checked herself. "I'm sorry. Rupert's dead, and I ought not to say anything against him. But Rupert was always keen on somebody or other. One girl one minute and another girl the next."

"What used to be called a lady-killer?"

"I don't know that term. I've heard my father use it," the girl replied. "If it means that Rupert thought he could get off with any girl it doesn't quite suit him. It was more that Rupert *hoped* he'd get off with somebody. He was sort of smarmy about it—always wanting to paw people."

"Don't attach too much importance in your mind on this question, Miss Daldy. It is only meant to clear the ground," said Burford. "Roger Bastable had noticed Ward's attempts to paw you—I mean, previous to to-night—and didn't like it?"

"Roger didn't like Ward pawing anybody. He said Rupert was covered with dry slime. But nobody really liked Rupert much. Only Roger was blunter about it than most. That's Roger's way. He easily becomes vehement."

“Could I put it this way: that all the girls of to-night’s party had experienced Ward’s pawing tactics, and that all the young men were inclined to resent it?”

“I don’t think most of them liked it, though one would show it more than another.”

“What about the girls themselves?”

“They minded it less than the men did for them. You must have noticed, Mr Burford, that the party to-night was inclined to split into pairs. Well, some of them are really keen on each other, and with others it isn’t so serious. Where it isn’t serious on the girl’s part she wouldn’t mind Rupert chasing her a bit. After all, he was a kind of *somebody*—well known and successful, I mean. And one or two girls—I mean, outside of the ones here to-night—others as well, I mean—would only have been too glad if Rupert’s pettings had meant anything.”

“If his intentions had been matrimonial, shall we say?”

“That’s it, Mr Burford.”

“Is it in your recollection that any of Ward’s tentative approaches looked like developing into a serious affair?”

“Now and again,” Irene said, with a smile, “it looked as if Rupert was really falling for somebody. There was a gay widow in the village about a couple of years ago—a Mrs Trent—who seemed to have Rupert on a string. That lasted the longest of any. Until Mrs Trent disappeared—leaving a lot of unpaid bills in the district. Little Vicky Rubens had him going for a while. So had Jacky Blake. And there were several girls apart from those in to-night’s party. Oh, yes, and Sally Bastable was sloppy about Rupert for a little. So was Joan Hibbert.”

“A perfect Captain Macheath, apparently.”



“Not quite perfect, Mr Burford. Rupert wasn’t so successful.”

“Well, thank you, Miss Daldy. You’ve helped me a lot. I hope you will be just as frank with me, should I have to trouble you again, as you have been in the last few minutes. You will find it much more comfortable to be frank.”

He got out of his chair to open the door for her. She also rose, but did not move from beside her chair.

“Mr Burford!”

“Yes?”

“If—if you have to question Roger,” the girl pleaded, “don’t pay any attention to his grumpiness. It’s just his way. I mean, don’t think it means anything. He’s difficult. He goes into a paddy-whack about nothing. But, honestly, Roger wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

“I’ll handle him tactfully, Miss Daldy,” Burford smiled. “You’d be surprised at the number of touchy people I’ve had to deal with as a policeman.”

“Thanks a lot.”

“You may go to bed if you like. How’s the hand?”

“Stinging a bit now.”

“Well, go to bed. All this inquisition must have tired you thoroughly. Good night, Miss Daldy.”

As he opened the door for her a bulky young man, apparently under the guard of Crowther and a local officer, got up from a bench on the other side of the hall. At the sight of Burford and the Daldy girl a grumbling noise arose from his throat.

“What’s all this, Rene?” he grumbled. “What have they been doing to you?”

“Good night, Miss Daldy,” Burford repeated, and shepherded her towards the stairs. He turned to the young man. “Mr Roger Bastable, isn’t it?”

“That’s me. What about it?”

“Step inside, and I’ll tell you what about it,” Burford replied. “Crowther! Take Vanjohn’s place for a little, and tell him to come here, please.”

He held open the door for young Bastable.

## CHAPTER V

### THE GRUMPY YOUNG MAN

“It’s a bit thick,” said Roger Bastable.

“Take a chair—that one,” said Burford. “What is a bit thick, Mr Bastable? I hope nobody has been rude to you.”

“Nobody gets off with being rude to me, Mr....”

“Burford is the name. Detective-Inspector Archie Burford, Criminal Investigation Department, New Scotland Yard.”

“Christopher!” said Mr Bastable naïvely. “I’ve heard about you. You’re one hellofa swell, aren’t you?”

“I have been lucky, perhaps, in my work,” Burford smiled. “You were saying that something was a bit thick.”

“I take it back. I was going to say it was a bit thick coming up to one’s own father’s house and being pounced on by a gang of coppers. But something’s up when there’s an ace like you in charge. What’s up, Inspector?”

Was this really ignorance, Burford wondered, or good acting? He had allowed the conversational opening to wander as it might in order to have a moment for summing young Bastable up. He was persuaded that the young man had brains, and that his brusqueness was more than half attitude. On a snapped judgment—a thing on which Burford was not apt to depend—he fancied that Bastable had secret ambitions which outran either his capability or his opportunities, and that the rude and impatient manner was what is known in psychological jargon as a ‘defence.’ But Burford shelved his immediate impressions of the young fellow, clearing his mind to receive others that might transpire.

“The question is genuine, Mr Bastable?” he asked. “You really do not know at all why I am here?”

“I don’t. All I know is that I was pounced on by a lot of plain-clothes policemen after getting back from a walk and told that ‘the Inspector’ was anxious to see me.”

“Well, the matter is this,” said Burford. “During the progress of a game of hide-and-seek in the garden here one of the players, Rupert Ward, was found dead in very suspicious circumstances.”

“Holy smoke! You mean somebody has bumped the tick off?”

“Rupert Ward was stabbed to the heart with this knife.” Burford rolled the crude weapon over on the desk before him with a finger-tip.

“Murder, eh?”

“All the circumstances point to that,” said Burford. “It could hardly have been suicide.”

“If you had known Ward you’d leave out the ‘hardly,’ Inspector. He wasn’t the fellow to kill himself—especially not with a thing like that. Morphia or a gas-oven would have been more his style, supposing he’d come to the end of his tether. And there’d have been a literary effusion for the coroner, all polished and very likely whimsical. No, Inspector. Ward didn’t commit suicide. He was sitting too pretty for that. Those sickening books of his—gosh!” Bastable made a wry face, and looked as if he wanted to spit. “*Google Dan! Mau’wiss the Mice! Dinkery-donk!*” he murmured disgustedly. “Gah!”

Burford rolled the knife back again. “You have never seen this thing before, Mr Bastable?” he asked.

“No. Ugly brute of a thing. Looks home-made,” said the young fellow. “May one look?”

“Of course. But don’t lift it.”

“Finger-prints, perhaps?” Bastable suggested. He drew his chair closer to the desk and peered at the knife. “Mean to say you can bring up finger-prints on a thing like that?”

“If they aren’t too smudged we might,” Burford replied. “We can bring them up on much less promising surfaces than that, you know.”

“Good old Scotland Yard!” said Bastable. “Gosh, what a brute of a thing! It looks like a file shaped up on a grindstone or a buff. Yes, an old file. You can see remains of the criss-cross up close to the handle. If the chap that made this likes to sing dumb, Inspector, you may have a lot of difficulty in establishing the ownership. Anybody could have made it—anybody with a mechanical knack.”

“It may be difficult, yes,” Burford agreed. “As a matter of routine, Mr Bastable, would you mind accounting for your movements this evening?”

Bastable sat up with a jerk. “Holy smoke!” he ejaculated. “So I’m suspected, am I?”

“Of course,” said Burford. “As much as anyone, that is.”

“Good enough,” Bastable replied. “Am I to be told when Ward was supposed to be murdered, or anything like that?”

“Not a thing,” said Burford. “It will be better if I keep the advantage of you.”

“And I don’t get the usual warning?”

“I have no intention of charging you—yet. Of course, you don’t need to talk unless you like, but you’ll imagine the interpretation that might be given your refusal.”

“Good enough,” said Bastable. “You talk very fairly, Inspector, and I’ll shoot the works, as the Americans are supposed to say. Let me preface my statement by saying that I didn’t murder Rupert Ward. By the way, who’s this chap with the notebook?” he broke off, with a nod at Vanjohn.

Vanjohn sat up to glare at him, but Burford meant Bastable to have all the rope he wanted.

“Detective-Constable Hilary Vanjohn, M.A.,” Burford informed Bastable, and Bastable said, “Gosh!”

“Tell me if I talk too quickly, constable,” Bastable said kindly. “I’ll suit my speed to you.”

“Thanks,” Vanjohn replied dryly. It was plain that he did not like Bastable and that he thought the whole proceedings grossly irregular.

“I didn’t kill Rupert Ward,” Bastable began again, “but that’s not to say that I didn’t, or don’t, think he needed scragging. Those bloody awful books of his were enough to provoke a desire to murder in anybody with sense or decency. But the books were the product of the man. Nobody but a tick could write such tripe. Enough to give anybody the jitters.”

“Do I put all this down, sir?” Vanjohn asked, with a sour face, of his superior.

“Oh, blow it, man!” said Bastable, before Burford could answer. “Be human for a moment! Being an M.A., you must have some feeling about writing, and you’re never going to tell me you *liked* Ward’s infantile goo?”

“I can’t say I’ve read any of it,” Vanjohn returned unwarily.

“Good for you, Vanjohn!” Bastable commended. “Don’t you ever—unless you want to cat all your innards up. You know”—he turned to Burford—“I wouldn’t be a bit surprised if that was the solution of the murder. Somebody that was

completely fed up with Ward's 'whimsy' thought there was no cure for it but slaughter."

"It's an idea," Burford nodded. "But supposing we get along?"

"Sorry! I see red and jaundice colour when I think of *Google Dan*. All right. Where do I start about my movements?"

"Start from the point where you left the party choosing sides for hide-and-seek," Burford suggested.

"The party was flooey from the start with that blighter Ward horning in, but hide-and-seek finished for me. I've got my growth," said Bastable. "Then that Scotch goat Methven got them on to a variant from the Glasgow gutter called Hi-spy-kick-the-can. It looked like being Oranges-and-lemons next, so I went for a walk.

"When I say 'walk' that's a euphemism for a drink. I went up to the Bricklayers' Arms for a pint of beer, then walked down to the Anchor for another half-pint. I should have had the pint at the Anchor. They keep Benskins' there. Good stuff, Benskins'. Well, I played a couple of games at darts, and left the place. I walked up to the Park, and then down here to see how the kids were getting on with their game. There were a lot of men hurrying up the road—I was on the other side from the house. I thought to myself that I'd like to chuck a spanner into the works—I mean, mess up the infantile proceedings. So I hid in the gateway opposite until the men had passed. Then I ran across the road and climbed the wall into the garden, crept up to the drive fronting the porch, and kicked their bloody can for them."

"And after that?"

“I bolted round the north side of the house, shinned over the wall into the next-door garden, and climbed over the back wall of that into the lane, and went for another walk.”

“You didn’t wait to see the effect of your interference?”

“Why should I? I thought the babies would soon find out that it wasn’t one of them that had kicked the can, or rather get to accusing each other of doing it. I thought, anyhow, that it would put a stop to their foolishness.”

“Why should you want to put a stop to their foolishness, as you call it?”

“Wouldn’t you call it foolishness?” Bastable countered, quite irritated. “A dozen men and women acting like ten-year-olds! It simply annoyed me. That’s all.”

It seemed a straightforward enough story and straightforwardly told—granting the peculiarities of the young fellow’s character. But Burford could not leave it there, of course.

“The jumping into the garden and kicking the can was the only thing you contrived for hindering the game?”

Bastable stared at him. “What else do you imagine I did?” he asked.

Burford took a risk, perhaps. “You didn’t do any telephoning previous to entering the garden?” he suggested.

“No. Why should I telephone? To tell ’em I was coming to kick the can?”

Watching him carefully, but unobtrusively, Burford gradually let slip the story of the ’phone-calls to the two public-houses.

Bastable was delighted with the idea. “No, it wasn’t me,” he said frankly, “but I almost wish I’d thought of it. So that



was what these chaps were running up and down the road for! I bet some of them took the back lane for a short cut, too. It must have given the children something to think about—all that scurrying. No, it wasn't me that did the 'phoning, Inspector. But I would have done it if I'd thought of it."

"Leave it, then," said Burford. "Over which part of the front wall did you climb?"

"The south-east end. The shrubbery's thicker there, and there's a big yew that made a fine screen."

"Did you see anyone in that corner of the garden?"

"I had an idea there was somebody by the yew."

"You penetrated far enough into the shrubbery to see that?"

"I didn't actually see anyone, Inspector. I only had a feeling there was some one there. What happened was, I was going up towards the yew to see if I could spot where the can was. There were two people in the porch, I thought. From that I got the idea that the can was somewhere in the drive in front of the porch. So I nipped back to the wall again, crept at a crouch across the drive—so as not to show against the piercing of the gate—and came up into the centre shrubbery."

"Did you see anyone there?"

"Here again I had a feeling somebody was around. But then it didn't matter. I could see the gleam of the can in the middle of the drive, so I ran out and kicked it. I rather fozzled the kick, as a matter of fact. Perhaps it was better that I did, because it made a fine old row. That was the main point."

"Just how badly did you fozzle the kick?" asked Burford.

"Does that strike you as important?"

"I wouldn't ask the question, else."

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to be fresh with you, Inspector. I meant to lift the can, if I could, right into the shrubs and stuff by the side of the garage yard. Give ’em a job to look for it, you see? But I never could kick with my left foot, and the can sort of glanced off to one side, I thought.”

“Which side?”

“To my right. I sort of hooked it.”

“Did you see where it landed?”

“No. I sort of ran over it and past it.”

“How long were you in the garden altogether, do you think?”

“Two to three minutes.”

“No more than that?”

“Three minutes at the very outside.”

“Have you any idea of what time it was when you dropped over the front wall?”

“Not to a minute or two. It was just on the half-hour—half-past nine—on the Memorial clock up by the Park when I left there. I didn’t hurry coming down. It would take me about seven minutes. Then I waited a bit for the men to pass. Going by the Memorial clock, it would be about twenty to ten when I dropped over the wall, but then the Memorial clock is notoriously unreliable. Bit of District Council graft, that clock.”

“That is all you think you can tell me about your activities after leaving the hide-and-see party?” asked Burford.

“There’s nothing you’d like to add?”

“Not a thing, except a point that may help you with regard to time,” said Bastable. “After I dropped into the lane I walked to the Three Tuns—another Benskin house—good

beer, Benskins'. I was just in time to have half a pint before being turned out. The Three Tuns is just a mile from the house. I was there just before ten. I'd do the mile in about a quarter of an hour. That would make it close enough to twenty to ten when I dropped into the garden."

"Thank you," said Burford.

"Is that all?" asked Bastable, as though disappointed.

"Not quite," Burford returned. "I want a word or two with you about what happened before you left the party."

## § ii

"You make no bones at all," said Burford, "about your dislike for the man who is dead?"

"I made no bones about disliking him when he was alive," Bastable replied. "And I don't see any honesty in the *de mortuis* stuff. And it would be useless, too. If you're the man you're reputed to be, Mr Burford, you'd soon find out that I didn't like Ward. It wouldn't be at all in my favour, would it—supposing you really suspected me of doing him in—if you found me out in a pretence of not disliking him? The truth is, I thought Ward a slimy sham. I detested the man and all his works."

"Quite. I gathered that. Did you resent at all actively his horning in—as you called it—into the party during the afternoon?"

"Not actively. I didn't quarrel with Ward, if that's what you're after. I was a bit sore with Sally—that's my sister—for giving him a chance to come in. But that's Sally all over. She's so blasted kind to everybody that she's soft. Almost wet, if you know what I mean."

“Anyone else resent his coming?”

“Nearly everybody, I should think.”

“Who in particular?”

“Nobody in particular—except myself.”

“A question of degree,” said Burford. “Take the men first. Did Methven resent Ward joining the party?”

“More than he’d show. Mungo plays poker.”

“Arthur Wing?”

“Wouldn’t care much. Live-and-let-live fellow, Arthur.”

“Willie Blake?”

“Oh, definitely—but ineffectively. Makes keening and whimpering noises about things, Willie.”

“Tom Daldy?”

“Didn’t like it. But old Tom’s too sure of himself to bother much about a tick like Ward. Ignored him.”

“There was no indication at all of a quarrel between any of these men and Ward that you saw or heard up to the time you left?”

“None that I saw. None that I heard of,” said Bastable. “There was some attempt here and there to score off Ward in conversation, but I will say for Ward that he could hold his own. He always had an answer that looked, anyhow, like repartee.”

“What caused this general dislike for Ward?”

“Because he wasn’t genuine. Because when he wasn’t talking over your head—doing the literary swell—he was talking down to you. Because he was always romanticizing over the girls—with a wary glint in his eyes. Because he was a good bit older than any of us, and was out of place. Because

he was always trying to be young, but couldn't forget he was successful. Because he was successful with such tripe. Because he was a niminy-piminy, precise, pretentious bastard. Because he was a frightened lecher. Because he was a bloody tick."

Bastable took a deep breath and scowled.

"That cover enough ground for you?" he asked. "I can give you more if you like, Inspector."

"That's ample—quite ample," Burford replied hastily. "Let us turn to the girls of the party. You have given us a hint regarding your sister's reaction to Ward's joining the party. It was she who answered the 'phone and asked him to join you."

"That's right. But Sally hadn't any real use for him."

"What about"—Burford looked at his list and skipped a name—"Jacqueline Blake?"

"Didn't give a damn one way or another, but didn't like Ward. A bit keen on Mungo Methven, as a matter of fact."

"Vicky Rubens?"

"A nice little feather-head. Likes everybody to have fun. Couldn't see why everybody was down on 'poor Rupert.' "

"Joan Hibbert?"

"Joan the Silent. She saw through Ward if anyone did. Indifferent, I should say."

"Irene Daldy?"

Bastable's hesitation was but momentary. "No use for Ward at all. She was vexed with Sally for telling him we were all here and asking him over. And Irene didn't mind showing it. But she didn't have any quarrel with Ward. She just kept out of his way."

“You saw no quarrel between Ward and any of the other girls?”

“Nor heard of any,” said Bastable. “You’re barking up the wrong tree, Inspector, on this line.”

“Possibly,” Burford said good-humouredly. “I don’t mind how many wrong trees I bark up. Put your hands on the desk, Mr Bastable.”

“What f—— Oh, all right.” He placed his hands palms downward on the desk before Burford. “They’re grimy, but not bloody,” he said.

Burford said nothing, but turned each hand over. Then quite frankly he examined the cuffs of the shirt and of the sports jacket. Though the latter was something darker than the grey trousers, it still was of a light and very noticeable check pattern. Mr Binns’s observation was at fault a good deal. Bastable’s hair was almost flaxen.

“Thank you, Mr Bastable,” said Burford. “You may go now, but don’t go to bed just yet. I’d like to read your statement over presently and see if there is anything you can add to it.”

“I shan’t go to bed until my father turns up,” the young fellow replied. “Poor old chap! This is going to upset him a lot. May I join the children?”

“If you like.”

Bastable nodded and went out.

### § iii

“Well, my lad,” said Burford to Vanjohn, “and what do you think of that?”

“A lout,” said Vanjohn, as though checking a shudder. “A brainless lout!”

“Loutish, I grant you. Brainless—I’m not so sure. And the loutishness I’m inclined to think largely attitude. But I wasn’t asking you what you thought of Bastable. I was asking you what you thought of his story.”

“Rather meagre, I thought.”

“Yes, meagre,” Burford agreed, and quoted:

“But thou, thou meagre lead,  
Which rather threat’nest, than dost promise aught,  
Thy paleness moves me more than eloquence.”

Vanjohn frankly goggled.

“If I have any instinctive preference as regards evidence,” Burford went on, “it is for the meagre story rather than the circumstantial one. I don’t say I’d let the instinctive feeling prejudice me against an elaborate story, but I have found in general that the meagre ones are likelier to be true. I don’t think that Bastable is brainless. He has brains enough, anyhow, not to hide his dislike for Ward.”

“I thought that rather overdone, myself,” said Vanjohn —“not to say indecent, sir.”

“Yes, yes,” Burford returned absently. “It might be that.”

“Might be what, sir?”

“The double deception—using the truth as a means to deceive. You know the story of the two men in the train out of Berlin? One of them, a Jew, was very anxious to know all about the other, and kept asking him questions. At last the other fellow, wanting to be quit of the conversation and get along with his newspaper, told the Jew quite simply that he

was going to Cracow on business, to buy a lot of timber. ‘Yes, I believe you’re going to Cracow to buy timber,’ said the Jew indignantly, ‘but why lie about it?’ ”

Vanjohn looked puzzled, and Burford grinned.

“Well, perhaps not,” he said. “The essential point is that unless Irene Daldy and Bastable are conspiring together Bastable could hardly have killed Rupert Ward.”

“That was evident anyhow, wasn’t it, sir? Bastable, who it now appears was the one who kicked the can, was ahead of Irene Daldy in the centre shrubbery. And her story is that she parted from Ward alive.”

“Ah, yes, of course. You’ve missed part of the evidence, and your reading of the footprints in the shrubbery was wrong, Vanjohn. Irene Daldy was ahead of Bastable in the shrubbery. She knew it was Bastable that had kicked the can, and she was trying to save him from implication in the murder of Ward by declaring he was ahead of her. I got the truth out of her a moment ago.”

“Good Lord!” said Vanjohn. “But you just said, sir, that Bastable couldn’t have killed Ward.”

“I said he could *hardly* have killed Ward—not if he was in the garden for a mere three minutes at most. But, with regard to that, there’s another conflict in the matter of time. Bastable was seen climbing the wall into the garden. The man who saw him do so puts the moment at about twenty-five to ten. Bastable said he climbed the wall at about twenty to. By the way, we’ll see if we can check up on his arrival at the Three Tuns.”

Burford went out and found a man in the local detective body who knew the public-house and the landlord well. In



spite of the lateness of the hour he sent this officer to make an inquiry. Then he came back to Vanjohn.

“It hardly matters whether Bastable did arrive at the Three Tuns when he said he did, but we’ll check it on general principles. The point it may help to establish is when the can was kicked. That, on the evidence of Methven and the Blake girl and checked by the timed movements of Irene Daldy, was at 9.42. If we’re right there, and it is the best-supported bit of timing in the whole problem, and if Bastable got into the garden two minutes before that, let us see what Bastable had to do to kill Ward.

“He had, first of all,” argued Burford, pacing up and down the room, “to find his man. The fellow who saw him climb the wall says that Bastable rested on the coping only for a second or two, having run straight across the road and up. Certainly, from the position in which Ward was found, and supposing he dropped—which is most likely—right on being struck, Bastable could not have seen him from the top of the wall. The yew intervened. He could not know for certain that Ward would be on the other side of the yew. We can scarcely suppose that he agreed beforehand to meet Ward there. We know that he had no conversation with Ward before leaving the party in disgust over their childishness. He simply left the party in a lump. All of the party say so quite casually. Roger dressed them down *en masse*, they say, and went off in a huff. Then he had not only to look for Ward. Unless he was carrying that awkward knife about with him he had to look for that too. He had to find Ward, use the knife—if not find it—and get in to the porch shrubbery a little behind Irene Daldy. Then, having committed a very premeditated and singularly determined murder, he had to risk advertising his presence in the garden by kicking the can.”

“And do it all in two minutes, sir,” said Vanjohn.

“And do it all in two minutes,” Burford echoed.

“Reconstruct the murder on these lines, if you can, my lad.”

“The kicking of the can might have been a part of what you’ve called double deception, sir,” Vanjohn suggested. “He might have done that to cover his guilty purpose in the garden with an innocent one.”

“That’s pretty good, Vanjohn. But the fellow who thought that out is no brainless lout,” said Burford.

“Oh, I just said that, sir. His manner annoyed me,” Vanjohn apologized. “The Daldy girl—she attempted to shield Bastable. Was that out of mere friendship, or ...?”

“I fancy the pair are what’s called ‘keen’ on each other. You missed that too. Bastable certainly is keen on Irene. She does not know, she says, about her regard for Roger, but she gave several fair indications of liking him a good deal.”

“It might have happened this way, then, sir,” said Vanjohn. “Bastable, having dropped into the garden and worked up to the yew quietly, heard the passage between Ward and Irene Daldy. He may have heard sounds to indicate that Ward was trying to embrace the girl, and that she had to struggle away from him. With his avowed dislike for Ward and his detestation of the man’s ways—remember that he said Ward deserved scragging—he got into a rage. He happened to have the knife with him. Picked it up somewhere, maybe, and thought it too ugly a thing to be left lying about. In his rage he slipped round the yew and drove the knife into Ward’s neck.”

“Without saying a word?”

“Without saying a word, sir—unless the people in the porch are lying when they say they heard no sounds of anger or of a struggle from the yew patch.”

“They did not hear Irene’s encounter with Ward.”

“I can imagine that being conducted in whispers.”

“Can you imagine a fellow like Bastable, a loud grouser, not giving tongue to such anger as made him kill a man?” asked Burford.

“You yourself think Bastable’s grouching just an attitude, sir.”

“But such an attitude as has become second nature to him,” said Burford. “Taking it, however, that Bastable had sufficient command of himself to do the thing silently, are we to suppose that Ward had nothing to say in the matter? He had just parted with Irene Daldy when some one comes up to him, grabs him by the coat collar, perhaps—would he submit without protest?”

“If he thought it was somebody on the hunting side, or if he wasn’t sure, he would probably whisper. Or, again, what would hinder that Bastable should have come up from behind, put his hand over Ward’s mouth, and driven the knife in?”

“Position of the wound, for one thing, Vanjohn,” said Burford. “The arm round the face would cover the place of entry, it being on the left of the head. Bastable is right-handed.”

“But he might have used the knife left-handed, sir.”

“We’re getting too many ‘mights’ into the theory for comfort,” said Burford. “Have you troubled to examine the pattern of the footprints recorded by the local men in the yew patch?”

“I haven’t had an opportunity, sir.”

“Well, take a look at it now,” said Burford.

He came over to the desk and picked out a paper. Pencil in hand, he leaned over Vanjohn's shoulder and illustrated his points.

“All fairly definite, you see? Apart from the trampling round about the yew, there are three defined sets of prints, a woman's and those of two men. The prints of one of the men are noticeably smaller than those of the other. We may identify these as Ward's. He entered the yew shrubbery down by the gate—one track, which is lost in the mess about the yew. He was going up to the yew. The prints of the bigger man support Bastable's story. They begin by the wall where Bastable was seen to climb over, and they show at intervals right up to the porchway side of the yew, where, like Ward's, they are lost in the mess about the tree. But they are to be seen again in the opposite direction, taking practically the same line towards the gate as Ward did away from it. The woman's, Irene Dalby's, also take that same line. It is fairly well indicated in what order the imprints were made. First Ward's, then Irene Dalby's, then Bastable's. Keep that in mind, will you?”

“For the sake of simplification,” Burford went on, “we have left out of consideration such prints as are distinguishable otherwise—those more towards the house from the yew and a set which goes round the tree. We have Methven's, who acknowledged entering the yew patch, and Willie Blake's, who ultimately admitted having gone round the tree after Ward was found dead. The confusion of prints on the houseward side of the tree and a good way round it to the other side may be explained in part by the eddying about of the party come to see what was wrong with Ward, but also in part by probable movements by Ward to avoid being seen by Methven or the people in the porch. But though we can see

that Willie Blake did go round the tree—he moved counter-clockwise away from the house—there is no sign of Bastable’s big feet going round the tree at all. Which means, since in all probability Ward would be facing the porch or looking after Irene Dalby, that Bastable could not have stolen upon him from behind. He would have had to move round the tree in the opposite direction from that taken later by Willie Blake—clockwise, that is. Had he done that his prints would have appeared under Blake’s. If Bastable stabbed Ward he must have done so from the front.”

“Yes, sir. I see that,” said Vanjohn. “And the position of the body, as shown to us by Methven, would also indicate that he was facing the porch when he fell.”

“There’s that too,” Burford agreed. “Now, see what comes out of all those indications. If Bastable heard the colloquy between Ward and Irene Dalby he must from his position—since we know he didn’t dodge round the tree—have been seen by Irene as she left Ward. She must, in fact, have almost run into his arms. It is extremely improbable, the two being what they are to each other, that they would not have a word or two together. That would take up time. Now from the moment that Irene left Ward until the can was kicked a bare two minutes elapsed. We can be fairly certain of that. Which means, again, that within two minutes Irene and Bastable had to speak with each other, Bastable had to send her on in front of him, murder Ward, and follow Irene to kick the can. In all the circumstances,” Burford concluded, “I don’t think it could be done.”

“Suppose that Bastable heard some one on the other side of the yew when he dropped over the wall?” Vanjohn suggested. “He must have come over pretty close to the time when Irene was with Ward. And suppose that he crouched in hiding under

the shadow of the wall until Irene had passed out of the yew shrubbery?”

“You heard Irene’s rehearsal of the encounter with Ward,” said Burford. “It was, or it seemed so to me, completely natural both as to phrase and tone. I’m sure Bastable could not have heard it from the wall.”

“But, seeing Irene pass, he might have guessed what had happened.”

“We’re still up against the factor of time. Even then Bastable had barely a minute and a half to make up his mind to kill Ward, find him, do it, and get round into the centre shrubbery to kick the can. You must remember that he could not hurry through all that bush and stuff. The noise would have given him away to Wing and Miss Hibbert in the porch. Nor could Irene hurry for the same reason.”

“What if the fellow who saw Bastable climb the wall was right,” Vanjohn queried, “and Bastable was in the garden at twenty-five to ten?”

“It wouldn’t help us any,” said Burford. “It would only complicate matters.”

And to his subordinate’s astonishment he began to whistle a soft but cheerful little tune.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE HIBBERT GIRL

**BURFORD** whistled, not because he was easy-minded, but ‘for a wind.’

The conversation with Vanjohn was induced by kindness for the young officer, and not by any desire on Burford’s part to air his own views. Vanjohn, with his air of ‘doing it for a hobby,’ did not go down well with the older sort of officers. They called him, quite unjustly, “the Oxford pansy” and other names expressive of their perhaps over-elaborated contempt. And, remembering the antagonism which had met his own promotion to the Department, Burford had a fellow-feeling for the recruit. Hilary, it is true, with his sometimes unbearable spasms of loftiness, could provoke Burford to reprisals differing little, except in degree of brutality, from those provoked in the rougher types of the Department, but in general Burford had a mind for the loneliness that Vanjohn could hardly help experiencing. So that it was to give Vanjohn a feeling of being in the case that Burford discussed it with him.

As a fact, Burford had little use for the rather theoretical kind of discussion he had indulged in with Vanjohn. It was, he knew from the start, quite unlikely to produce any new factor in the case of which he was not himself fully aware. Burford had a profound distaste for the word ‘theory.’ He never cared to present a case to the Public Prosecutor in which the evidences, the facts, did not tell their own story either singly or collectively. The Public Prosecutor would hardly thank him if he did.

There was, so far, no absolute case against anyone in respect of the murder of Rupert Ward. There were facts which were suspicious, or rather which tended to arouse suspicion, but none which presented the clear-cut story that Burford was looking for. The facts contradicted each other too much.

It did not escape Burford's notice that Vanjohn, invited to reconstruct the murder of Ward on the assumption that it had been done by Roger Bastable, had begged the premise that Irene Daldy was in love with the grumpy young man. The premise was wanted for its lead to or its support for an idea which Vanjohn had rather failed to develop—the idea that Irene and Bastable shared the knowledge, if not the actual guilt, of the murder. The idea, in fact, that Irene and Bastable were in conspiracy.

This was an idea from which Burford's mind, better apprised than his subordinate's with the evidences, was inclined to balk no less than Vanjohn's. Burford had seen too much of murder in his police career ever to allow sentimental or instinctive considerations to cloud his judgment. The fact that Irene Daldy was attractive, nicely feminine, and to all appearances the normal English girl of clean ideals who would shrink from bloodshed and violence did not occlude the notion that she might be party with Bastable to the slaying of Ward. It did not occlude the notion, even, that she might be the principal. It was the weight of evidence that made Burford doubtful.

It was quite certain that Irene Daldy's story of having worked round the garden was true. Her footprints were plain enough in the fairly soft soil to prove it. And it was almost as certain that her progress round the garden had been made at the time she said. It was significant, too, that nowhere in the indications remaining of that progress was there any sign of



much haste on her part until after the point where, as she now confessed, she had first seen Bastable.

It was not until Irene came to her stand in the semicircular shrubbery that Burford had found any flaw in her story. He was as certain as he felt he need be that it had taken her just about nine minutes from the moment of seeing Methven to reach her place in the semicircular shrubbery. She might have taken more, but certainly could not have taken less, than seven minutes to get through with her encounter with Ward after her sight of Methven. So that it did not matter, the proof of Bastable's movements being what they were, how long Bastable had been in the garden. It was impossible that Irene and Bastable could have met *before* she encountered Ward.

Unless practically all the young folks of the party were acting in concert to deceive him it was fairly certain, Burford could feel, that the can was kicked at 9.42. It did not matter that in the experiment the time allotted for the conveying of Ward's body into the house had expanded a good deal. The time of the telephone-call to the police-station was fixed quite definitely, and expansion of the time consumed in carrying Ward into the house simply meant a reduction from those vital two minutes. It only made it more impossible that, first, Bastable could have murdered Ward, and, second, that he could have had any colloquy with Irene Daldy.

So that, on the assumption of Ward's death *before* the kicking of the can, the possibilities narrowed down to two:

- (a) that Irene herself killed Ward, or
- (b) that she found him dead.

There was, of course, a third possibility which merged upon the before-the-can-was-kicked assumption, and which tied up with (*b*):

(*c*) that Ward was murdered by some one outside the kick-the-can party altogether.

This was a possibility which Burford could not dismiss. He merely left it for later consideration.

Against the (*a*) and (*b*) possibilities there was the fact that, in spite of the hurry which she had shown in the repetition, Irene's footprints showed no signs of great haste on immediately leaving the yew-tree. From his own observation in the semicircular shrubbery it was plain enough to Burford that the girl began to run only after the kicking of the can. Had she been privy at all to the slaying of Ward it was very unlikely indeed that her footprints immediately on leaving the yew would not have given record of some agitation. For her to have moved with the comparative serenity that her prints indicated, a pause for thinking out a plan of action was argued. There was no time for this. Irene could not have hesitated for long without running into Bastable in the yew patch. And time was against this also, for they would not have passed each other without some sort of consultation. And time again was against the supposition that Bastable could have come upon Ward's prone body and—having seen Irene pass and suspected her—have formed a plan for protecting her. It would have taken him as long to examine Ward's body as to have killed him. It appeared altogether that Irene must have missed meeting Bastable by a matter of seconds. For in addition to the impossibility in time of their having met and consulted there was the fact—demonstrable from their

footprints—that they had entered the central shrubbery apart. Irene had taken a different line from Bastable. So much so that the crossing of his prints with hers occurred almost at right angles. In fine, if the prints told any story at all they told it in support of Irene's second version of what happened in the semicircular shrubbery.

The weight of such evidence as Burford had to chew upon being against ideas (*a*) and (*b*), it followed that it was in some degree against (*c*). The supposed outsider could not have murdered Ward until both Irene and Bastable were well on their way out of the yew patch. But, of course, idea (*c*) could not be dismissed for that reason alone. There was about one minute before the kicking of the can and five minutes after that in which an outside murderer could have committed the crime.

Against a tentative dismissal of Irene Daldy and Roger Bastable as possible murderers of Ward there was, then, failing further evidence of an upsetting kind, only the consideration that almost all the young folks concerned were in conspiracy. This, to Burford, seemed impossible. It was impossible that in the very short space of time it had taken him to arrive at the Laurels after Methven's call these nine youngsters could have concocted a story so coherent as a whole or so perfect in coincident detail. It was true that between the discovery by Methven of Ward's body and the 'phone-call to the police-station ten minutes had apparently elapsed, but in this there had been the business of getting Ward's body into the house, an operation which had occupied a much longer time in the repetition of it. With five girls reacting in their various ways to the tragedy there would be little chance in that time of arranging a story. And the same might be said for the few minutes before Burford and his men

had arrived. By then what had looked like a serious mishap had been proved a distressing fatality, and it was still more impossible that all five girls, to say nothing of all four men, could have been brought to a mental state fit for elaborating false evidence. For either Bastable or Irene Daldy to have been concerned in the murder it was needed that several extra minutes should be added to the time between the striking of the church clock and the kicking of the can, or rather that there should be a general lying all round with regard to positions when the clock did strike. In this respect the individual testimonies, Burford decided, were in too natural an agreement for possible fraud.

Irene Daldy and Roger Bastable, then, were for the moment ‘out’ as suspects.

## § ii

With Irene Daldy and Roger Bastable dismissed for the time being as suspects the case at once presented a quite different aspect. With Irene and Bastable as the principal suspects it had to be assumed that Ward had been stabbed before the kicking of the can, but if neither of them was guilty it had to be assumed that the stabbing took place, roughly speaking, after the kicking of the can.

The new assumption made the case nothing easier for all that six minutes instead of two were given the killer to do his work. Always premising that nobody of the party was lying, either individually or in pairs, practically all the eight members of it—apart from Irene, that is—were innocently accounted for during the greater part of the six minutes. Save for Arthur Wing and Joan Hibbert in the porch, they had all been well removed from the yew-tree shrubbery between the

kicking of the can and its replacement. After that latter point of time two minutes elapsed, it was said, before the discovery of Ward under the yew-tree. Four people claimed not to have moved at all, even, in the six crucial minutes. These were Willy Blake and Sally Bastable—under the steps from the dining-room to the garden—and Tom Daldy and Vicky Rubens—sitting by the tree in the garden's north-west corner. Mungo Methven and Jacky Blake were by the tennis-court when the can was kicked, and they remained still until they heard the rap at its return. In the remaining two minutes this last pair were working back along the south side of the garden to the yew-tree patch. Unless Methven, who left Jacky Blake outside the patch, went straight into it and stabbed Ward—quite a possibility, and one that Burford was not leaving out of consideration—then all these six could be accounted innocent. At all events, each one of them had a corroborated story which practically had to be accepted.

Two people remained—Arthur Wing and Joan Hibbert. Up to the point of the kicking of the can these two had been together for several minutes, but parted, of course, at that point of time. Arthur Wing bolted round the north side of the house, he said, after the (to him) unidentified person that kicked the can, and Joan Hibbert ran to retrieve the can. There was nobody to support Wing's statement. The Hibbert girl could say merely that she had an idea Wing ran to the north side of the house. She got off the steps of the porch before him and ran in the direction in which she thought the can had been kicked. It was considered among several of her friends that she had taken quite three minutes to find and rap the can. That this three minutes had, in the view of Methven and Jacky Blake, been reduced considerably in the repetition Burford

had well in mind. The reduction might have some significance.

It was to be remembered that of all the people known to be in the garden the Hibbert girl alone was in the front drive after the kicking of the can. She was alone in it, according to her own testimony, for the better part of five minutes. Three of these minutes, she claimed, were occupied in searching for the can, kicked, she said, right into the more formal garden patch west of the garage front yard. But Bastable, on the other hand, believed he fozzled the kick so badly that the can hooked off to the right—that is to say, towards the semicircular shrubbery from which he emerged. Bastable was quite definite about this. The conflict was enough, in spite of the support given by Arthur Wing to Joan Hibbert's version, to warrant some closer questioning on the matter. A muffed kick, such as Bastable quite clearly suggested, could have enabled Joan Hibbert to retrieve the can in a second or two. What was she doing in the remainder of the three minutes? Wasn't it possible that her reduction of the time in repetition had been induced by a fear that reproduction of the actual wait for the rapping of the can would give her away?

Burford glanced from his seat at the desk to where Vanjohn was working very absorbedly. He did not disturb him, but rose and went over to the door himself.

“Pass the word for Miss Joan Hibbert to come and see me,” he said to the officer outside.

The girl's manner, when she came in response to the summons, was completely self-contained. She stood for a moment by the door until the officer pulled it to, and it seemed to Burford that she straightened herself a little before she walked over to him at the desk. She was, Burford judged,

the sort of girl who had done well at school both in class and on the playing-field. He could see her as captain of the hockey team, much admired by her school-mates, and regarded by the Head as a 'good influence.' She was, as already said, sturdily built, and in that fashion good-looking enough. Her excellent complexion, a trifle shiny at the moment, had probably never had any outward care except that which lay in a free use of soap and water. Her stone-grey eyes, the colour of new-fractured blue whinstone, were slightly myopic, but quite plainly she prided herself on looking people straight in the eyes.

"Sit down, Miss Hibbert," Burford invited.

"Thank you."

"I judge that you are the sort of person who prefers that people would come straight to the point with you," Burford went on, "so I shall not waste time in preliminary fencing. You know by now, of course, that it was Roger Bastable who kicked the can on the last occasion?"

"Yes; he told us so a moment ago."

"You will understand that in a case like this—I need not tell you it is very complicated—one cannot afford to have even minor contradictions in evidence. In your statement you say that the can was kicked, as it now appears by Bastable, right among the shrubs to the left of the garage yard."

"Not right among the shrubs, Mr Burford. If I said that I was wrong. I had the idea to begin with that it had gone among the shrubs, and I searched among them; but it had actually rolled back or fallen behind a sort of dwarf box that lines the path. It was close to the corner beside the concrete of the garage yard."

“Bastable says he fozzled his kick and that the can hooked off to his right,” said Burford.

“It rattled as if it had had a glancing kick, Mr Burford,” the girl agreed, “but there must have been a lot of force behind it. If Roger says he fozzled the kick he probably only means that he failed to lift the can cleanly. I don’t know whether the can went off to his right or not. I didn’t see it go. I only heard it, and it sounded to me as if it bounced off the corner of the house into the fish-pond plot. At all events, I went up by the corner of the house to look for it first of all.”

Burford had the impression that she was fighting against an impulse to gabble. She was talking with what looked like an exaggerated care. He waited for a long moment or two in the hope that she would say something further, but saw the faint bulge of the tractor muscle of her jaw as she clenched her teeth.

“I have difficulty in reconciling the place where you say the can came to rest with the hook to the right that Bastable says he gave it,” Burford said argumentatively. “There is quite a fall in the drive on that side away from the house. Supposing the can had not been hooked enough to go into the semicircular shrubbery, it still would have a tendency, being hooked to the right at all, to come to rest either in the drive fronting the garage yard or in the yard itself, surely?”

The girl thought for a moment before answering.

“Yes,” she said at last. “One would naturally think so. But it may have hit something and have been deflected.”

“Hit what, for example?”

“I don’t know. If Roger spun it off towards the yard——”

“He suggests a spin into the semicircular shrubbery,” said Burford, intentionally exaggerating.



“—or even that,” she went on, “it must have hit something, and hit something hard, because it landed behind the dwarf box in the corner of the fish-pond plot.”

“Did you enter the fish-pond plot to look for it, Miss Hibbert?”

She hesitated perceptibly before answering.

“No,” she replied. “I looked for it from the path.”

“Though you thought it had gone clean among the shrubs?”

“Not kicked cleanly into the shrubs, Mr Burford,” she corrected him. “I never thought that or said I thought it.”

“You simply thought it had got among the shrubs, then, but not far enough into the plot to justify your stepping off the path. Is that it?”

“Yes.”

“When you heard the can kicked you ran down the porch steps and made at once for the corner of the house?”

“Yes.”

“Arthur Wing after you?”

“Yes.”

“Where did he pass you?”

“I haven’t an exact idea, Mr Burford. I think at the corner of the house.”

“He did pass you, nevertheless?”

“Yes, I know he passed me. I didn’t see him. I only know that he came running down the steps after me and along the front of the house after me. I suppose really I’m taking it for granted he passed me. I’d have noticed if he had turned back and gone the other way.”

“So that from the moment you reached the edge of the fish-pond plot until you found the can you were searching that twenty foot or so of border between the house and the garage yard?”

“I suppose so.”

“No, no, Miss Hibbert!” Burford said crisply. “ ‘I suppose so’ will not quite do there. You must know whether you confined your search to that border or went elsewhere. Did you go elsewhere?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Very well, then. You said in your statement that about three minutes elapsed between the kicking of the can and your rapping to indicate its return. Have you altered your mind on that point?”

“No. It must have been fully three minutes.”

“Do you know that in the repetition you cut down the time spent in looking for the can quite perceptibly?”

“I realize now that I did. I think really that I realized it immediately I rapped the can in the repetition. Mungo Methven says I cut the time down quite a lot—as much as half.”

“How did you come to do it?” Burford asked. “On other points you were at some trouble to be exact. I regarded you, in fact, as the most helpful of my witnesses.”

She coloured slightly, it seemed to Burford, but she did not look away from his steady gaze.

“I don’t know how I came to do it,” she said, not without hesitation. “I did know then where to find the can. I saw where your big officer kicked it. I did try to repeat my search down the edge of the fish-pond plot, but I suppose I must

have hurried. I—I'm sorry, Mr Burford—if—if my mistake put you out."

"That is all right, now that you acknowledge it," said Burford quietly. "But I'd like to be reasonably certain of the time spent in actually searching for the can. Methven and Miss Blake, whose evidence on this point there is good reason for trusting, declare for three minutes. You are in absolute agreement with that?"

"I say quite three minutes," the girl replied.

"Rather over than under?"

"That's my impression."

Burford was frankly puzzled. He had a feeling that the girl was frightened in acknowledging the long period of time between the kicking of the can and her return of it, and that she was only acknowledging it because she had to. In his first impressions of her he had thought her of the sort that is more painstaking than clever, a girl of more determination to learn than of actual intelligence. She would be, he imagined, a slave to duty, a doer of those things which she had been taught were right. She would be frank, not on the basis of reason, but because it was the nice thing to be, the admirable thing to be. She would hate to lie because, according to her absorbed teaching, no nice person lied. Yet, Burford felt, the girl was lying. She was even using her habit of frankness to lie, and she was using it well, intelligently. The indications that she was lying were too subtle to be defined. Burford could not say she lied because when she said so-and-so she looked that-or-the-other. She scarcely took her eyes off his, even when she hesitated in speech. She was brave, whatever else she might be.

If, as Burford imagined, she had curtailed the repetitive search for the can in a sudden panic it argued both bravery and intelligence that she confessed to having shortened the time. And her explanation of why she had done so had the merit of simplicity. As far as words went, it rang true. So did her apology for the mistake. Altogether, apart from the untrustworthy, because instinctive, feeling that Joan Hibbert was lying, there was only a slight exaggeration about her sticking to the original count of time, a tendency to overdo it, to create a doubt of her integrity.

Burford had to go warily. He was not in a position to charge Joan Hibbert with the murder of Rupert Ward. If even at the back of his mind he actually suspected her he had to remember that the suspicion was aroused by something which might have a quite innocent explanation. Burford did not flatter himself that it wanted keen intelligence to note that the girl, of all the party, had been alone in the front of the house and quite near to the yew-tree during at least four important minutes. It was quite likely that Joan Hibbert was aware of it too. And, being aware of it, it was likely enough that the knowledge would frighten her. The possibility was, then, that the fright had descended on the girl when she found herself alone in the drive fronting the house (and close to the spot where she now knew Ward's body was supposed to be lying) with a long three minutes or more to fill in. It was not even necessary that she should have realized how suspicion might easily fall on her to explain her panicky cutting down of the time. The mere loneliness of her situation might have effected that in the circumstances. But, taking it that she did conceive herself in peril of being suspected of murdering Ward, it was a fair explanation of why the girl, otherwise so likely to have slavishly copied her original movements, had scamped them

in repetition. It was a fair explanation for the indefinable falsity which Burford felt was in her manner as he talked to her.

Burford had to be fair to the point of splitting hairs. However much he might detest the 'theory' of how a crime might have been committed, he had no impatience about examining any possible theory whereby the odd conduct of a decent person suspected of it might be explained. He had to play fair. Unless it was his intention to charge Joan Hibbert with the murder of Ward, he had to accept her explanations as they stood, they being so feasible. Before he could set her questions with the idea of trapping her into admissions it was his duty—his suspicions being as they were—to give her warning that they might be used as evidence. But, aside from regulations, Burford would himself have wished the girl to know where she stood.

Archie Burford, as he had shown often enough in his handling of other cases, was capable of a ruthlessness that could make even the roughest sort of his fellows in the Department sit up. Without that capability he would hardly have reached, at his age, the position he held in the Yard. But it wanted always the special circumstances of detestable turpitude or cruelty before he called up his ruthlessness in dealing with a woman. No less than the ordinary run of decent men, the sight of a woman in distress—even of her own making—evoked pity in him. He detested having to frighten a woman in the course of his duty, however bad he might think her. So that, though he did want to know what Joan Hibbert was doing in the three minutes under question, anything approaching 'third-degree' methods to get it from her was impossible.

“Go back, if you will, Miss Hibbert,” Burford said gently, “to a couple of minutes before the can was kicked. Were you then in the porch with Arthur Wing?”

“Yes.”

“This in spite of the fact that you were supposed to be guarding the can?”

“Yes. I risked the chance of somebody running out and kicking it,” the girl replied. “I had just spied round the front drive and got back to speak to Arthur then—about two minutes before the can was kicked.”

“You didn’t enter any of the patches of shrubbery, you said, I think?”

“No. I didn’t go anywhere out of sight of the can.”

“And you didn’t see anyone around?”

“Nobody. I had a feeling that the game wasn’t being played by most of them—that they had grown tired of it. So I went back to talk to Arthur.”

“I take it that you peered into the yew-tree patch?”

“Yes.”

“And you saw nothing of Rupert Ward?”

“No. I didn’t see Rupert—or anyone,” the girl answered.

“Nor from the vantage-point of the porch?”

“No. I didn’t see anyone—not until I heard the rattle of the can and saw a shadow disappearing round the corner of the house towards the fish-pond. Arthur Wing was talking to me about the tennis-club—we’re both on the committee—and I was interested in what he was saying. I had my back to the can when it was kicked.”

“Then you ran to that corner of the house, and Wing passed you,” said Burford. “I’m fairly certain that you can sprint?”

he suggested.

“I have won prizes,” she nodded.

“I thought so,” Burford smiled. “And when you had found the can you sprinted back to the base with it?”

“Yes,” she said on the end of a breath.

“So that you were fully three minutes, on your own estimate, searching for the can. During that time, Miss Hibbert, did you see anyone?”

“No. I imagined I saw some one up towards the vegetable garden, but I cannot be sure that I really did.”

“And your search was confined all that time to the edge of the fish-pond plot between the corner of the house and the garage yard? You did not hunt anywhere else, and you did not leave the pathway?”

“It was confined to the edge of the pond patch, and I didn’t go anywhere else or leave the path,” the girl said firmly.

“So that if anyone had passed across the drive by the gate to the roadway from the garage you should have been quite plainly seen?”

It looked to Burford as if the girl gave a little jump, but she answered him straight away and steadily enough.

“That I don’t know. It would depend on what I was doing and what sort of background I had. I really don’t know.”

“Some one did pass, you know—and didn’t see you.”

“That, I suppose,” the girl said slowly, “would be Irene Daldy.”

“What makes you suppose that?”

“I know that every one else was behind the house. And, besides, I saw you and Irene down there just before I returned the can in the repetition.”

“Yes,” said Burford, “yes.” He considered her reply for a moment, then nodded. “What did you do after you returned the can?”

“I ran round the fish-pond end of the house and right up to where the vegetable garden starts. I hunted about there for a little, thinking I might spy Arthur again or the person who had kicked the can; then I heard Jacky Blake calling. I came back to the front of the house and heard that something had happened to Rupert Ward.”

“All right, Miss Hibbert,” Burford said, and rose from his chair. “That will do for the moment. If you will just wait for a second or two I’ll take you and have you show me where you found the can. Wait there, please. I’ll come back for you.”

### § iii

Burford went through to the kitchen premises to find Horlick, the butler-valet. He wanted the keys of the garage. He had not forgotten that the knife used to stab Ward was home-made, and he wanted to see if the garage contained any equipment by which the weapon could have been fashioned. He found Horlick in the kitchen with the cook and a maidservant who had come back from an evening out. Horlick positively jumped when Burford appeared at the kitchen door, and it was the butler’s jump more than Burford’s appearance that made the fat cook yelp with terror.

“I want the keys of the garage, Horlick,” Burford explained.

“Mr Bastable Senior took them this morning, sir,” the butler replied. “But I think you’ll find the door opens without them if you try. Mr Bastable doesn’t usually lock the garage when he’s taken the car out. He leaves the keys inside until he



returns. There's a knack in opening the door, sir. The latch doesn't come quite free of the catch unless you lift the half-door by the handle at the same time."

"Thank you, Horlick. Is there a light in the garage?"

"Yes, sir. The switch is by the doorpost, on the right. Shall I come and show you, sir?"

"No, thank you. I expect I can manage," Burford returned. "But let me have a word with you in the hall."

Horlick looked very uncomfortable, not to say scared, but jerked out an obedient "Yes, sir!" and followed Burford out of the kitchen.

"Tell me first of all, Horlick, did you wait at table during supper?"

"No, sir. Not as if to a regular dinner, sir. The food was cold, and the young people helped themselves. I only removed some of the dishes and plates and the used cutlery when rung for. And I took in coffee, sir."

"Did you hear any bickering or anything of a quarrel?"

"I heard a bit of argument going on, sir," Horlick replied, "but nothing out of the ordinary. They always argue as if they were angry with each other, sir, that lot. But I didn't hear anything you could call a quarrel."

"Take it generally, Horlick. From the formation of the party in the afternoon did you see or hear anything to indicate ill-will among the young people?"

"No, sir. Not a thing. Mr Roger wasn't too pleased at the idea of them playing hide-and-seek, but that's Mr Roger's way, sir. His bark is worse than his bite, as the saying is."

"Leave that, then, and come to another point," said Burford. "How was it that you took so long to answer the bell

when they were bringing in Mr Ward?"

"I—I just don't know, sir. I must have dozed off over my book, between sleeping and waking, sir. I thought the bell woke me with a start. I didn't realize they'd been ringing so long until they told me."

"What did you do after supper?"

"Why, I helped Cook to clean up the kitchen and that—what Lottie would do if it wasn't her evening out. Then I went to tidy up my own pantry, sir, and I picked up the book and fell to reading."

"That is all you did?"

"Yes, sir."

"And there was no movement about the house during that time?"

"No, sir. Not after the game started outside. Miss Sally told me not to put up the hall lights—that was all, sir."

"All right, Horlick. That will do."

Burford picked up Joan Hibbert, and they went together into the drive.

"I want to see you do, as nearly as you can remember, just what you did between the kicking of the can and your rapping of it," he told the girl. "The can is inside the house, but you can start when I give you the word 'Go!' "

"I'd better start from the porch, then?"

"Yes, take up the actual position, Miss Hibbert."

The girl went up the steps again and stood with her back to Burford. He gave the word, at the same time pressing the starter of his stop-watch. As the girl turned and leaped down the steps, then ran to the corner of the house, he set off at a run himself to the garage gate. He had had the hall light put

out for the experiment, so that conditions were practically repeated as regarded visibility. From the garage gate he could quite distinctly see the girl as she stooped over the edge of the path pretending to peer among the plants and bushes of the plot. She was distinct enough in her greyish frock to have been seen even by a person running past the gate.

Burford went up towards that corner of the plot at which she said she had found the can. The girl was working slowly along the edge of the plot, but with quick movements of her hands in parting the plants and bushes. She came at last to the corner.

“It was just about here,” she panted.

“Let me see,” said Burford. He switched on his pocket-torch, pulling back the focusing cap, so that the light was spread. “Just where was it?”

“I can’t say exactly to an inch or two, but just about here—tucked in behind this little hedge thing.”

“How did you discover it—by sight or touch?”

“Both together, I think. I think there was a faint gleam through the little foliage of the box. I must have seen it just as my fingers touched the can.”

“Very well, Miss Hibbert,” said Burford, pressing the stop action of his watch. “We’ll say you’ve already run back to the base and rapped the can. That will compensate for this little inquiry, eh?”

“It should be about right.”

Burford brought the watch under the beam of his torch.

“It has taken just ten seconds over two minutes,” he said, and switched off the light.

It almost seemed that in the sudden dark Joan Hibbert gulped.

“I’m almost sure I did everything just as I did it in the first place, Mr Burford,” she said chokily. “If it took just over two minutes now it must have taken just over two minutes then. It—it seemed ages at the time.”

“All right, Miss Hibbert,” Burford said kindly. “Go back into the house for a little, and I think presently I can let you and the others go home.”

## CHAPTER VII

### THE GARDEN STAIRS

**THERE** was no equipment in the garage such as might have been used to fashion the knife that had killed Rupert Ward. It was apparent that the Bastable car had nothing done to it in the garage but the most minor repairs. There was only a very small vice on the unhandy work-bench, and such tools as lay about were of the sort which properly belonged to the car tool-box. There was no buff-or carborundum-wheel of the kind Burford half expected to find.

The garage was in two divisions. One was kept reasonably clear for the car, and the other was used for storing firewood and the garden implements. In this second division there was a small carpenter's bench, littered with tools, toys, awkward-looking chips of wood, and ends of wooden billets with nails hammered into them without any apparent purpose. It was plain that the bench and the tools belonged to the Bastable small boy.

As he turned over the litter Burford came on a spoke-shave, between the blade and the body of which was a packing of awkward shavings. He noted idly that the shavings were of green wood, as if the spoke-shave had been used to strip the bark off a small branch of green wood. Burford was interested enough to sniff at the packed shavings. Having sniffed thoroughly, he pulled out some of the shavings and examined them closely. Whereupon he began to look among the litter of odd pieces of lumber and tree-loppings which lay about and under the bench. Out of this litter he picked up a green branch, about four feet long, which had been partially stripped

of its bark. There had been, indeed, some attempt to taper the thicker end of the branch off into proportion with the naturally diminishing end. The stripped end was fearfully hacked about with cuts that in places dug right into the central pith. Each end of the branch was awkwardly notched, and from one of the notches hung a length of cord. It was obvious that Master Bastable had been trying his hand at fabricating an archer's bow.

Burford grinned as he put the branch back under the bench. He switched off the light and went through to the other division of the building. He switched off the light there also, shut the door, and strolled over by the front of the house to the yew patch.

Torch in hand, he gave the tree under which Ward had lain a close examination. His surmise regarding Master Bastable's attempt at bow-making proved to be right. Moved, no doubt, by the common idea that the yew wood was the true wood for the good old English bow, Master Bastable seemed to have got his material from the old tree. His handiwork was manifest on several of its branches. And it had not occurred to the boy, apparently, to make use of the saw which was included among his carpentry equipment. He had been at the branches with a sharp cutting tool—a knife of some sort. What he had lacked was the strength of hand, and the patience, to carry to a satisfactory conclusion his attack on the thicker branches of his selection.

Burford went back to the house and into the room which he had turned into an office for himself. He took his seat again at the desk and pulled the reading-lamp closer to him, so that its rays fell more strongly on the knife lying on the pad. He turned the knife over and back again with a pencil and examined each side and edge of the blade very closely. Under

the thin smearing of blood that dimmed the blade towards the haft a series of brownish-green streaks could be seen running away from either edge. They were just the sort of streaks which would have been left on the blade from cutting through the sooty bark of a London tree. Especially if it happened to be of the gummy and tough fibre of a yew.

It seemed, then, as if one of the missing points of the case looked like being discoverable—the ownership of the knife.

“How are you getting along, Vanjohn?” Burford asked his assistant.

“Nearly finished, sir. Bastable’s statement is ready, and I have just a note or two to put on the garden plan.”

“Good work!” Burford commended. “We’ll have the garden accurately measured in the morning and properly plotted. Then we’ll have your stuff transcribed to the new one.”

He rose and crossed to the hall to find Crowther.

“Anything new, Joe?” he asked. “I think we may now let those that don’t belong to the house go home.”

“There’s just one thing, Archie,” the big fellow said. “Been a bit of an argument between the Bastable girl and the slight chap—Blake—about whether anybody moved or not on the stair down from the dining-room while they were sitting under it. From what they said it looks as if they didn’t think of it while you were taking their statements.”

“Confound it! Fancy leaving out a thing like that!” Burford said mildly. “All right, Joe. I’ll see the whole gang together. Get Vanjohn to bring his book, and put some one on the door of the other room who’ll see that nothing is interfered with inside.”

He went into the room, a sort of secondary drawing-room, where the hide-and-seek party was congregated. The only one absent was Irene Daldy, who had gone to bed. Burford did not waste any time in lecturing them, but got the story out of Blake at once.

There was no disagreement between Blake and Sally Bastable about the fact that there had been some one on the stairs a little before the last kicking of the can. What they could not agree about was whether the individual had gone up or down them. The stairs were of stone, and the person heard on them was light of tread. It was Blake who had the idea that he or she had come down the stairs. Sally Bastable could only say that the prowler was on the balcony affair, in front of the window, from which the stairs ran down.

Burford tried to get something definite out of them on the point of time, but all they could be sure of was that the thing had happened a minute or two before the kicking of the can.

There was nothing of enlightenment to be got on the matter from the other members of the party. The only ones who acknowledged having been on the dining-room side of the house around the time were Methven and Vicky Rubens and, of course, Irene Daldy. Methven and the Rubens girl not only denied having gone up the stairs, but had seen nobody on or about them. Neither Methven nor Vicky Rubens knew of the existence under the stairs of the alcove into which Blake and Sally Bastable had squeezed themselves. They had been content in passing to note that the opening under the stairs was apparently vacant. Then it had been made a rule of the game that nobody was to hide inside the house. The idea that anyone might hide in the dining-room did not occur to them.



Burford had to swallow his annoyance with Blake and Sally Bastable for their vagueness on the point of time. It might have been just a minute or several before the kicking of the can that they heard the footfalls.

There was no further point in keeping those of the party who had homes to go to out of their beds any longer, and Burford let them go. He detailed some of the local men to work in the morning on various investigations connected with the case, and had uniformed men posted to check interference with what work had already been done in the garden. Then he went back to his desk with Vanjohn and Crowther to check and tabulate the facts of the case as they stood, to consider the effect of the new if nebulous piece of evidence, and to wait the return of the younger Bastable boy with his father and mother.

## § ii

The stairs themselves revealed nothing to any purpose. They showed the marks of a number of feet, and there was a cake or two of the garden soil on the landing outside the window, but nothing in the least identifiable. The young people, Burford knew, had been in and out of the dining-room for drinks during the afternoon, and had gone that way into the house for supper.

Burford sent for Horlick. The butler could not be persuaded to occupy the chair on the other side of the desk from Burford. He said it was not 'his place' to sit in the study. He preferred to stand, if the Inspector did not mind.

"Very well, Horlick. Stand if you feel more comfortable that way," Burford conceded. "I want you, if you don't mind,

just to repeat your statement so that it can be written down. After that you'll have to sign it, you know."

"I don't quite know what I said, sir," Horlick pleaded. "What I said was in answer to your questions."

"That is quite true. But simply give an account of what you did this evening between the time that you cleared the supper-table and when you opened the front door to admit Ward's body."

Horlick summarized the answers he had already given to Burford regarding his movements. He was very nervous under his trained manservant calm.

"When you had cleaned up," Burford asked, "was there anything you had to return to the dining-room for?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Some of the plate and cutlery had to go back to the sideboard."

"The French windows giving on to the stairs were open, then?"

"Yes, sir. It was a question in my mind whether to shut them or not—I mean, lock them, sir—but then I thought that some of the young people might want to get into the house that way, and I left them open."

"Did you by any chance go out on the balcony?"

Horlick seemed to have some difficulty in remembering. He thought for a moment or two.

"Yes, sir. I did," he replied at last. "I just stepped out for a breath of air."

"And to see how the game was going, as it were?"

"That's it, sir. I wondered how the game was going."

"What sort of light was there in the dining-room?"

"None, sir."

“But it was quite dark, wasn’t it? How did you see to return the cutlery and the plate?”

“I left the door open. And some light came across the hall from the passage where my pantry is, sir. I had in mind Miss Bastable’s instructions about not putting on the hall light. I wasn’t in much need of light, sir. I think I could return the cutlery in the dark—knowing the house so well.”

“I see. You have been in Mr Bastable’s service here for some time?”

“Coming on for three years, sir,” Horlick answered.

“The light borrowed from the passage across the hall,” Burford asked—“would it cast a ray through the dining-room window?”

“Hardly at all, I should think. In any case, I only left the dining-room door open enough to show me the sideboard.”

“When you stepped out on the balcony did you see anyone about in the garden?”

“Nobody, sir. Nobody at all.”

“How long did you remain on the balcony?”

“Not more than a minute or two——”

“Try to be accurate if you can, Horlick. A minute? Two minutes?”

“I—I can’t be accurate to a second or two, sir. It’d be about a minute and a half, say. I don’t think it’d be quite two minutes, sir.”

“And in that time you saw no movement in the garden?”

“No, sir. None at all.”

“Well, now, you were on the balcony for about a minute and a half. You knew that there was a game of hide-and-seek

going on. But you saw nobody moving in the garden. Didn't that impress you in any way?"

"No, sir. I can't say that it did," Horlick stammered. "I don't grasp your meaning, sir."

"I merely mean this, Horlick," Burford replied. "Didn't you think it odd, a game of hide-and-seek being in progress in the garden, that you saw nobody about? I take it that, knowing what was supposed to be going on, you peered around a bit?"

"Well, naturally, sir, I——"

"You peered around a bit, thinking you would see some one. What came to your mind when you found the garden so still?"

"I thought that either the game was drifted to the other side of the house or that the sides were confabbing together in the porch—that maybe it was all over."

"Can you be sure that these were your impressions?"

"Oh, yes, sir. That's what came into my mind."

"That passed through your mind," said Burford. "Yet when I asked you a moment ago whether you stepped out on the balcony or not you had to think before you answered. Why?"

"I don't know, sir," Horlick said, in a flustered way. "I wanted to be sure. I've got a habit of stepping out on the balcony, sir—if I think there's nobody about the garden. I don't like to give my people the idea that I'm overlooking them——"

"Did you by any chance go down into the garden?"

"Oh, no, sir—no, indeed not, sir! I wouldn't do that!"

"Are these the slippers you were wearing when you stepped out on the balcony?"

“Yes, sir. I changed into them after I’d served the coffee, sir—after the young people went out.”

“Take them off and let me see them,” Burford ordered.

“Sir?”

“Take them off and let me see them,” Burford repeated.

“But, sir—I——”

Burford stretched out his hand for them.

Horlick’s reluctance to remove the slippers might have been because he knew that the great toe of one of his feet was poking well out of his sock. But, Burford saw when he examined the slippers, there was another possible reason. The soles were not exactly damp, but they had not the absolute dryness that might be expected in slippers that had been used solely in the house. The slippers, in fact, had the appearance of having been recently brushed. Burford ran the point of the brad in his pocket-knife along the welts.

On the inner curve of one of the slippers the brad-point pushed out a morsel of dampish soil to which a fragment of grass was clinging. Burford transferred the scrap of soil to a clean sheet of paper. The grass was green and fairly moist.

“Look at this, Horlick,” Burford said. “Do you still say you didn’t go down the stairs into the garden this evening?”

Horlick had gone pale. He peered at the morsel on the white paper.

“I still say it, sir. I only stepped out on the balcony, sir,” he said, in a trembling voice. “I give you my oath I didn’t go into the garden.”

“But you can see what I have here?”

“Yes, sir—a bit of garden dirt with a little grass-blade sticking to it.”

“How would you explain that if you didn’t go into the garden? The grass-blade and the soil are quite damp.”

“I really don’t know, sir—unless—unless I picked it up somewhere. I do know that I didn’t go into the garden——”

“Nor brushed your slippers this evening?”

“No, sir. I’d no cause to brush them.”

Horlick’s face was grey. He gasped, and put out a hand to grasp the back of the chair in which he had refused to sit.

“Steady, man!” Burford said quietly. “You are all right if you are not holding anything back. Sit down, and take your time over it.”

“Thankee, sir—I think I will now....”

He fell into the chair. Burford gave him a moment or two to get a grip of himself. But the man was badly scared.

“The slippers look as if they had been brushed quite recently, Horlick,” Burford said presently, “and they seem dampish for slippers which have not been outside the house. But there might be quite an innocent explanation. Think back a little. How could you have got your slippers damp? How could you have got this soil and grass into them?”

Detective-Constable Vanjohn, at his end of the desk, looked from the butler’s face to Burford’s in no little bewilderment. He felt that Archie, having worked up a good case against the manservant, was letting it slip from him. If ever there was guilt in a man’s face it was in the butler’s, Hilary thought. Of course the fellow had been in the garden! What was the use of giving him a chance to think out an innocent explanation for the soil and the grass? What was the use of making that telling point about not remembering whether he had stepped out on the balcony or not, when he remembered wondering why there was no movement in the garden, only to go soft

with the fellow on the first definite clue? Hilary, though he had some pity for Horlick in such a trap, thought the professional move at such a moment was to be crisp and ruthless. He felt very impatient with Archie.

“The damp—the damp, Mr Burford, sir,” the butler said with difficulty, “I might have got it in the scullery when helping Cook to wash up. I know that it was wettish underfoot. Cook slopped a pan of water on the floor. As for the bit of garden dirt ... Oh, I’ve got it, sir!”

The explanation came in a rush.

“It must have come off the door-mat inside the dining-room window, sir!” Horlick said. “The young people were in and out all the afternoon, and they must’ve picked up a worm-cast or that beside the hosepipe. I recollect now wiping my feet on the mat inside the dining-room windows. Yes, I did that, sir. I remember doing it. I had a feeling that something was clinging to my slipper, sir!”

“Which slipper?” Burford asked. “Can you remember?”

Horlick went through the motion of wiping his feet as he sat. “The right foot—the inner side, sir——”

“Yes,” said Burford, “yes, Horlick. All right. Sit there a moment or two. I want to look at something. I’ll be back in a little.”

Burford went through to the dining-room and had another look at the slate slabs of the balcony and at the mat inside the windows. Then he went across to the butler’s pantry. He spent a moment or two examining the floor, then, leaving the light in the passage to the pantry switched on, he went back to the dining-room. It was perfectly plain that, with the door of the dining-room left slightly open, enough light came across the hall to show up the sideboard. With the door still open

Burford crossed to the balcony windows again, stepped out, and went down the stairs. From the garden he looked up to study the effect of the faint light in the windows.

He entered the house again and returned to the butler's pantry. He had picked up a pair of Horlick's boots when another idea struck him. He found his way to the now deserted kitchen—the cook and the maid had apparently gone to bed—and had a look at the scullery. It was quite obvious even then that earlier on in the evening the scullery floor had been wiped over.

Burford went back to the room where he had left Horlick with Vanjohn.

“I shall have to keep your slippers for a little, Horlick,” said he, “but I have brought you what look like a pair of your boots.”

“Oh, thank you, sir!” Horlick said gratefully. “I was ashamed—that hole....”

Burford smiled. “I know,” he said. “I've been out of countenance at my bootmaker's myself.”

He returned to his chair at the desk.

“Let's see, now, Horlick,” he began again on his examination. “I'd like to establish as near as possible what time it was when you stepped out on the balcony. Have you any idea yourself?”

“I'm afraid not, sir. It might have been about half-past nine or so.”

“What did you do after leaving the balcony?”

“I pushed the French windows to and went across the hall to my pantry. I did a bit of tidying up, then sat down to my book.”



“How long do you think you had been reading before the front-door bell went?”

“Perhaps about twenty minutes, sir. I don’t really know. I dozed off, and it was the bell that woke me up.”

“That was at about five minutes to ten, we know,” said Burford. “How long did it take you to do your tidying up?”

“Just a minute or two. I was sort of reading my book at the same time as I was putting things away. It was lying on the shelf. I’d look at a bit, then put something away and come back to the book. I was dawdling, sir.”

“Did you hear anything out in the garden, after you got back to the pantry, to indicate to you that the game was in progress?”

“I heard the can being kicked, sir.”

“How soon was that after you got back to the pantry?”

“A minute or two, sir. I hadn’t sat down to my book.”

“Did you hear any other noise from the garden?”

“No, sir.”

“The door of the pantry was open?”

“Oh, yes, sir. Window and door both open.”

“How long was it after you heard the can that you sat down to your book?”

“A minute or two, sir.”

“You read for some time before you dozed off?”

“I couldn’t really say, sir. But it couldn’t have been long. I don’t remember that I got very far on with what I was reading.”

“*The Pickwick Papers*, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, sir. I had just got to where old Tony was sitting on the stairs in the Fleet shouting ‘Weller!’ at the top of his voice. I don’t know how I fell asleep at that bit. It always amuses me.”

“It amuses me too,” Burford admitted—“that and Tony’s piano alibi.”

Horlick’s eyes lit up and his face was wreathed in smiles. Then suddenly he became serious again.

“Yes, sir,” he said, and looked down at his hands.

There was a moment’s silence.

“Tell me, Horlick,” Burford said suddenly, “have you ever seen *that* before?” And he tipped the knife that lay on the pad before him over with his pencil.

The butler, looking up to see what Burford meant, recoiled. He looked sick.

“Tha—that, sir?” he stammered. “No, sir—no, I’ve never seen it before.”

“Had you had at any time any close contact with the man who was killed by it—Rupert Ward?”

“N—no, sir, I——” Horlick struggled to say. “I have only seen Mr Ward here at odd times—as a guest, sir.”

“All right, Horlick. That will do,” said Burford. “Have you any idea at what time Mr Bastable Senior will be back?”

“He should have been back before this, sir—by a good time. But he must have been delayed. Mrs Bastable doesn’t like David—that’s the younger son, sir—to be out as late as this.”

“Very well, Horlick. You may go now.”

“Thank you, sir.”

With the ends of his trousers caught up on the ears of his unlaced boots, Horlick made an almost dignified exit.

§ iii

“I think, Vanjohn,” said Burford, “that we must find out a little about Mr Horlick.”

“Do you think he *was* in the garden, sir?”

“He might quite easily have been—and at about the right time too,” Burford admitted.

“Could he have got that bit of grass and soil from the stairs or balcony, sir?”

“Very easily. In fact, that was my first idea of where it had got into the welt of his slipper. That, or from the mat by the dining-room window. I don’t think it’s important.”

“Not important?” Vanjohn echoed.

“Not by itself. I think Mr Horlick is concealing something \_\_\_\_\_”

“The fact that he murdered Ward?”

“It might be; but I don’t know.”

“Could he have done it, sir?”

“Better than anyone, Vanjohn. He had a longer time at his disposal than anyone, and a practically clear field. At the time when we may suppose he stepped out on the balcony—say, a couple of minutes before the can was kicked—there was nobody on that side of the house at all. Irene Daldy was parting with Ward under the yew, Bastable was about to drop over the wall. Methven and the girl Rubens were up by the tennis-court, possibly at a point where the angle of the house hid the dining-room window from them. Horlick had seven minutes to get to the yew-tree and kill Ward. After that he had only to work his way up the south side of the garden and wait a convenient moment for stepping across to the stairs up to the dining-room. True, he left no definite marks of his

progress in the soil of the garden, but part of these may have been obliterated by the crowding of the party into the yew patch to see about Ward, and he may have been lucky in keeping to the track used by Methven or by others in working up that part of the garden previously. He would make little impression with those soft slippers of his. But we'll have another look. If for some reason—and it is likely he had plenty—he had to lie doggo until the bearer party was well on its way to the house with Ward's body his delay in answering the bell may be accounted for.

“I am not so sure,” said Burford, “of Horlick's story about dozing off. He admits hearing the can being kicked, but denies hearing it being rapped. And he says nothing of hearing the shouts that called the party in because something had happened to Ward. He says he was on his feet when the can was kicked. It doesn't sound true that, reading a favourite passage in *The Pickwick Papers*, he sat down and dozed off within a minute. What's the report, actually, from the local men about the footprints in the south fringe of the garden above the yew?”

“From the yew patch to a good way up the ground's a mess. Irene Daldy's prints are clear because she was so close to the wall, and so are Methven's because he kept so near the border,” said Vanjohn. “The others were made, presumably, in the earlier half of the game.”

“We may find a distinctive mark or two made by those round-soled slippers,” Burford murmured, “but I doubt it. Even if I did find them I'd still be puzzled.”

“In what way, sir?”

“How the devil Horlick, or Miss Hibbert, or anybody else under suspicion could know that it was Ward beside the yew!”

said Burford. “Possibly it could be seen from the dining-room window that there was some one by the yew, though it is very doubtful indeed. And possibly it might be determined from the porch that there was some one by the yew. But that from either point it could be determined that the some one was Ward—impossible. Short of a rendezvous with the man, I cannot see how anyone could know he was there, all handy to be sneaked up to and murdered. With the exception of Methven, who may have noted Ward in passing through the yew patch the first time and have determined to come back and kill him, the difficulty applies to all the party.”

“Methven would have had to be pretty quick, sir,” said Vanjohn.

“A few seconds would do, given determination.”

“But wouldn’t Ward have been breathing still when the others came up?”

“What’s the odds if he were?” Burford asked, half impatiently. “They all thought he had fallen and bled his nose, knocking himself unconscious. He would have been dead before they got him into the house.”

“It’s a tangle, sir.”

“A pretty tangle—and not a single thing to pin on,” said Burford, with a frown. Then he smiled, and added, “Yet!”

Vanjohn opened his mouth as though to say something, but he changed his mind apparently. He was given no time to alter his mind again, because there came a knock on the door. The officer on guard outside poked his head round the door edge.

“Mr Bastable Senior has arrived, sir,” he announced, “and he’d like to see you.”

“Bring him in, Clumber,” said Burford, and he rose from his desk to greet his willy-nilly host politely.

## § iv

Mr Bastable, as the father of two such hefty young people as Sally and Roger, was something of a surprise. He was a little cock-robin of a man, with all the robin's perkiness of movement and cant-headed way of regard. He was singularly bright of eye, and the sleek brushing back of brown hair off his forehead, together with the neat bulge in the line of his chest and abdomen, increased his birdlike appearance. He strutted, however, like a wagtail when the expectation was to see him take a double-footed hop.

“Good God—good God!” he ejaculated. “Policemen—policemen! What's all this—what's all this? Who are you, sir, who are you, sir?”

Burford explained who he was.

“Good God—good God!” said Mr Bastable, and made a double question of wanting to know what it was all about.

Burford explained what had happened, and how it came that he was in possession of Mr Bastable's study. Mr Bastable was appalled. He made a birdlike retreat for a step or two, then strutted round in a sort of figure of eight.

“Terrible—terrible! How did it happen—how did it happen? My wife will be most upset—most upset!” he exclaimed. “I must tell her. This is dreadful—dreadful!”

He strutted to the door, and called into the hall, “Sophie! Sophie!”

His wife came at once. She was a head and a half taller than her husband, and was a sparely built woman at that. Her face, which, one would guess, wore normally an expression of tired placidity, was full of concern.

“My dear John!” she said, as if the burden of the distress fell upon her husband. “Horlick has just told me. Dreadful! That poor Mr Ward.... Who could have done such a thing?”

“This is Detective-Inspector Burford, my dear,” Bastable explained. “That’s what he is here to find out. We must give him every facility—every facility. Dreadful thing to come home to—dreadful! After such a pleasant afternoon and evening. In our garden! Where’s David? Where’s David? Gone to bed?”

“Horlick is giving him a glass of milk and a biscuit.”

“He mustn’t hear of this. Get him to bed at once, Sophie!”

“I’m afraid he has already heard something of it,” said Mrs Bastable. “Horlick got it out before I could stop him. And now we’ll have to tell him. It will be the quickest way to get it out of his head. He’ll never be done asking questions if we don’t.”

“I’m sorry,” Burford intervened, “but I must ask the boy one question—and that may lead to two or three. Is he so very young, Mrs Bastable?”

“He is nearly twelve.”

“What question—what question?” snapped Mr Bastable.

“Perhaps you—or Mrs Bastable—might be able to tell me,” said Burford. “It is the question regarding this knife.”

“Good God—good God! Is that the—— What a horrible-looking weapon!”

“Yes, this is the knife that killed Ward. I have an idea that it belongs to the boy,” said Burford.

“Impossible—impossible!” exclaimed Bastable. “What would David be doing with a thing like that?”

“That’s just the sort of thing David would like to have,” said Mrs Bastable quietly. “He’s very much at the wild Indian stage, Mr Burford. But I have never seen it in his possession. I’d have taken it from him if I had.”

She quite calmly examined the knife for a moment, then turned away with a shudder.

“Could I see the boy?” asked Burford.

“And show him the knife? Why, he’d have nightmare!” said Bastable.

“I fancy David is not so impressionable,” his wife said, in her quiet way. “The things he reads! I have to take them away from him—they make my blood curdle. I’ll fetch him, Mr Burford.”

She went out, and in her absence Mr Bastable fired questions at Burford. Had he a clue? Was he on the track? Who had been of the hide-and-seek party? Of course, it was none of these that had murdered Ward. Burford answered as best he could.

Mrs Bastable came back with the boy. He was a fair-haired, good-looking youngster, with a sturdy build that promised to develop into the fine physique of his elder brother. He came in with no reluctance, carrying a glass of milk in one hand and a big half-bitten biscuit in the other. He stopped midway between the door and Burford, and regarded that officer with an astonishing pair of brown eyes. They were perfectly candid.

“I’ve heard about you,” he said through a mouthful of biscuit, and with a nod to Burford. “You’re Burford of the Yard.”

“That’s me. You’re David Bastable?”

“That’s me.”



Burford sat against the desk, hiding the knife. “I want to know, David,” he said, “if you know anything about a home-made dagger or knife. It is about eight inches long in the blade, and that’s made from an old file. The blade is stuck into a plain handle like a bradawl handle.”

“Have you got it? Let me see it!”

Burford, with an apologetic glance at the parents, stood away from the desk. Young Bastable came forward eagerly. “Golly!” he said, taking a bite of biscuit, then a swig of milk to wash it down. He gulped. “It has blood on it! Say, Inspector, is that the knife that was used for——”

Then he shook his head, took another bite of biscuit and another swig of milk. He looked up at Burford and tried to look ‘tough.’

“I’m not squealing, Inspector,” he said.

Burford took his cue. “That puts me on a spot,” he said, wondering if he had the phrase right. “I sorta thought I could depend on you, David. I thought you were on the level. But I’ll hand you this: it isn’t your own skin you’re thinking of. If the knife was yours you’d spill it quick enough.”

“You bet.”

“I thought so,” Burford nodded. “Well, it’s this way, fella. If you put me in a jam, so that I’ve got to go gum-shoeing around for the owner of the knife, I’m liable to think things that ain’t so. What I mean, fella—you’re doing the pal that owns the knife no good. I want to corral the killer that used the knife, not the guy it belongs to, see? You’d better come clean. Whose is it?”

“On the level?”

“On the level,” said Burford.

“Well, it’s Billy Daldy’s stiletto. Billy made it himself.”

“Using it to make a bow, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, and wouldn’t lend it to me,” said David.

“When was this? This morning?”

David nodded.

“I see,” said Burford. “And he just left it knocking around for anybody to pick up?”

“No, he took it with him—home.”

“Better tell me, I think, when you last saw the knife. It’ll help a lot.”

“It was this morning—before lunch. Billy and me were making bows——”

“David had one with him this afternoon,” Mrs Bastable put in.

David cast a reproachful look at his mother. “I wanted Billy to have lunch in our house. We were lunching early because I had to go with Father and Mother down to Godalming. But Billy said he was going home for lunch. I went in because Mother was calling me to get washed and change my clothes. I left Billy in the garden.”

“So that you didn’t actually see him taking the knife away?” Burford suggested.

“What difference would that make?” asked David, not without scorn. “I thought you were a sleuth!”

“Wait a bit, and let’s see if I can work it out,” said Burford, and pretended to ponder. “You’re betting he wouldn’t leave it here, knowing how much you wanted it. He wouldn’t even lend it to you.”

“You’ve got it,” said David.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE BUTLER'S MOVE

**HIS** investigations, Burford saw, were practically at an end concerning the Laurels and its occupants. At least, for the time being. There was, he felt, nothing more to be got out of the members of the hide-and-seek party. They had told their stories, and unless he could come upon some further piece of evidence that might prove illuminating he had to accept them.

On these stories, however, and always providing there was no conspiracy, he had to dismiss as possible murderers of Ward the following:

Sally Bastable, Willie Blake, Tom Daldy, Vicky Rubens, Arthur Wing, Jacky Blake.

There were left, therefore:

Mungo Methven, Joan Hibbert, Horlick.

Burford had been inclined to dismiss, as we have seen, Irene Daldy and Roger Bastable. But these two, if the Bastable boy's idea—that his friend, young Daldy, had taken the knife home with him—could be believed, came back again into the picture. Certainly Irene Daldy came back. In spite of the awkward factor of time it was barely possible that Irene could have killed Ward and yet have avoided meeting Roger Bastable in the yew patch. On the assumption that the knife had been brought back to the Laurels from the Daldy home in the afternoon who more likely than Irene to have done so? The trouble was that on this assumption it had to be further assumed that Irene knew Ward was likely to appear at the Bastables'. And then it was necessary to say that her

annoyance at Ward's being invited by Sally was a pretence. Irene, however, knowing Ward's habits, might have been aware there was nothing more likely than that the man would be looking for her in the afternoon.

Burford had to look at the matter from all possible angles. With suspicious circumstances telling against so many people, none of which he could eliminate, he had to keep even the unlikeliest threads to the tangle labelled, as it were, in his mind. No matter how much the time factor seemed to set Irene Daldy aside as a suspect, a matter of seconds, together with the possibility of the knife, dragged her in again. It was admitted, not only by Irene herself but by others, either openly or in hints, that Ward had been chasing the girl. What was to prevent that Irene, who had gone off alongside Ward to the fish-pond patch at the second part of the game, had made a rendezvous with him at the yew? What was to prevent that she had either carried the knife with her or even have left it in the yew itself, with the determination of ridding herself of this man who, quite possibly, had some hold on her?

One of the first things Burford had to do, therefore, was to see the boy Billy Daldy and discover what he had done with the knife that afternoon.

With regard to the other three suspects, Horlick, Methven, and Joan Hibbert, there was only one other immediate reapproach to the case, or cases, which might serve to give light. That was from the motive for the murder. The relations of all three, as of Irene Daldy, with the murdered man would have to be ferreted out.

A start in this direction had already been made. By the morning there would be a number of men in the district making inquiries regarding Ward's contacts in the past with

the members of the hide-and-seek party. And already a couple of trusted men were in possession of Ward's rooms, going through his papers. Burford had seen to that immediately it became apparent that Ward had been murdered.

The consideration that the murder had been done by some one quite outside the hide-and-seek party, and that the messages which had brought men hurrying past the house from both public-houses so close to the time of the murder were part of the plot, was also being attended to. It would mean the patient interviewing of perhaps scores of public-house customers, but in patience Scotland Yard was, above everything else, well stocked.

Burford did not leave the house until he knew he had everything in train. With Vanjohn and Crowther, owing to the burglary scare in the district and the short-handed condition of the local staff, he had been on his feet since the early morning. From Bastable Senior he had extracted what information the City merchant had about the butler. Horlick's references were good. But for a period of War service, during which he had been batman to officers of high rank, he had been a manservant all his life, beginning as boot-boy in one of the bigger houses near the Surrey village where he was born. Mr Bastable gave the man an excellent character. Burford gathered, though Bastable did not say so, that though Horlick had been in establishments where he had little more to do than give dignified service he had seemed happy enough in the Laurels, where he was required to do work that was quite outside a butler's province. An honest, decent, sober, good-tempered, and willing servant, said Mr Bastable, with his habitual repetitions.

Burford was at some pains to examine the soil in those parts where, if Horlick had been in the garden, the prints of

his slippers would possibly have been distinguishable. There were marks which might have been made by Horlick's slippers, but none so definite that Burford could rely upon them. As far as this side of the investigations went, Horlick might have been in the garden—and he might not.

“That'll do,” Burford said to his two henchmen. “We can do nothing more to-night. I'll run you both into town and drop you somewhere handy for getting home. I'm seeing Superintendent Greenlea before breakfast in the morning, so I won't be able to pick up to bring you out again. Get out as early as you can make it, and I'll join you at the station. But you, Joe, you can see what's come in, and if there's any line you think wants picking up go to it and leave a note for me. You stand by, Vanjohn. I shall want you with me. Got it?”

Both men said they understood, and Burford bundled them into his Bentley. He made the routine call at the local station, then headed for the West End and bed.

## § ii

Superintendent Greenlea, clad in a flaring dressing-robe of a tartan which would have made even the hardest Highlander shudder, gave it as his opinion that Archie's case was a ‘twister.’

“But there it is, Archie,” he said. “You've got to take it as you find it, twister or not. I can't see that you've missed anything, and if I said that this or that was your best bet I'd only be guessing.”

He ran his fingers through his grey hair, still wet from the full bath-sponge of cold water he had squeezed over his head as a temporary freshener, then gazed at his wet fingers as if in astonishment.

“I’ll be sneezing presently,” he said. “Fetch me a towel from the bathroom—there’s a good boy!—while I just have another look at your notes.”

Burford went out as requested and came back with the towel.

“Thanks, son!” his chief acknowledged, and, still glaring at Archie’s notes, fell to scrubbing his head vigorously. “It’s a twister, Archie,” he repeated, “but I don’t need to tell you what to do first. The first thing you’ve got to do,” he went on, “is settle about that knife. If the boy took it home with him your case is finished. No grown-up person carries that sort of thing about with them except for a purpose. But if he didn’t—well——”

The Superintendent reached mechanically for the box of cigars on his desk, picked one out, stuck it between his teeth, muttered hastily, “No, dammit! Not before breakfast! What am I thinking of?” and threw it back into the box again.

He turned round and caught Burford in the act of grinning. “What you grinning at, my lad?” he demanded. “Let me tell you, you got nothing to grin at here!”

“You and those dreadful Flor de Cabbagios,” said Archie.

“You and your pansy cigarootos!” said the old man. “Would you believe it, Archie? Doctor says I smoke too much!”

“I’ll believe he thinks so,” Burford returned. “But he’s wrong. It’s quality, not quantity, that’s the matter with you, Chief. These things would kill a mule.”

“I want none of your lip at this time of the morning,” said Greenlea. “I’m no mule.”

“That follows. You’re alive. Your cigars would kill a mule. You’re no mule.”

“Meanin’?”

“That you’re a hardier animal—a singularly tough old man.”

“Atcha!” said the old boy. He had a great affection for his ‘pup,’ as he called Burford, and he was glad that Burford had an affection for him. But unless he was absent-minded he shied from any manifestation of it, and became grim. “You make a muck of this case, my lad, and you’ll find me tough enough.”

“I’ll do my best, Chief,” said Archie.

“You’ll do better than that, or I’ll sort you!”

“All right. I’m on my way,” Archie grinned. “I’ll ’phone you if anything develops, sir.”

“Mind you do. Anything you want...”

“Thank you, sir.”

Burford had reached the door when a word from Greenlea stopped him.

“Take the evidence for no more than it’s worth, Archie,” his chief warned him. “If nobody could get near Ward in the time then it was suicide—in spite of what the surgeon or you think. It might even’ve been an accident of a queer kind. You’ve got no case against anybody as it stands. But there,” he finished, “I’ve never known you go off at half-cock. Good luck, son!”

“Thank you, Chief. Good morning! Have a good breakfast—and don’t incinerate more cabbage-leaf than you can help!”

It was still more than half an hour short of nine o’clock when Burford reached the police-station in the northern suburb, but Sergeant Crowther was already off on inquiries—“anent that pub affair,” as his somewhat quaint note put it. Vanjohn was standing by.



“Had your breakfast, Vanjohn?” Burford asked.

“I had a cup of tea, sir. Made it last night and kept in a thermos.”

“That will hardly last you all morning,” Burford said. “I’m going round to have a talk with the Daldy youngster, and I won’t want you for a little. Give yourself some bacon and eggs. I’ll come back here for you.”

“Very good, sir. Thanks.”

There was nothing to keep Burford in the station, so he went off at once. He quickly found the Daldy house, a comfortable place, more modern, though considerably less in size, than the Laurels. The family, apart from Irene, who was still with the Bastables, was at breakfast when Burford arrived. How Burford’s investigations overnight had centred on the daughter of the house had reached them, and his appearance had the effect of at once scaring them and making them resentful. If it had been left to Mrs Daldy Burford would not have been allowed to see the boy Billy. The mother put her arm round the youngster like a hen sheltering a chick. But the father of the family, a quiet, grey man, whose good looks had passed to his daughter, acted sensibly. His attitude was that Irene could not be implicated in the death of Ward, and that there was no use in hindering the police in their duties. Then the fact that, like Burford, he had got his schooling in the *Worcester* training-ship made him still more amenable.

He bade his son answer the Inspector truthfully and openly.

“Yes, I made the knife,” the boy acknowledged. “I took the temper out of an old file I found kicking about the garage. I hammered it well into the handle, then I ground it into shape on Robinson’s—that’s our chauffeur’s—carborundum-wheel. Robinson didn’t see me do it, though it was him that told me

how to take the temper out of steel. Then I whetted it up on Robinson's whetstone.

“David Bastable and I were making bows and arrows in their garage yesterday. We were using branches of the yew in their garden. The stiletto wasn't much good for cutting the yew wood, and I made a mess of the first one I tried. But then I made one for David and a better one for myself. David wanted to use the knife, but I wouldn't let him. He isn't much good at making things, and he'd've been sure to cut himself. He's a bit younger than me. Nearly two years. David was going somewhere in the afternoon with his father and mother, and went in to lunch early. I said I wouldn't lunch there, and I pretended to go home. But I really wasn't pleased with the bow I'd made. There was a bendy bit in the thick end—I mean the end I'd cut down from being thick. I wanted another branch of the yew. But David was vexed with me for keeping the knife, so I knew that if I said I wanted another branch he wouldn't have wanted me to have it. So after David had gone in I went back to the yew. I couldn't get the branch I wanted off with the stiletto. It was too thick. I thought I'd come back in the afternoon with a saw—David's saw is a silly little thing, and, besides, he blunted it terribly by sawing naily bits of wood. I hid the stiletto in the yew-tree. I didn't want to carry it because it had cut a hole in my trousers as it was, and because I didn't want Mother to see it. She's fussy about things like that—sharp things and pistols. I meant to go back and get it and the branch in the afternoon. But when I got home for lunch I heard I could play cricket if I liked, and that I could keep wicket. I didn't want to miss that, and I hadn't time to go back for the knife. I was going round for it this morning.”

This evidence, given in a lump for the sake of space, was elicited by Burford from the boy with very few questions. Burford looked at the boy and saw a fine candour in the intelligent grey eyes. There was no doubting the story. Billy Daldy already was showing the broadened hands and the spatulate fingers of the sons of Tubal-cain. He looked like a born engineer.

“That’s admirable testimony,” said Burford, with a nod to the father. “I wonder if Billy might come round to the Laurels and show me just where he left the knife in the tree?”

“Of course he might,” said Mr Daldy.

“You mean, ride round in your Bentley?” the boy asked, his eyes alight.

“That’s what I meant,” said Burford.

“Good egg! Let’s go!”

He was full of technical questions about the car as they drove round to the Bastables, picking up Vanjohn on the way. He wanted to know how many revs. the engine did and what h.p. it developed. What was the cube of the cylinders, how much did it do to the gallon, and what speed could Burford get out of it? Not for the first time was Burford astonished at the knowledge of the modern boy, but Billy Daldy was exceptionally knowledgeable. He yet remained very much a boy, naïve in his thinking, apart from mechanical things.

“May I look under the bonnet, Mr Burford?” he asked, when they pulled up at the Laurels.

“First show me where you left the knife, and you can look in the bonnet as much as you like. I shall be a minute or two in the house after I’m through with you,” said Burford. “I suppose I can trust you not to unship anything? I might need the car in a hurry, you know.”

“I won’t touch. I’ll only look,” said the lad.

He led the way round the yew when they came to it, and stopped in an aperture among the branches under which Ward had lain.

“Just there,” he said, reaching up to a fork close to the main stem. He was a short, squarely built boy, and his reach was not very high.

“Look!” said Burford. “Take this and put it as near as you can remember in the place where you put the knife.”

He took an ivory two-foot rule from his hip-pocket and unfolded it to a foot’s length. It was then just about an inch longer than the knife.

Billy took the rule and set it in the fork. “That’s it,” he said. “Only the rule stays there easier than the knife did. But, of course, it’s about an inch longer.”

“The knife wouldn’t stay put?” asked Burford.

“No. It fell the first time. It nearly dug into me.”

“And you left it in plain sight like that—with quite a chance that David Bastable might see it if he came round the yew?”

“He was going away for the afternoon,” Billy reminded Burford. “And, besides, why should he come round the yew again? He had a better bow than he could ever make himself.”

“I see,” said Burford. “Thank you, Billy. You can go and have a look into the bonnet of my car now. I’m afraid, though, that you may never see your stiletto again.”

“That’s all right. I don’t want it. If I did I could make a better one. If I had a forge and an anvil I’d like to try forging a sword. Not to carry about, you know, but just for the fun of making it. I’ll go and look at the Bentley engine.”

When the boy had gone Burford stood looking at the rule in the fork of the yew. Under his hat his scalp moved back. He put up his hand and gently edged the rule over until one end lay precariously on its branch of the fork. Then he touched it with a finger-tip. The rule fell, knocking several branches as it came down, and landed on the ground a little to the side of where he had been shown that Ward had lain.

“M’m!” Burford murmured. “Yes!”

He picked up the rule and restored it to its perch in the branches. For a moment or two he stared at it. Against the dark bark of the tree it was gleaming white. He wished then that he had not allowed the stiletto to pass so soon into the hands of the finger-print experts. He would have liked there and then to have calculated, among other things, how much it might have gleamed among the branches of the yew. But experiment in that direction could wait a little. There was plenty to do.

### § iii

Burford made his way round the north side of the house to the kitchen. He wanted to have a word with the cook, and by taking the north side of the house he avoided the dining-room, in which, he took it, the Bastable family would be collected at that hour. He had no wish at the moment to see any of the Bastables.

The cook, as cooks have a habit of being, was a stout woman whose build made her look older than she probably was. Burford, who had made his way past the open outer door, heard her give a startled exclamation at his knock on the inner door, and saw her subside with her hand over her heart

when he looked round the edge of it. He stepped right into the kitchen and removed his hat.

“Mrs Goodchild,” he said politely, “I’m sorry if I startled you. The outer door was open, and I——” He stopped and frankly sniffed the air. “What a delicious smell of coffee!” he murmured. “It makes one feel quite hungry!”

“Would you like ...” The cook hesitated.

“Would I like a cup?” Burford suggested. “I should love one. I had to make an early start this morning, and a cup of coffee would be a blessing and a boon. I’m sure Mrs Bastable wouldn’t mind. And if you and—Lottie, isn’t it?”—he smiled at the maid, who was gazing at him pop-eyed—“and if you and Lottie can put up with my company for a minute or two....”

“I don’t know as it’s fittin’,” the cook said doubtfully.

“May I sit here?” Burford said blandly. “It may be Mr Horlick’s chair, but if he comes in I’ll just tell him I’ve got squatter’s rights. All you’ve got to do, Mrs Goodchild—Lottie—to establish squatter’s rights is to squat. I squat.”

The cook and the maid apparently thought the joke a good one. The maid giggled, but, seeing the cook laugh outright, she joined in.

“That’s a good one on Mr Horlick,” the cook chuckled. “Lottie, fetch a clean cup, there’s a good girl. Would you like a bit to eat, Mr—Mr Burdock?”

“Burford,” said Burford, with a smile. “No, thanks. A nice cup of coffee is all I want, Mrs Goodchild.”

“And that you surely will ’ave, Mr Burford,” said the cook, busy with the pot and milk-jug. “It’s ’ot and ’ot—and so’s the milk. Isn’t it a dreadful thing as ’appened last night to that poor Mr Ward—and ’im so clever, too! I know I didn’t sleep a

wink all night after it. But I suppose you're used to it, Mr Burford. I could never be. Mr 'Orlick says it's murder. I don't know what Mr and Mrs Bastable'll do with it 'appenin' outside their door, so to speak. I was just sayin' to Lottie, it's a blessin' it didn't 'appen in the 'ouse. In the garding's bad enough, I say, but in the 'ouse! They'd never want to live in it any more. Thankee, Lottie."

She poured out coffee and milk simultaneously into the cup brought by the girl, then poised a spoon over the sugar-bowl.

"One spoonful, thank you," said Burford. "If I could only get at the time when it happened I might do something about it. You've no idea, Mrs Goodchild, how difficult it is to get people to be accurate about time. There's Mr Horlick, now. Wouldn't you say he was just about as precise a man as you could find?"

"Never saw such a man to watch the clock," said the cook. "Precise isn't the word."

"Well, I suppose it was because he wasn't attending to any of his household duties at the time, but he couldn't say at all precisely what time it was when he went upstairs after giving you a hand with the dishes."

"Well, I can tell you. It must've been about twenty-five past nine, because after I'd mopped up the scullery floor—turned over a bowl of water, I did—it was just the 'alf-'our on that clock. It'd just take me five minutes or so to mop the floor and finish tidyin' the scullery. When I came into the kitching I could 'ear Mr 'Orlick talkin' on the 'phone, and I looked at the clock."

Burford compared the clock's time with that on his watch. They coincided.

“That’s a good point, Mrs Goodchild,” Burford murmured. “That’s a thing that can be checked easily. The clock hasn’t been touched since last night?”

“Oh, no, sir. Mr ’Orlick winds it reg’lar every Saturday night. It’s really an eight-day clock.”

“Yes, that’s a useful point,” Burford repeated. “You see, there’s not only your checking the time. We’ve only to get the people who rang up to say what time it was when they did so and we have a double check. I take it it was somebody ringing up, and not Mr Horlick that was calling some one?”

“Well, I didn’t ’ear the ’phone-bell ring,” said the cook, “but Mr ’Orlick wouldn’t be ringin’ up anybody at that time, all the tradesmen being shut.”

“I see. You didn’t notice any movement about the house except what might be accounted to Mr Horlick?”

“Oh, no, Mr Burford. You wouldn’t ’ear even Mr ’Orlick movin’ about the ’ouse. There was nothin’. After Mr ’Orlick spoke the second time on the ’phone you couldn’t ’ear a sound. I never ’eard anythin’ until the young people began to shout in the garding—’xcept it was the talk of somebody passin’ in the lane—and then the long ringin’ of the bell to let them in with the dreadful news.”

“I must ask Horlick about the ’phone-call. He forgot to mention that,” said Burford. “You say he talked a second time. Do you mean there was a second ring?”

“Oh, no. The bell didn’t ring the second time. I thought it was the same people, and that Mr ’Orlick’d gone to look up somethin’ for them.”

“Well, I shall ask Horlick about it,” said Burford. “He won’t like having forgotten an important point like that, so I don’t think you’d better talk to him about it. However, you



can please yourselves about that, you and Lottie. You know Mr Horlick a lot better than I do.”

“Yes, it might make ’im cross,” said the cook. “ ‘Im so precise. Least said soonest mended, I always say. And I’m all for keepin’ things ’armonious in my kitching—ain’t I, Lottie?”

“Yes, I will say that for you, Cook,” the maid replied. “I will say I never been in a ’armoniouser kitching than yours—never.”

“And I will say that you can brew a cup of coffee,” said Burford as he got up from his chair. “I enjoyed it immensely, and I thank you very much. I think I had better go round by the front to see Mr Horlick. It would look better than calling on him from the kitchen stairs. Formal’s the word, eh, Mrs Goodchild?”

“Maybe it would look more fittin’,” the cook admitted.

Burford repeated his thanks, said good-bye, and went round to the front of the house.

#### § iv

It was Horlick who answered his ring, but as Burford stepped into the hall Mr Bastable Senior came out of the dining-room.

“Ah, good morning, Inspector—good morning!” he greeted. “Not brought any more trouble—no more trouble, I hope?”

“Well, I hope not, Mr Bastable,” Burford replied. “I merely want to go over a point or two with Horlick, if you can spare him and your study for a moment. A little checking with regard to times.”

“Of course, of course. Horlick, go with the Inspector,” said Mr Bastable. “You must have every facility—every facility. Citizen’s duty to help the police in every way possible.”

Burford had the idea suddenly that Mr Bastable was a candidate for municipal honours somewhere—municipal or parochial.

“Thank you, sir,” he said, and added, as it became apparent that Mr Bastable expected to form a third at the interview, “It will be a great convenience to be able to talk to Horlick in your study—alone.”

“Of course, of course!” said Bastable, putting up his birdlike front. “The study is yours, Inspector.”

Horlick held the door open for Burford and followed him into the room. He shut the door and, leaning up against the handle, looked at Burford rather wanly.

“Yes, sir?” he ventured.

“Come away from the door, Horlick. I want you to tell me about your conversations on the telephone last night.”

“Believe me, sir, it’s been worrying me all night,” the butler said. “I ought to have known you’d find out sooner or later, and now that you have found out it looks bad that I didn’t tell you. But the truth is, sir, I was ashamed. I was afraid if Mr Bastable heard of it that he’d be angry. I don’t know what came over me....

“You wouldn’t think, sir,” he went on, with an appealing lift of his hands, “you wouldn’t think, to look at me, that I was a joking kind of man?”

“No,” said Burford amiably, for the man paused for a reply. “I’d say you disguise the fact very well, Horlick.”

“Well, it’s the truth, sir. I’m one of the jokingest men that ever lived. I was the jokingest boy, and when I was in the Army, sir—you’d hardly believe it—I was called ‘Smiler’ Horlick. It’s a perpetual worry to me, sir, because I never know when I’m likely to break out. It’s the very devil of an itch—if you’ll excuse the word, Mr Burford—for a butler to have. Most inconvenient it might prove to be. But sometimes when I’ve been waiting at table—yes, even in better-class houses than this, sir, though I do say I couldn’t have a better place—and I’ve heard some solemn old gentleman a-holding forth all pompous-like about the ‘Empiah, sir, the British Empiah!’—or something like that—I’ve had to put tight hands on myself, so to speak, not to haul off one of my old shoes and put it over his shoulder on a dish, sir, like spinach. And, just thinking to myself what his face would be like if I did, I’ve had to pretend I had to get out of the room for something to have my laugh out. And goes on like that, Mr Burford, sir, aren’t a good example to young servants. A butler can’t keep control over them when he goes on like that.

“And between you and me, sir,” Horlick said confidentially, with a furtive look over his shoulder in the direction of the door, “that’s why I’ve come to prefer service with a middle-class family like this. They’re more human, Mr Burford. They don’t forget there’s a human being in the butler. Now there’s Mr Bastable, sir. Anybody would say that he was just pompous; but he’s not—he’s kind. And he reads Dickens, sir \_\_\_\_\_”

“That’s all very interesting, Horlick, and I’d like to hear it, or talk Dickens with you—if I had time,” said Burford. “But I want to hear about those telephone-calls.”

“I’m sorry, sir. I was carried away. Well, it’s this way, sir—I’ll make a clean breast of it,” said Horlick. “I’m in the habit

of taking a stroll of an evening down to the Anchor or up to the Bricklayers' Arms—two local houses, sir—for a quiet drink. There are two men in these houses, sir—I mean, one in each house. They're brothers-in-law, and one's as big a sponger as the other. There was one of them the other night, sir, who made away with my half of bitter on the pretence it was his. That's a trick of his. Well, last night I was thinking of these two men, of the half-pints I've stood them and never got back, and it suddenly occurred to me what a joke it would be to ring them up, as from the one to the other, and persuade them that there was free drinks going in either house. It was easy, sir. I can imitate Bill Summers and Bert Gollop quite lifelike. But it didn't occur to me that the joke would cause the commotion that Mr Roger tells me it did. I thought that maybe Summers and Gollop would pass the word to a particular crony or so, but it seems that the story emptied both houses pretty nearly. I hope, sir, that there's nothing seriously wrong in what I did—I mean, nothing in it that you'll have to take official notice of. I wouldn't like Mr Coram of the Anchor, for instance, to know that it was me who emptied his house at nine-thirty, his busiest time. And it might mean the loss of my place, which I like, if Mr Bastable came to hear of it. I do hope you don't need to report it, sir."

"Well, now, Horlick," said Burford, keeping a straight face, "it's this way: The passage of those men front and back of the house happened close to the time when Rupert Ward must have been stabbed, and, of course, it had to be noted. As a matter of fact, it could have been quite a big factor in the case. So I cannot promise you that I will not take notice of it. It entirely depends on how matters turn out."

"Oh, dear, oh, dear!" breathed Horlick.

“Would I be right in supposing,” Burford asked, “that your stepping out on the balcony was not unconnected with the trick you had played?”

“Yes, sir. And it was because it was connected with the trick that I pretended to have forgotten going on the balcony. I was afraid to let it leak out. I’m sorry, sir.”

“Did you hear anything of the men passing?”

“In the back lane, sir—yes. There did not seem to be much doing in the front.”

“And you came in as soon as it was apparent that your joke had succeeded?”

“Yes, sir. The rest of what I told you is true.”

“All right, Horlick. I’ll see what I can do about having no notice taken of the trick. But I do hope you have come clean altogether,” said Burford. “As you are in a confessing mood you had better search your mind and see if you are not hiding anything else. Get it all out. It’s safer.”

The butler looked uncomfortable. “All right, sir,” he said, after a pause, “there is another matter. I only held it back because I thought it might not be fair to the dead man. I did know something of Rupert Ward before I saw him here as a guest. He came from the same village as I did in Surrey. I knew his brothers and sisters and his parents. I was, of course, a good bit older than him, but I knew him when he was a boy. His father was a farm labourer, sir, and Rupert Ward’s real name was Isaac Hogbin. My people, who kept the inn at Gomshere—my father had been a butler too, sir—thought themselves a cut above the Hogbins. But Isaac was a smart lad. He was bright at school. And from being a reporter on a county paper he got to writing bits for the London journals. He got on, sir. But he wasn’t very nice about it. There was a

cold streak in him, because when he got on he forgot all about his folks down at Gomshere—and old Hogbin grew to be past his work. I'd heard, of course, that Isaac Hogbin had changed his name to Rupert Ward, but I never thought to run across him in the course of my duties, sir.

“But there he was at supper one night in the next room, the lion of the party,” said Horlick, “and there was me, that used to boot him in the village street for being saucy—the little scut, with his shirt-tail hanging out the seat of his trousers—there was me leaning over his shoulder and saying, ‘Salad, sir?’ Of course, it wasn't my place to show that I recognized him, and he just stared through me. But he knew me all right. I could see that. There was a look in his eyes when he saw me that said, as plain as plain, ‘You dare to give me away!’ Well, of course, I never had any intention of doing it. I wasn't a bit jealous of his getting on so well—though I did think his books a lot of silly muck—and fake at that. It'd 've been a joke to me, him sitting there and taking wine with Mr Bastable—‘a very charming *blanc fumé* indeed, Mr Bastable!’ What spoiled the joke for me was the thought of his poor old father, crippled by the screws, and Rupert, as he called himself, never lifting a hand to help him.

“Ah!” said Horlick. “There was a heartless, cold streak in Rupert Ward, Mr Burford—and a good bit of viciousness too, I should think. He would pretend to be jolly and generous, but all the time he was on the make. You want to be a servant to tell whether a man's genuine or not. The real people don't keep reminding you of your place, even when they don't invite you to step out of it. But there! The man's dead, and it isn't pretty to be showing up his bad points.”

“Did Ward ever admit that he recognized you as a fellow-villager?” asked Burford.

“Once, sir. One night when I was helping him into his coat. He was going away early, and there was nobody seeing him off. ‘Thanks, Horlick,’ he said. ‘If you know what’s good for you you’ll go on keeping your tongue between your teeth!’ That was all, Mr Burford. And he’s never put his hand in his pocket for my benefit in over two years, not even at Christmas-time.”

“Have you heard or do you know anything about his relations with women?”

“Only gossip, sir. Nothing that it’d be fair to retail to you, because I don’t know what was in it. But I will say, sir,” Horlick conceded, “that he wouldn’t have come to my house if I’d had young daughters.”

“Thank you, Horlick,” said Burford. “I’m obliged to you.”

He went out to find Vanjohn listening with great interest, apparently, to a lecture by young Daldy on internal-combustion engines, with the Bentley’s engine as a demonstration piece. At sight of Burford Vanjohn became all official again, hardly realizing, perhaps, that his chief had never found better cause for liking him than in that unguarded moment.

“Nothing adrift, I hope, MacAndrew?” Burford grinned at the boy.

“No, sir,” Billy Daldy grinned back, saluting before turning to replace the engine bonnet. “All shipshape and Bristol fashion.”

“All right. Hop in and I’ll run you back home if you’re going that way.”

The offer was too tempting. Though David Bastable had been yelling to Billy just a moment before from a top window, telling him to wait and he’d be down in a second, Billy

hopped in. The run meant quite a walk back for him immediately, but what was that to three or four minutes in a Bentley?

Besides, Billy had taken rather a shine to the sailorly-looking detective who was whistling so contentedly at the steering-wheel.



## CHAPTER IX

### IN WARD'S LIBRARY

**THE** result of Burford's interview with Horlick, and the butler's confession of having been the one to cause the excitement in the two public-houses, was the recall of Sergeant Crowther. Burford set his burly *aide* to the task of discovering what he could regarding Ward's relations with the members of the hide-and-seek party, and to bringing the other men off the public-house inquiries.

Horlick's confession, however, did not lead to his dismissal as a suspect in the mind of Burford. There had been touches in Horlick's part of the conversation which indicated that the butler had the makings of a fine actor. He was an excellent mimic, and the fact that he could hide a propensity for practical joking under the normal serenity of the trained manservant was another revelation of his histrionic ability. It was just possible that Horlick's confession had been made as a blind, that the butler was giving so much away in order to create an impression of innocence on the larger suspicion. Burford did nothing, therefore, to call off the investigations which, in consultation with Greenlea, he had had the Yard begin touching Horlick's past. He simply handed over to the Superintendent by 'phone the fact that Ward and Horlick had originated in the same village, and begged that investigation regarding Ward's career should be intensified from this point. At the same time he requested that the knife should be returned to him as soon as the finger-print men had got all they wanted, or could get, from it.

When Burford had attended to these matters he drove with Vanjohn to the flat in which the dead man had lived. This was one in a modern block, built in brick in the plain-face style which has become so prevalent in recent years. It was on the ground floor to one side of the building, with a separate entrance of its own. Burford found one of his men in possession. There had been two, but one of them, having completed the search of the flat, had gone off on other duties.

“What have you got, Tranter?” Burford asked the man who remained.

“Quite a bit, sir,” was the reply. “I don’t know what it will lead to in the case, but it will show you plain enough what this fellow Ward was. I’ll give you the dope on his domestic life, and then you’ll see what Morris and I have put aside for your inspection, sir.”

He fetched out his notebook.

“Go ahead!” said Burford.

“Ward lived alone,” Tranter began, “and had no servants sleeping in. The flat consists of sitting-room or study, small dining-room, two bedrooms—one large and the other small—bathroom, kitchenette. The cleaning was done by a daily servant, a widow-woman called Mrs Florence Guide. She had occasional help from a charwoman—Mrs Hocking—and the valet attached to the flats came in once or twice a week to look after Ward’s clothes. Ward telephoned him as he wanted him. Ward had his meals sent in from the restaurant belonging to the flats. The only meals made in the flat itself were—if you can call them meals—his morning coffee and tea in the afternoon. Ward made those himself. Mrs Guide was mostly through with her work by about half-past one each day. She washed up the breakfast things and the cups left over from the

previous afternoon. The dishes belonging to the restaurant went back there mostly, but sometimes Mrs Guide would wash them of a morning before the waiter collected them. She came to the flat each morning at half-past nine.

“Visitors,” said Tranter, as though inserting a heading. “Once or twice in a week Mrs Guide would see from the dishes that Ward had somebody with him for dinner or tea, or both, the previous day. Though now and again a collection of glasses would show that several people had been in for cocktails, she mostly had to do with the dishes left by Ward and a single visitor. From the fact that some of the cigarette butts tipped into the ash-bucket had lipstick on them, and from traces of powder and that—sometimes in the bedroom—Mrs Guide would say that Ward’s callers were mostly women. Mrs Guide has been working for Ward ever since he took over this flat, which was three years and six months ago, and she has seen these indications of women visitors since the start.

“That’s all, sir,” Tranter concluded, “except that from the files of tradesmen’s bills and receipts in the kitchen Ward seems to have been regular about money matters. From his bank-book, which happens to be in his desk, and from his cheque-book he was in no apparent money difficulties. But you’ll see that for yourself, sir, when you come to look at what Morris and I have put aside for you.”

“Good, Tranter!” Burford commended. “This Mrs Guide, or the valet, or the waiters—they can say nothing definite about the identity of the women visitors?”

“Mrs Guide and the valet—no, sir. Mrs Guide has seen Ward about from time to time with different women, but none of them ever visited the flat while she was here. The same applies to the valet. As for the waiters, sir, I haven’t got round

to seeing any of them yet. They don't get here until the middle morning."

"It's just possible that a waiter may have seen something when bringing in a meal," Burford said. "You can make inquiries in that direction presently, Tranter. If you do find anything bring the man or whoever it is here to me."

"Very good, sir."

"Now let's see what you've got," said Burford—"or—just a moment—I'll have a look round the premises first of all."

The flat in its general appearance was just like any of the flats that can be seen in blocks built in the last decade. It had the usual compactly cupboarded kitchen, with refrigerator and built-in sink and small electric cooker. It had the usual tiled bathroom with panelled bath (with shower), constant hot water, and all those elegancies that estate agents like to make mention of by abbreviation in their advertisements. But in the bathroom cupboard, which Burford was at pains to investigate, there were several medicaments and articles of the toilet which one would not normally expect to find in the bathroom cupboard of a man's flat. The smaller bedroom was a bleak little apartment containing a single bed and a wardrobe. It had the air of never having been used. The larger bedroom, on the other hand, was sybaritic in the shiny three-ply way beloved of Tottenham Court Road. The double bed, luxuriously matted, was covered by a spread of silk in a deep peach colour which was repeated in the pelmeted curtains of the window. A very big wardrobe in what looked like three-ply with a larch exterior matched the wooden headboard of the bed. There was a dressing-table of the same material and a chest of drawers. The litter on the glass top of the dressing-table, apart from a pair of military hairbrushes

and a leather collar-box, was not particularly bachelor. A large coloured print of one of Gauguin's South Sea paintings—nude brown women among plantain fronds—hung on the wall facing the foot of the bed, and another blank space was occupied by a print of *September Morn*.

The dining-room was done in thin panelling finished mahogany colour. The furniture, reproductions in Sheraton style which had not quite come off, was also in mahogany. In the middle of the table, set on a coyish lace centre, was a round of mirror glass containing a bunch of purple glass grapes with one glass leaf in green and a wire tendril. A big glass cocktail jug, containing a long stirring spoon with a twisted stem, stood on a plated tray on the sideboard, surrounded by a dozen long trumpet glasses. Above the fireplace was a heavily framed print of a large-bottomed nude by Renoir.

The sitting-room was also library and study. It contained a large flat-topped desk, which on examination proved to be of pressed steel finished to look like mahogany, a wide mahogany bookcase reaching from floor to ceiling, a deep settee in brown leather with down-stuffed cushions in matching velvet, two deep easy-chairs of like pattern, and a single small round table in mahogany. By the fireplace and close to the settee was a big brass Indian tray set on a six-legged folding frame. The walls were decorated with the original drawings of the dust-jackets of *Mau'wiss the Mice*, *Google Dan*, and other of Ward's writings, and several etchings and drawings by artists Burford could not identify of women either nude or in a state of undress. The pile carpet of a deep maroon was matched in colour by the window-curtains of silk. A curious note in this modern apartment was the big armchair which stood by the knee-hole of the desk. This was

an elaborately carved piece of furniture in what looked like black oak. With its arms partly covered in red plush, brass-studded, and its big red cushion, from which depended large golden tassels, it looked like a ducal throne.

The desk was piled with neat stacks of papers and books, but these were mostly the material discovered by Tranter and his *aide* and set out for Burford's inspection. Before sitting down on the ducal throne to go through this material Burford had a look at the library.

It contained, to begin with, an enormous collection of children's books and books about children. These—some hundred or more of them—were stacked on the shelves towards the top of the bookcase. Then came an assortment of modern novels and semi-biographical volumes, a set of works by modern dramatists, and a row of Mermaid and other editions of plays from Marlowe and Massinger through the Restoration to Sheridan. The rest of the bookcase was filled with books on sex, or subjects relating to sex, from scientifically conceived works to exercises in sheer pornography. They were in all Continental languages, and beside them, apparently as an aid to mastering their contents, was a complete set of dictionaries and grammars. It might have been, of course, indicative of a perfectly serious study on the part of Ward, except for the presence of paper-covered volumes of fiction such as may be bought in small paper-shops of Soho or about the Rue de Rivoli in Paris.

“Yes, Tranter,” Burford said quietly, as he turned away from the bookcase. “Quite so! Let me see his bank-book and cheque-book for a change.”

He sat down on the ducal throne, and Tranter set in front of him the pass-book and cheque-book, together with a pile of

accounts and a loose-leaf volume with a clasp. Whatever might be said of Ward, he was systematic regarding the financial side of his work. The accounts were royalty accounts mostly, and these were subject to entry in the loose-leaf volume. Every piece of work that Ward had ever done was set down in its own leaf in the volume—books, articles, short stories. Under each item was a complete record of what the work had done—sales, royalties, fees, foreign editions, serial rights. There was nothing to show in bank-book or cheque-book when checked with the accounts that Ward had been at all extravagant or subject to any drain on his finances. He had lived almost sparingly, considering his apparent income, and must have had no fear at all about poverty in his old age.

“Yes, all right, Tranter,” said Burford. “What next?”

“This next, I think, sir—then these.”

He placed under Burford’s hands another volume, heavily and elaborately bound with a clasp, and a packet of letters. The clasp of the volume set into a little lock, very strong for its size.

“This is the key, sir,” said Tranter. “It was among those you sent over.”

“Yes,” said Burford, but ignored the book for the moment. He glanced at the letters. They were mostly in a characteristic female hand, but at the bottom of the stack there were some in different writing.

Burford gave a minute or two to study of the letters, then he turned to Vanjohn.

“I want a specimen each,” he said, “of the handwriting of Irene Daldy and Joan Hibbert. Get them for me, Vanjohn, as quickly as you can.”

For a moment Vanjohn looked at a loss, then he brightened.

“Wouldn’t it be quicker and simpler, sir,” he suggested, “if you were to write each of them a note, asking them a simple question they’d have to answer?”

“No, my lad, it wouldn’t,” Burford replied. “They might guess that I’m here—and try a little disguising. But I’ll give you a lead. Try the Bastable girl for Irene’s: they seem to be close friends. And Miss Hibbert is a member of the tennis-club committee. Find the secretary and try him or her. If that doesn’t do, try Wing. But it’s possible that the Bastable girl will have a specimen of Joan Hibbert’s too. She looks as if she collected postcards. Use your wits, boy—but get them.”

“Very good, sir,” said Vanjohn, and departed.

He was not long gone before he returned.

“I thought I’d better report it to you, sir, before I went off,” he said. “I’m sure I saw Miss Hibbert coming in this direction when I got to the corner of the building.”

“How sure are you?” Burford demanded.

“Certain, sir. My impression is that she saw your car, recognized it, and turned away. At all events she stopped suddenly, went back a little, and turned up a side street.”

“Did she see you?”

“I don’t think so, sir. I was partly hidden. She did not look in my direction.”

Burford fingered the letters before him for a moment, thoughtfully.

“It may be significant,” he murmured; “but I don’t know. You were right to report it, Vanjohn—quite right. Now go and get me those specimens.”

He turned to the thickly bound volume with the clasp.



## § ii

The volume was a sort of diary. It began without preamble or title at a date about four years back from the day Burford was examining it.

“I have at last got rid of L., and I hope for good,” the initial entry ran.

She had grown exigent to the point of interfering with my work, and her jealousy was not to be borne. Why is it that women will believe their surrender to a man puts him under an everlasting obligation? L. more than a case in point. At a loose end and unhappy when she met me, she is no worse off now than she was then. A large number of good dinners and outings on the credit side, besides being better off materially, she has at least gained in experience and has a fuller mind. Tried to work up tragic scene at the last, but without effect. L. goes, I hope, for ever. No intention of standing for blackmail either material or moral. Lunch with B., and back to meet L. All the more determined to settle with L. because of B., who seems to catch on. La Tour Blanche 1922 for lunch—good, but too dear at the Laverdet. 1400 words, D-D.

The next few entries indicated a pursuit of B. Then came one which told of B.'s surrender. References to B. filled a page or two, then came an occasional remark about the attractions of G. G., it appeared, did not react as expected to lunches and pseudo-philosophizings, and B. continued to occupy attention—in entries increasingly far apart in point of time—until an A.-T. began to have notice taken of her. B. went the same way as L., but A.-T. cooled off before the diarist did, and there was a considerable lapse of time before a new initial appeared.

There was a record of content with the new flat, which, to the diarist's mind, was 'ideal'; but from then on references to the number of words done daily and to the wines taken at

lunch or dinner began to drop out. The writing, fairly reticent to begin with, began to develop into a more and more frank treatise on the art of seduction. The pages began to be interlarded with quotations and paraphrases from the books that Burford had seen on the shelves. The way of a woman with a man was studied minutely, with reflections on the various feminine types and the varying methods by which they might be subjected. But it became plain, as time passed after the occupation of the new flat, that the move to the suburban district had been a mistake. The diarist became short of material on which his carefully evolved techniques could be tried.

The advent of a lady frankly put down as “Mrs T.,” and therefore identifiable by Burford as the “gay widow” mentioned to him by Irene Daldy, was in the nature of a windfall for the thwarted Don Juan. Mrs T., who became more briefly M. as relations ripened, lasted quite a long time, it appeared. But ultimately her habit of borrowing small sums of money and never returning them began to irk the mind of the diarist, and he seemed to be glad when he could record her abrupt disappearance from the scene.

The activity with Mrs T. brought the diary up to within eighteen months of its final entry. A number of prospects were mentioned, and tentative experiments with them were recorded after that. But the diarist, to his quite obvious chagrin, was unable to write of any success until his approach to D. This was the last record of success in the book. It also appeared to be the diarist’s most difficult campaign.

The girl, he recorded, was a pack of old-fashioned notions and inhibitions. She had the painfully antiquated idea that a girl’s greatest treasure was her chastity, and that she should not yield herself until Mr Right came along, and then only in

marriage. When one loved, she considered, it was for always. Sexual contact was a rite whereby two souls were united for eternity. She was not, of course, so puritanical or bigoted as to despise a poor girl who had sinned for love, but she believed that nobody could really love more than once. She knew that there were girls and women who thought very little about being with a man, but for herself it was impossible. If she failed to find a man who really loved her, and with whom she could live as a wife and comrade, facing the world together, then she would quite gladly die an old maid.

There was a sneer in this recording of the unknown girl's naïve faith that made Burford's blood boil. Ward, who had taken it with his tongue in his cheek, set it down merely to keep himself informed of the difficulty he was faced with. He was impatient with the girl for being such a fool.

Then came the detailing of his cold-blooded undermining of all the girl believed. Love, he told her, held no promise at all of eternal fusion. Her ideals were childish and silly, no more than an unintellectual clinging to a stupid and long-exploded myth. The happiest people were those who took loving as they found it, enjoying it as a material thing. If she would come to his flat—there would be no danger for her in doing so—he would give her chapter and verse for all he said from the works of savants. She prided herself on her intellect, on being open-minded. Why didn't she give her brains a chance?

Once the girl did come to his flat the rest was easy. There were shaded lights, food and wine, a deep settee, a cosy fire—all the paraphernalia. They were two intelligent people discussing an important matter of life, so important that it was only the stupid who made it taboo. What was there to be scared of?

It was all quite cynically recorded from Ward's point of view. What the victim's reactions were could easily be guessed. Bemused and bewildered, yet fascinated by the intimate discussion of things that had been a matter of curiosity, yet shame, to her, giddy with the protestations of a love which had nothing in it of what she had imagined love was, stung by the accusations of a mental and physical cowardice that held her back from living a full life, and probably with a terrible desire awakened in her by intimacy of contact, and with her major fear soothed by assurances that she would come to no harm, the girl gave in.

It was, however, only a physical victory for Ward. His theorizings on the real nature of love and the significance of the sexual act merely won him the girl's body; they had not penetrated her mind. She continued to visit him and to sit at his feet, but, as he used discussion of love merely as an aphrodisiac for her and for himself, he made no progress in winning her over to his hedonistic views. The girl was unhappy. If he loved her as he said he did there was nothing to prevent their getting married. She hated having to come to him in secret. She wanted to be able to admit in public how much they meant to each other. D., in fact, was the normal suburban middle-class woman who wanted a house and a husband and a nicely stepped range of children. She was not cut out to be a secret mistress.

"I have had to tell D. where she gets off," said the diary, with a lapse from the literary.

Her whinings have become unbearable. I never know nowadays when my work is going to be interrupted by her knock at the door and held up by an interminable argument about her fancied wrongs. I pointed out to her to-night that from the first I have made no promises, and that I have never subscribed to her idea that love can be

eternal. I said frankly that I had no intention of hanging a wife about my neck, and that if I had she did not fill the bill. The woman is a moron. Ideas bounce off her like rain from an oiled window-pane. In spite of all my arguments, given without heat or rancour, she always returns to the fact that she loves me, and that for love she had given me her 'all'—whatever that may mean. I told her finally that matters were at an end between us, and that I did not intend to be blackmailed by threats of suicide or any other thing into changing my mind. I imagine she is as afraid of a scandal as I am. I only wish I could be sure. At all events, I told her that I could not afford to be kept off my work any more by her untimely interruptions, and that the next time she called uninvited she would not be admitted. I also said that any attempt on her part to get into my flat would be my cue for telephoning the police. I hope this is "Good-bye, D.!" I wish that affairs would permit me to shut up the flat and go abroad for a month or two. D. has been my greatest mistake.

Later entries showed that Ward's tactics were not entirely successful in keeping the girl away from the flat. A final interview occurred there, at which Ward intentionally lost his temper, calling the girl a "bloody fool" and a "sickening cow." That, with his answer to her threat of drowning herself—that it would be a good riddance—seemed to be more effective than his former suavity. The relapse into the farmhand's son, Isaac Hogbin, did the trick. There was no later record in the diary of a visit from the girl, though there was occasional mention of meeting with her at odd times elsewhere. This occasional mention ran parallel with indications that in spite of the warning of D. Ward was on the prowl again.

Tranter was gone by the time Burford finished with the diary. Had he been there he would have seen a look on the face of his chief that he had never seen there before. Archie Burford looked sick.

“The lecherous rat!” Archie muttered.

He got up from the chair and walked through the flat to the front door. He stepped out into the open and filled his lungs with air. It was as grateful to him as if he had come out of a fetid pit. For a minute or two, sombre-faced, he indulged in a quarterdeck pacing back and forth on the path. Then, with a stifled exclamation, he turned back into the flat.

### § iii

It was with great distaste for his next task that Burford slipped the tape off the bundled letters. He made no pretence of being a particularly moral individual. If one had got him at an unguarded moment and persuaded him to say what he actually thought of himself he probably would have quoted his favourite play: “I am myself indifferent honest; but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me.” In that, with Hamlet, he would have been making too much of his failings, of course, but it would be his way of disclaiming any credit for living cleanly and decently, doing no hurt that could be avoided to man or beast. In the course of his official duties he had seen, of necessity, more than most men of the seamy side of life. His exposure of their crimes had sent a handful of men to the gallows and an army of them to prison. But he had never failed to make the most of the saving grace in the criminal as a means of extenuation or of lessening the punishment. The one thing—it may have been said before, but may well be said again—that evoked cold rage in Burford was cruelty. And cruelty, in his definition, was not limited to the physical. It rather made more of the greater cruelty, the cruelty that for selfish ends or mere sense of power inflicted suffering on a weaker mind. So

that, with his modest view of his own clean way of living and thinking, while he could find excuse for the human so weak as to be led by appetite of the grosser kind, he had no pity for a man like Ward, the calculating lecher who coldly sought a fleshly gratification through the destruction of a girl's inmost and treasured beliefs and at the expense of her soul's happiness. Burford set aside all consideration of whether the girl's beliefs were mere inhibitions or not, the seed of inevitable disillusion or not. If life were kind to her experience would wean her from them and leave no hurt. And the hurt of a wrenching that ignorance might inflict would heal. But that they should be taken from her in a cynical travesty of the kindlier process would leave a shameful sore such as no human should be called upon to bear. All of which, perhaps, is a way of saying that Burford considered Ward had earned his death. Perhaps a long way of saying it. But a mental battle lay in front of Burford, and the long way of saying how he reached the conclusion may help understanding of the conflicting elements.

The kindly human that was in Burford hated the task of conning those letters so likely to lay bare the inmost thoughts of a decent girl. The policeman that was Burford was in duty bound to con them. He had to search them for words and phrases which might indicate a threat to kill a man who deserved killing. He had to read them from end to end and determine if, taken together, they constituted a threat against this man who deserved killing. And if they did convey such a threat he had to set them alongside such other evidences as he might find which would justify bringing to the dock a girl who had been grossly cheated out of what otherwise she would probably have defended to the death. He had to present against the girl a case so strong that it would bring her to the

point of seeing the judge assume the black cap and of finding herself under threat of the gallows.

For the first time in his official career Burford was afraid of his duty. He was afraid of what he might find. If either of the girls suspected could be identified with her in the diary there was terrible evidence of provocation and motive for killing Ward. It was true that the provocation was great, but on the other hand the murder was to all seeming a premeditated one. Certainly a most determined one. It was true that small sympathy could go out from judge or jury to the murdered man, but once the case reached the hands of the Public Prosecutor no amount of sympathy could save the girl from wasting the useful years of her life in a convict prison. Not, that was, if the law held good. And if the letters contained what Burford now feared to find the certainty against the girl was made absolute.

There was no way out of it for Burford. He fell to his task.

#### § iv

The letters traced in fuller fashion the insidious attempt to instil into the girl's mind the morally disruptive ideas that the diary traced in part. The ideas in themselves were not degraded. Sown in the proper ground, they could have done little harm, and might possibly have done an amount of good. It was the interpretation put upon them by Ward, and the intention behind the use of them, that made them morally disruptive for the girl. And it was against Ward's interpretation and intention that, in her first series of letters, the girl had fought. The girl, though she tried to think honestly and straightly, was not clever, and the dice were cogged against her. Ward in his diary took justification to



himself from the fact, as he claimed, that he had made no promises. But it was plain enough that with his pretended intellectual view of love—and by that he meant the sexual act merely—Ward had not scrupled to hint that he had romantic notions himself. Time and again the girl picked him up on the point:

You say that our minds are in harmony, Rupert. And that's what you said was needed between a man and a girl to keep passion alive—the only thing that was needed. If you love me with your mind like that I could trust you. What makes me afraid is the cold way you sometimes speak about loving: as if it were just a physical thing. I can't be so childish if I want my love perfect, and if I want to be sure it's mind and body. Surely it isn't childish or stupid to want the best?

She thought, poor girl, for a little after she became his mistress that the love between them was perfect. She poured out her heart to Ward, telling him that she counted herself in nothing else so happy as in pleasing him. She confessed that she was stupid, but protested that she was willing to learn from him. If only he would be patient in teaching her she would learn to shake off her fears. All she wanted was to be what he wanted her to be. Nothing made her so happy as knowing he was pleased with her. This was the second phase in the series of letters. It did not last long.

What might be called the third phase opened with a letter which showed that Ward was cooling off. He had been pleading the excuse of his work for not seeing her so often, and she meekly acknowledged that his work must come first. What distressed her was the use by Ward of a cheap old gag. To some casual remark of hers that she would be faithful to him he had returned the answer that a woman “could be too damn' faithful.” She had taken his answer to mean—as,

indeed, it did mean—that he wouldn't mind her finding another lover. The idea hurt her terribly. She could not believe it, and apparently she had asked him if that was what he really meant.

It seemed, then, from the letters that for the moment Ward had hedged. But on comparing dates of letters and diary Burford could see that this was Ward's first move for getting rid of D. Ward's notion was, bluntly, that the girl had learned from him how to make the most of life, and that now was the time for her to launch out and enjoy herself. In Ward's view, he had given the girl good cause for being grateful to him. He had 'awakened' her.

From that point the letters showed an increasing sense of disillusionment in the girl. She kept begging to be told what she had done wrong that had made him so cold to her. If only he would tell her where she had sinned she would never sin in the same way again. Then, as the realization fell upon her of how she had been cheated, her letters became bitter and more wild in their terms. She wrote wild and foolish things, threatening her own life and hinting at requitals in a way that might easily be construed into threats on the life of Ward.

Burford put down the last of the bundle with dismay. The three or four other letters not in the handwriting of the girl D. were souvenirs of much earlier affairs of Ward's. They could be fairly ignored.

Whichever of the two girl suspects might possibly be identified with the D. of the letters, she could easily be—with the earlier evidences weighed in—in a bad case on the letters and the diary.

Of the two girls Irene Daldy on the face of it looked the likelier from the use of the initial D. Irene herself had said

that Ward had a habit of calling her “Dolores.” Apart from that, however, the character of the girl D. as indicated in the letters was more like Joan Hibbert, as Burford saw her, than Irene Daldy. But Burford could not be quite sure.

He dug into his recollection of both girls as he had seen them, and strove to weigh the one against the other as a possible murderess from her demeanour. He could only conclude that if Irene was possible so was Joan Hibbert. There had been, in spite of the serenity the two girls in their different ways had tried to muster, a look of brooding behind the eyes of both. Irene, Burford thought, was the cleverer-minded of the two. It was just possible that, having found the knife and stabbed Ward in anger at his attempt to renew his relations with her, she would exercise the cunning necessary to hide her perturbation.

But no; it would not work on the idea of Irene’s finding the knife at the moment of coming upon Ward under the yew. It had to be, if at all, that Irene carried the knife right round the garden—the cut on her hand might support the idea—and was looking for Ward when she killed him. On this idea, which held the possibility of her hurrying to the yew from the point where she had seen Methven, the difficulty of the time-factor was lessened. But it all premised a premeditation that Burford thought alien to the nature of the Daldy girl.

Burford was aware that he was no longer the policeman looking for a conviction, but had become an advocate for the defence. Alien to the nature of the girl, he had said in his mind. What did he know of the girl’s nature? What good would any ideas regarding the girl’s nature be in the Central Criminal Court?

If the specimen of Irene's writing that Vanjohn by this time had probably secured were to tally with the writing in the letters the girl was in great peril.

Burford almost prayed that the writing would not tally with Irene Daldy's. He felt sure that it would not tally. Irene was much too clever a girl ever to be cheated as the D. of the letters had been cheated by Ward. There was no use in picking on her manifested displeasure the previous afternoon on hearing that Ward was going to be along. There was the fact that she was more than half in love with Roger Bastable, the surly young man, and rather tenderly amused by his habit of calling her "brat" and "bitch." And the D. of the letters could never have smiled regarding Ward's affair with the 'gay widow' and his jejune tactics with her own friends—especially not if she had just expressed her bitter hatred of Ward by sticking a knife in his heart.

Finally and definitely, Burford told himself, Irene Daldy was out.

There remained Joan Hibbert. With a partially relieved mind Burford considered his case against Joan Hibbert.

## § v

He had a much less perilous case against Joan Hibbert than against Irene Daldy. It was necessary to say, in order to make Joan Hibbert the murderess, either that the three minutes she was supposed to have spent in searching for the can were faked or that she had contrived to do the deed inside the two minutes that elapsed between the replacing of the can and the finding of Ward's body by the Scot, Methven.

In support of the first idea there was the fact that Bastable declared he had muffed his kick at the can. If Bastable muffed

his kick in the manner he asserted the extreme likelihood was that the can went off to the right into the shrubbery facing the porch. Burford himself had a feeling that this was what had happened. He was not far from the conviction that Joan Hibbert's story of having had to search three minutes in the fish-pond section was made up. There was no need for him, of course, to elaborate on that conviction. But if it was right, and Joan Hibbert actually had picked the can out of the central shrubbery, then there was a case for the idea that she had killed Ward between the kicking of the can and the rapping of it. It would take her very few seconds to snatch the can up and plant it somewhere handy. This would leave her the better part of three minutes in which to run into the yew patch, have a quick and angry word with Ward—it was likely enough that his share would be brutal—and let him have the knife behind the collar-bone. To get back and rap the can would require very few seconds. The awkward questions against the idea were these: How did she know Ward was by the yew? How did she get the knife?

The second idea was less feasible than the first only in that less time was afforded by it; but it was possible. It was possible only if it could be granted that the same two questions which affected the first idea could be answered satisfactorily. There was no time for her to search for Ward. It was necessary that she should have the knife in her possession, or at least be able to snatch it up quickly.

It was, on the face of it, if Joan Hibbert was the D. of the letters, quite likely that she sought a word with Ward in the course of the evening. It was only a matter of weeks since Ward had done her the final hurt of casting her off, and she still would be very sore of heart. In her idea, as was apparent from her letters, she was damaged goods, so soiled as to be

unable, in her own phrase, “ever to accept an honest man’s love.” It was very likely indeed that in the chance afforded by the dusk and the contacts of the game she would, womanlike, seek to learn from Ward if his determination to discard her still held. It was also likely enough that Ward, afraid of a reappearance of her badgering tactics, would take an opportunity to make his mind clear to her, and tell her that in the course of the game he would remain by the yew. This likelihood had support from the actual fact that Ward must have been by the yew during the greater part of the time that Irene Dalby was moving round the entire boundary of the garden.

As for the knife, it was entirely possible that Joan Hibbert, in spite of her denial, had been by the yew in the earlier half of the game. At that time, when the dusk was still thickening, she could easily have seen the knife gleaming in the fork where Billy Dalby had placed it. On that it could be further supposed that she had either planted the knife more handily in the yew or hidden it away elsewhere. There was even the chance that, having hidden the knife by the yew, it was she who suggested the tree as a rendezvous to Ward.

In breaking so badly his rule of avoiding ‘theory’ Burford was again at his new *rôle* of advocate for the defence. He was creating a case against Joan Hibbert to see in what direction it could be exploded. It seemed to him that he had evolved the only case that could be presented against the girl, and it was far from watertight. It supposed too much. But if Joan Hibbert was the D. of the letters it was a case that could put her in great peril.

Was it possible, Burford asked himself, that Joan Hibbert could summon up the determination, not only to kill Ward in this way, but to maintain such a measure of serenity

afterwards? Thinking of certain touches in the letters, Burford had to say “Yes.”

Joan Hibbert was of the stuff that martyrs are made. In an earlier day, had some admired person persuaded her of the injustice women suffered in being unfranchised, she would have been among those who chained themselves to railings and who went to prison to hunger-strike. In a much earlier day still she would have been a Charlotte Corday. Somewhat limited in intellectual grasp, what she believed in she believed in with absolute faith. If another man, loving her, had patiently shown her the common sense of the relation between man and woman, not using the ideas attaching thereto as a trap for her seduction, she might easily have come to shelve her romantic notions. But Ward’s insincerity and callous purpose had offered nothing to replace her cherished ideals save an empty husk. Cheated, her lapse from those ideals only made them more valuable to her. She had fallen from them, and could never get back. She was damaged goods, one of the living dead. Not only her own betrayal, but the knowledge that Ward was looking round for other victims would persuade her that he was an evil thing better dead. And, brooding along these lines—quite in tune with the outpourings of her later letters—when the opportunity came for putting an end to Ward’s villainy she grasped it.

But this Corday complex, as Burford saw it, carried the concomitance that her action should involve a penalty to be suffered bravely. It needed a strong motive to deter her from confessing what she had done. Burford knew what the deterrent motive was, he thought. It was behind her long struggle against the attack of Ward, behind her fear of scandal which gave him the lever for discarding her. It was, very

likely, the original source of the ideals she had lapsed from with such misgiving: her mother and younger sister.

My name is Joan Hibbert. I am twenty-three years of age. I live with my mother and younger sister. I have no occupation but caring for them. My mother is a widow, and is greatly an invalid.

So had run the opening of her statement to Burford on the previous evening. It was because of her love for her mother and sister, and because of their need of her, that Joan Hibbert did not carry impulses of the Corday complex to their conclusion—if Joan Hibbert was Ward's slayer.

Vanjohn came back with two postcards collected from Sally Bastable. One had been written by Irene Daldy and the other by Joan Hibbert.

Burford set them together on the topmost letter, leaving a space for the handwriting on the letter to appear between them. The witty scrawl of Irene Daldy did not match the letter-writer's hand in the slightest. The neat, painstaking half-script of Joan Hibbert was exactly the same.



## CHAPTER X

### QUESTIONS UNANSWERED

**CLOSE** on the heels of Vanjohn came Detective-Sergeant Tranter. He had failed to find a waiter who had ever seen a lady in Ward's flat. This, Tranter explained, was probably due to the fact that food from the restaurant was carried into the kitchen or dining-room, and that any lady in the flat was probably always in the sitting-room.

"It hardly matters, Tranter," Burford said. "Stand by the flat for a little, and I'll send a uniformed man over to relieve you. I'll take the diary and the letters with me to the station. You can join me there later."

"Very good, sir."

On the way to the station Burford stopped at the Daldys' house and asked if Irene had returned home. She had, and Burford begged an interview with her. She came with frank confidence in her manner.

"How is the hand?" asked Burford.

"Oh, much better. It has stopped throbbing, and looks like healing nicely."

"I just dropped in to ask you one question, Miss Daldy," Burford told her. "It may even seem a silly one to you, but don't mind. Answer it if you can. You told me last night that Rupert Ward called you 'Dolores.' Had he the habit of giving girls names like that?"

"Yes, that was one of his pet theories—that naming babies was foolish. He said children ought to be numbered, then given names that suited them when they grew up."

“So that Miss Blake and Miss Rubens and Miss Hibbert would all have names from him? I wonder if you can remember them?”

“Of course I can. Jacky was ‘Sprite,’ Vicky was ‘Fluff’—too obvious, that!—and Joan was ‘Diana,’ because she was so athletic, you see.”

“Thank you very much, Miss Daldy. I’m obliged.”

She came nearer him, and looked up at him confidentially. “Have you found out yet,” she asked in a low voice, “who killed Rupert?”

Burford shook his head. “Not yet,” he said. “I’m beginning to wonder if I ever will. I can’t see—unless all you young people are in conspiracy—how any of the kick-the-can party could have killed him. Are you all in conspiracy?”

“No, Mr Burford. We’re all as bewildered as you are. Besides, you didn’t give us any time to conspire. It must have been an accident, Mr Burford.”

“That,” said Burford, “will be as difficult to prove as murder. But it’s an idea. Good-bye, Miss Daldy.”

“Then you don’t think any more that it could have been me—or Roger?”

“No, I don’t think that any more. I don’t suppose I’d ever have thought it if you had given me the whole truth straight out.”

“I’ll remember that it’s silly to lie to a policeman. Good-bye, Mr Burford.”

Burford returned to his car and drove to the police-station. He spent an hour or two there taking reports as they came in. As touched on Ward’s relations with women, they supplied him with no information that he did not already possess.

Scotland Yard's discoveries regarding Methven and Horlick came in later, and they were none of them adverse to the character of the Scot or the butler. Methven was a steady-going civil engineer, highly thought of by his employers. From the local reports it could be added that he was happily attached to Jacky Blake, and hoped to marry her one day. And Jacky Blake had been seen in the company of Ward much less than she had been with other young men until she became attached to Methven. There was not the slightest thing to warrant Methven having a motive for killing Rupert Ward.

The same might be said regarding Horlick. There came out of the complete inquiry regarding the butler nothing to hint that he had ever more than his admitted contacts with Ward, and nothing to hint that he had a motive for killing the writer.

The day moved on, and the case, such as it was, centred more and more on Joan Hibbert. As the members of the local detective contingent came in Burford released them one by one for other duties. The same with the men who came out from Scotland Yard to help.

Still Burford made no move, much to the puzzlement of his *aides*, Crowther and Vanjohn. Burford was waiting for the knife to be returned to him. He already knew that what prints could be faintly made out on the messed-up handle were useless for identification purposes. While he waited for the knife Burford went round to see Arthur Wing, who was in a local estate office. While questioning him again on what happened when the can was kicked he contrived an artful question or two about Joan Hibbert's manner on the steps just before the kicking took place. Wing maintained that the girl had been deeply interested in the subject of the tennis-club. The questions, of course, were useless as helping to establish whether the girl contemplated murder there and then, since

she could not be expected to know that the can would be kicked at that moment, but they might have elicited a hint as to the general state of her mind. And Wing was not to be shaken in his idea that the can was kicked towards the fish-pond patch.

It was late in the afternoon when the knife was handed over to Burford. He carried it round immediately to the Bastables' garden, and spent a few minutes alone with it at the yew. Then, once more securing the assistance of Billy Daldy and summoning Crowther and Vanjohn, he had the boy place the knife in the tree in the same way as he had done the previous afternoon.

“You think that’s a fair reproduction, Billy?” Burford asked.

“As near as I can remember. You see, this upper branch stops you from wedging it right in. It must be right to within a quarter of an inch, sir.”

“Very well, Billy. Thank you.”

While Crowther and Vanjohn watched in some bewilderment Burford stood back and gazed at the knife. He brought Billy Daldy back with him, and stood with his hand on the boy’s shoulder. After a long spell of gazing thus transfixed at the knife he moved closer into the yew and gave a branch a slight butt with his head. At once the knife came out of its rest, fell with a slither along one of its containing branches, and dropped to lodge in a fork lower down with its point sticking downward at an angle of about thirty degrees.

“Good God!” gasped Vanjohn.

“If it did that now,” said Burford, “who’s to say that it didn’t do that last evening?”

“I see what you’re driving at, sir,” Vanjohn said. “But the point’s much lower than your shoulder.”

“Than *my* shoulder, yes—but not a great deal lower than Ward’s shoulder would reach. Just wait a moment. Perpend!”

He took a handkerchief from his pocket and made a thick pad of it. With this he struck up at the point of the knife. The result was the piercing of the cloth to about an inch in depth, but the knife came out of the fork and fell away sideways.

“Let us be sure,” Burford said. “Put the knife back again, Billy, where you had it before.”

Billy stepped forward eagerly, but took great care in the replacement. When he came back from the yew Burford stepped forward once more and gave the same branch a slight butt with his head. His greatly daring repetition was rewarded amply. Once again the knife slithered down and lodged in the lower fork, but this time with its point at a slightly different angle downward than formerly.

Burford turned to Vanjohn. “You were saying that the point was much lower than Ward’s shoulder?” he said.

“No, sir. I said much lower than *your* shoulder. I forgot that Ward was much shorter than you.”

“Uhuh!” grunted Crowther. “And longer in the neck, besides.”

“It hardly matters,” said Burford. “You are a little shorter than I am, Vanjohn. Come here a minute.”

He pulled the knife out of the fork and wedged his ivory footrule in its place. He set Vanjohn in position a little away from it, but with his back to it, and gave him a sudden push. Vanjohn staggered back, lost his footing, and fell up against the branching trunk of the yew. As he came erect the point of

the rule dug into his left shoulder, resisted a moment, then fell out of the fork.

“That,” said Burford, “is how Rupert Ward met his death.”

## § ii

“Yes,” said Greenlea next morning, at New Scotland Yard, “you had the makings of a case against any one of four of them—I’m leaving out the butler, but even he looked like being for it—and against that ill-done-by girl in particular.”

He reached mechanically for a cigar, said “Tchah!” and drew back his hand again.

“Murder’s murder,” he went on, “and it won’t do to let anybody get away with it. But I’d’ve hated myself to’ve seen that poor lass in the dock, let alone in prison, for a skunk like this fellow seems to’ve been.”

He tapped the bundle of letters and the diary, which, with Burford’s notes, lay on the desk before him.

“I’ve got daughters of my own,” he said.

“And a credit to their poppa they are, too,” said Burford. “Of course, they get their good looks from their mother!”

“That don’t get under *my* skin,” the Superintendent returned. “I don’t pretend to be any la-di-da blooming popinjay Apollo!”

“It would be useless,” murmured Archie.

“Hey, what’s that?” his chief demanded fiercely.

“I said I felt roofless. You know—my head blown off.”

“Atcha! You got too much lip. One o’ these days I’ll start and tick you off good and proper,” said Greenlea. “Well, as I was saying, it’s a good job you landed on the way the knife fell, Archie. But for that, on your notes and these letters and

this foul thing, I'd've felt bound to put the case before the P.P."

"The time-factor would have bust it, Chief," Burford said.

"You never know," Greenlea replied.

"It would have needed too much 'if' and 'suppose' about it. I'd have hated to present a case needing all that bolstering."

" 'Ifs' and 'supposes' might've muddled the jury—and you've got to remember that if it had been a murder it'd've been a very determined one. But it just shows, once again, that you've got to take your evidence as you find it, and not try to give it more than it's worth."

"That being so, nobody that came under suspicion except Horlick had really the time to have killed Ward," said Burford.

"No, that's true. Well, it's done with, anyway, and I'm glad it's turned out the way it did, Archie. Since the coroner agrees with you about it being an accident there'll be no need to bring all this rubbish forward." He tapped the diary and the letters. "It's extraneous, and would just cause unnecessary distress."

"There's going to be some. The Daldy girl won't feel too happy about having pushed Ward, and my friend Billy won't like to think that he left the knife for Ward to be pushed on to."

"Ward had himself to blame. If he hadn't been a skunk he wouldn't have been pushed. And how was the boy to know that his elders would go all childish and start playing—what is it?—Hi-spy-kick-the-can? But the boy and girl will get over it in time. They're young."

Greenlea brooded for a moment or two.

“What’d we better do with these things, Archie? We don’t want to send the letters back to the girl.”

“Better wait until the inquest is over and burn them with the diary,” said Burford. “I’ll make a point of seeing the girl and telling her they’re burned.”

“Do,” said Greenlea. He dismissed the whole case. “There’s this thing come up, Archie,” he said, reaching for some notes on his desk. “It’s right in your old country, and I think you’d better take a look....”

### § iii

Burford saw Joan Hibbert after the inquest. It was due to him that the girl had not been called as a witness, and she apparently had no desire to go to it as a spectator. It was Joan herself who answered the ring he gave on the bell. When she saw it was Burford on the steps her eyes widened and her mouth opened.

“Accidental death was the verdict of the jury on Ward, Miss Hibbert,” Archie said loudly, before she could get out a word. “I’ve come to tell you that if you ever happened to write to Rupert Ward your letters have been burned with all the others. What was in them is from now on nobody’s concern but yours, and nobody who has seen them will ever mention them again.”

The girl would have spoken, but once more Burford forestalled her.

“No, don’t say anything, Miss Hibbert. Forget the letters, forget Ward, forget everything that happened in the Bastables’ garden two nights ago. You are young, and all your life is before you. And don’t overdo the regrets: they are often nothing else than a bad habit. Good-bye!”



He lifted his hat to her and turned on his heel. He did not want to see the tears that he thought were welling into her eyes.

He did not know even then whether Joan Hibbert had struck the blow that slew Rupert Ward. On the evidence, ‘as he found it,’ he had no proof that she did. But only he knew of a branch displaced on the old yew—he and perhaps Billy Daldy. And if Billy Daldy knew he had a fine talent for keeping his mouth shut.

**FOOTNOTES:**

[1 See *The Counterfeit Murders*.

] [2 See *The Clue of the Dead Goldfish*.

] [3 See *Death on the Set*.

---

---

[The end of *Hi-Spy-Kick-The-Can* by Thom MacWalter (as Victor MacClure)]