

Death at

**DYKES'S
CORNER**



E.C.R. LORAC

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A Crime Club Detective Story

“We’ve taken the wrong fork. There’s a double hairpin bend somewhere.” There was! Immediately in front of them a car was drawn up on the opposite side of the road. As they swung round the wicked curve headlights blazed full at them, blinding them both. A lorry had drawn out to pass the standing car and was coming at them like a battle cruiser. They sensed the rending, tearing scream of metal as the lorry hit them, and darkness came down on them. In that threefold crash it was the occupant of the stationary car who was found dead. Out of the details of a commonplace accident Inspector Macdonald relentlessly builds up the most amazing elucidation of a murder mystery—a case devised with all E. C. R. Lorac’s customary brilliance.

By the Same Author

CRIME COUNTER CRIME
POST AFTER POST MORTEM
BATS IN THE BELFRY
BLACK BEADLE
A PALL FOR A PAINTER
THESE NAMES MAKE CLUES
THE DEVIL AND THE C.I.D.

DEATH AT DYKE'S CORNER

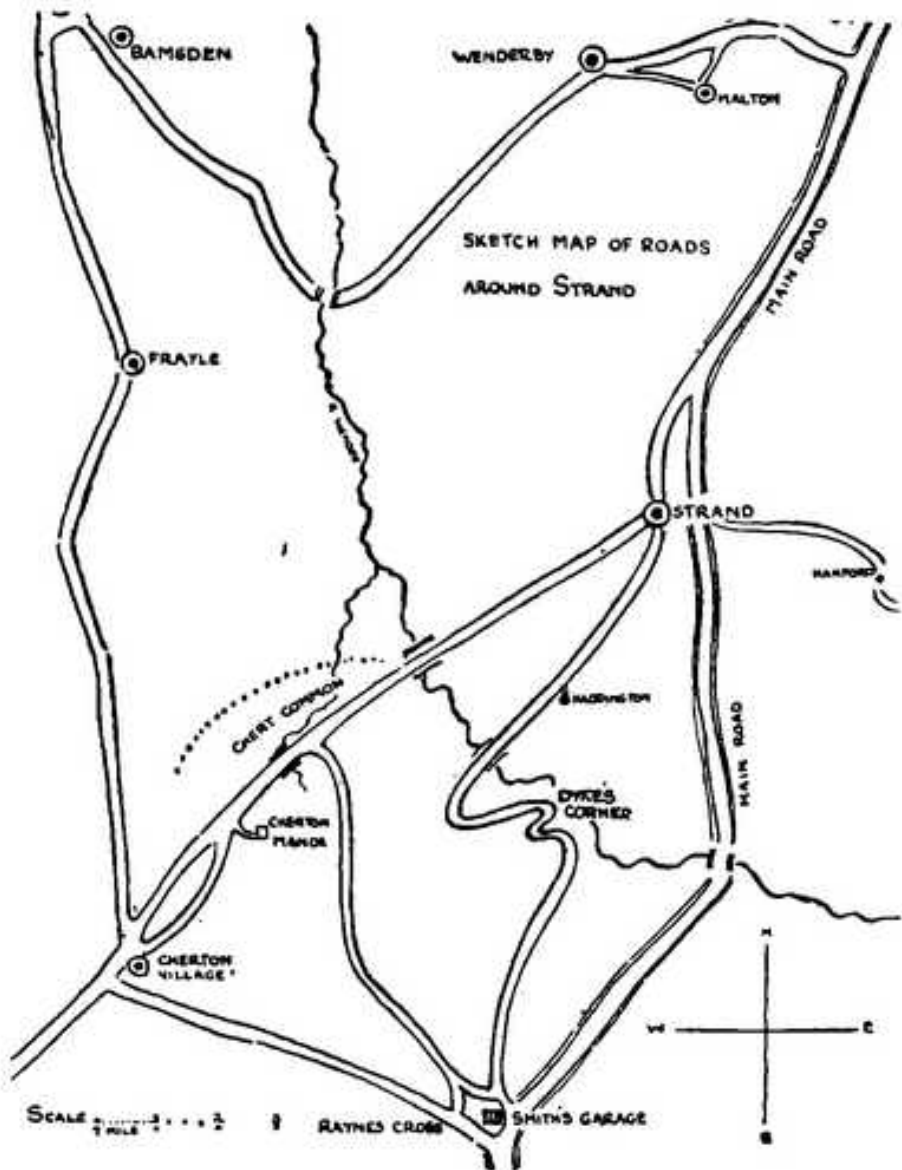
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E. C. R. LORAC



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SKETCH MAP OF ROADS AROUND STRAND

Death at Dyke's Corner

CHAPTER ONE

“Of all the filthy nights I’ve ever known,” broke out Roland Straynge disgustedly, taking his right hand off the driving wheel in order to close the off-side window of the car more securely. “Call it rain—it’s more like a wall of water. The roads’ll be flooded if it goes on like this. Hallo, is it leaking in on you too, now? Get the other rug from the back. Nothing except a jolly submarine could keep dry under this.”

“For the rain it raineth every day,” chanted Steven Langston beside him. “This jolly well beats the band. Can you see anything at all?”

“Nix. Wipe the screen for me again. We’re still on the road by the feel of it, but it’s an act of faith.”

“Anne said take the left-hand fork after we passed the A.A. box,” said Langston cheerfully, as he re-wiped the misted windscreen, and peered out at the streaming road which shone like a river in the glare of the headlights through the torrent which ran down the glass.

“A.A. box, be damned! You couldn’t see the Tower of London itself on a night like this,” grumbled Straynge. “It makes no odds, anyway. Either fork leads to Reading eventually. I only hope to God the river’s not over the road at Farley. Ten to one it will be—in which case we’ll be done in the eye nicely. It’s a fool trick taking these cross-country routes.”

Langston glanced at his companion’s face, and then again at the downpour which lashed the windscreen and headlights. He knew that Straynge was taking a risk in driving fast on unknown roads when visibility was almost nil, but Langston, like most young men of to-day, enjoyed the hazards of speed. He was a medical student in his fourth year, and Straynge was his cousin, a man considerably older than himself, with a growing reputation at the Bar. The two had been to the Hunt Ball at Wenderby, and had set out on their return drive to London at two-thirty in the morning. Straynge had to be in court early, and Langston himself had to be on duty in the wards of St. Joseph’s at ten o’clock. Necessity impelled them both to return to London, to snatch a few hours of sleep before the day’s work.

The car bumped over a bad stretch of road, and Langston said, “We’ve taken the wrong fork. Anne said that this was an absolute stumer. There’s a double hairpin bend somewhere——”

“Hell! There is!”

Straynge saw the bend in the road ahead just in time to save hitting the bank. He braked, felt the car skid on the flooded surface, and righted it with a skill which Langston applauded with a quick “Played sir,” as they swung more slowly round the second bend.

Langston heard the brief profanity with which Straynge greeted the situation ahead, and instinctively braced his feet against the panel in front of him. “All U.P. this time,” was his own reaction.

Immediately in front of them, a car was drawn up on the opposite side of the road, on the outer curve of the narrow bend. As they swung round the wicked curve, headlights blazed full at them, blinding them both. In the gap between their own bonnet and that of the stationary car another pair of lighted eyes glared through the rain—rather high up, Langston noted. A lorry had drawn out to pass the standing car, and was coming at them like a battle-cruiser, full steam ahead.

There are some situations in which the most skilful driver is impotent. This was one of them. There were three vehicles to occupy a given width of road, and the road was not wide enough. Straynge did what he could. He drove his Morris into the bank, braking skilfully. Langston felt the impact as wings and wheels crashed against the sodden bank, and then sensed the rending, tearing scream of metal as the lorry hit them and passed them, its height towering above them, its length seeming never-ending, as wood and metal and glass split and rent, and darkness came down on them.

“Are you all right?”

Straynge’s voice was quite cool, and Langston replied at once, “Yes. I’m O.K. You?”

“Not touched. God knows how. He kept his nerve and drove straight. I’ll say that for him. He’s just about shaved the side off us. My God! What a mess!”

“You there, sir?”

A hoarse voice called from the teeming rain, and Langston realised that the lorry driver had pulled up and come running back, and was standing beside them with the rain lashing down on him.

“Yes. Small thanks to you I am still here,” snapped Straynge. “What about the other car? Hell! I suppose we’ve got to be drowned as well as bashed.”

Producing a torch he clambered out of the wrecked Morris. The door handle had gone, and the door was split and rent, and Straynge kicked it savagely to get it clear. Seeing his own car he said “Good God!” hardly able to believe that he himself was unhurt after such an impact. Turning the beam of his torch on the car across the road he was silent for a second. It was a nasty sight, but miraculously it was not on fire.

“Have to get him out somehow, God knows how,” he said at length and turned to the lorry driver. “Got any tools in your outfit? Look sharp.”

Langston had found another torch in the door pocket beside him, and as he struggled out of the tilted Morris, Straynge said:

“Keep an eye on that bend, Steven. If anything else comes along there’ll be hell to pay. Blast this rain.”

Langston recognised the wisdom of his cousin’s advice. The road was narrow, and the double bend, edged with tall hedgerows and dense elm trees, might be responsible for a further smash if another car chanced to come along. The torrential rain, the twisting road and the high hedges were jointly responsible for the fact that he and Straynge had not seen the headlights of the stationary car. Now, with the lights put out of commission, the situation would be desperate if another car came along at speed.

The lorry driver came running back with tools, and he and Straynge set to work to lever open the smashed door of the wrecked car. It was a Daimler, Langston noted—a beauty—smashed now into crumpled confusion of twisted metal and rent panels. The driver was still inside. With the rain lashing in his face and pouring down his neck Langston kept watch on the road ahead. Behind them the lorry would indicate to an oncoming driver that caution was necessary.

He heard Straynge’s voice, “Come and look at him, Steven. I think he’s finished.”

Langston became aware of a reflection in the shroud of moisture which encompassed them and said:

“Look out. There’s another car in the offing. He’ll be on us if we are not careful.”

He handed his torch to Straynge, and went back to the wrecked Daimler. As he bent through the aperture where the door had been wrenched away, Langston was conscious of the heat of the Daimler's engine, and the hot airlessness which still persisted inside the saloon. The car was twisted and tilted, and the driver's slack body had been moved up by Straynge and the lorry driver so that it rested against the back of the seat, the head fallen forward on to the chest. Langston turned the beam of his torch on to the man's face and gave a soundless whistle. The glass from the smashed side window had been driven into the driver's face and throat. Langston knew that the man was dead before he touched the limp pulseless wrist. He was intent on the pitiable figure over which he bent, and was startled when a voice behind him said:

"Better let me have a look at him. I'm a doctor."

"He's quite dead," Langston said abruptly, and drew back, giving place to the new arrival. As he stood upright in the road again, the young man was almost glad to feel the lash of the cold rain on his face. Bending down in the hot air of the car must have turned him sick. He felt dizzy and bemused for a moment.

The lorry driver was talking to Straynge.

"His rear lights were out. I never saw him till I was on top of him, and just as I pulled out you came round the bend. There wasn't time to do nothing. I couldn't stop in time—we was nearly head on. I thought if I kept straight I might only hit the wings both sides."

"You were driving too fast," said Straynge, and the man replied:

"We have to keep schedule, sir, and I was behind time. Road's up on the straight stretch between Strand and Raynes Cross and I had to do my best on this."

Straynge turned to Langston.

"This doctor chap came up just as you got busy," with a nod of his head towards the Daimler. "He's put his car inside a gateway back there. He'll give us a lift with a bit of luck. The Lord knows how long the police will keep us here. The poor devil's dead, isn't he?"

Langston nodded, and a crisp voice came from behind them.

"Nothing to be done there. Someone's got to fetch the police."

There was a note of authority in the voice, as of a man accustomed to controlling others. He turned to the lorry driver.

“Is your outfit still able to move?”

“Yes, sir. The lorry’s all right. Wings gone, but I can drive her.”

“Then you’d better go on to Strand and fetch the police out. Report there’s a man killed. They’ll want an ambulance, and a couple of breakdown gangs as well. I’ll see your licence before you go—and don’t try to do any vanishing tricks.”

The man produced his driving licence, and the other took it.

“I’m going to keep this. The police will bring you back here. Give them my card, and be careful what you’re up to.”

He turned to the others.

“You’ll have to wait here, as I intend to do. My name’s Mainforth. If you get in my car, at least you’ll be under cover.”

Turning again to the lorry-man he said:

“If you see any car coming in this direction, try to stop them and warn them there’s a smash blocking the road. Go along now and keep your head.”

Langston put in, “Ought we to move him?”

It was to the dead man he referred.

Dr. Mainforth replied:

“No earthly object. The rain won’t do him any harm, and the police won’t thank us for moving him. Get inside—I’ll turn the car so that the headlights shine across the road—if I’m not bogged already. This rain’s as cold as sleet. Jolly night for a smash.”

With the engine roaring and the wheels churning up the clay, he managed to reverse his own car in the field and manœuvred it so that its bonnet was level with the gate, its lights streaming across the road.

“That’s the best I can do. No use standing in the road and waiting to be hit.”

“That’s a damned odd business, sir,” put in Langston, and the doctor replied:

“Meaning?”

“I’m a medical student. Fourth year at St. Joseph’s.”

“I see,” replied Mainforth. “What happened exactly?”

Straynge replied, giving their names and details of the accident. When he had finished Mainforth asked:

“You are sure the Daimler was stationary when you first saw it?”

“Perfectly certain,” replied Straynge. “I suppose the driver pulled up by the roadside when the rain came down in such floods. It was very difficult to see any distance ahead, but why the deuce he chose to pull up at the most dangerous point of a narrow bend beats me completely. It was an insane thing to do. I suppose he was killed instantaneously, wasn’t he? He’s horribly cut about.”

“But he wasn’t killed in the smash at all,” burst out Langston. “He was dead already, before the lorry touched him. His jugular’s cut right through, and he’s not bled at all, barring a few drops. If he’d been killed by the smash, he’d have been fairly spouting blood.”

“Good Lord!” exclaimed Straynge, and Mainforth put in:

“That’s all perfectly true, in fact, painfully obvious. I should say he’s been dead at least an hour, and the engine of his car had been running all the time. I probably needn’t give you advice, but apart from the police, I shouldn’t advertise what you know.”

“Quite,” replied Straynge, “but since we all three know the facts, can’t we get a bit farther? If the crash didn’t kill him, what did?”

“Exhaust gases,” said Langston promptly. “It was carbon monoxide which killed him—don’t you agree with me, sir? Remember his colour?”

“Yes. I agree with you as to what killed him. As to the mechanics of the killing—well, it remains to be proved.”

“Isn’t this quite possible?” asked Straynge. “Say he’d been driving with all the windows shut, because of the rain. If there was a fault in the exhaust pipe and the gas got into the car, he’d have felt a bit drowsy and dizzy. He realised he was feeling queer, and pulled up immediately, as an experienced driver would. Because it was raining he didn’t let down the window, and the rest followed.”

“A very nice explanation, accounting for all contingencies—almost,” said Mainforth. “You noticed the car? It’s a Daimler, almost new. If you’ve ever heard of a new Daimler with a fault in the exhaust pipe, it’s more than I have—or any one else.”

“Quite,” said Straynge in his abrupt way. “Also it’s a bit of a coincidence that his car was pulled up at the most dangerous corner it could have been

pulled up at. A very nice scheme. No arguing about faults in the exhaust pipe now. It's smashed to blazes."

"My hat!" said Langston. "That means——"

"It'll be the jury's business to say what it means," put in Mainforth. "You neither of you recognise him, I take it?"

"Who is he?"

"Morton Conyers."

Straynge gave a whistle. "Is he, by jove? I put in for some of his new issue a week back, but it was over-subscribed in five minutes."

"A financier then?" asked Langston and the doctor replied.

"Morton Conyers is the originator—and virtual owner of John Home & Co., Ltd. He started his first store in the outer suburbs of London twenty years ago. Recently he's been operating in the small market towns of the Home Counties, on the slogan of 'cut overhead costs and economise by dealing with one firm under one roof.' You probably saw his latest store last time you drove through Bamsden."

"Good Lord! That chap! He's a big noise, isn't he? Someone was saying that John Home's the English Woolworth. Jupiter! This isn't half going to be a huroosh!"

"That's about it—and the huroosh is just starting. Here are the police. That poor devil of a lorry driver's going to get it in the neck. Lucky you were on your own side of the road."

Langston checked a little whistle. He knew quite well that for a good part of their route they had been anything but on their own side of the road. Fortunately they could plead not guilty to any fault over the accident. They had been travelling slowly—for twenty yards. The Morris had stopped dead with its wheels in the bank before the lorry had touched them. Roland Straynge said all this, and said it several times over, to the Police Inspector who tried to lecture him in the solemn manner of the English Constabulary. Straynge's statement was a model of virtue, and the lorry driver, by name Albert Bigges, was an honest man. He made no attempt to contradict Straynge. He admitted that he had been driving faster than he cared to on such a night—but his job depended on his keeping to his time-table. He was behind time, owing to a puncture and to the fact that he had had to take the more devious route on account of road repairs and a tree down across the main road. On rounding the first bend at Dyke's Corner (where the accident

occurred) he had pulled out abruptly to avoid the Daimler. The rear lights of the latter were off, and he had been almost on top of it before he saw it. The very moment he pulled out he had seen the headlights of the Morris, and done the only thing he could do, since he was travelling too fast to pull up dead in his own length. He had gone on, keeping his lorry straight, and hoping to get through with a minimum of damage.

Straynge, sheltering in the police car, heard the inspector harping persistently on one point as he questioned the lorry driver.

“You say the Daimler was stationary. Was the Morris stationary, too?”

“It was when I hit it—pulled up by the bank.”

“When you first saw it was it moving, or standing by the bank?”

Straynge turned to Langston, and their eyes met. Comprehension dawned on them. The inspector had seen Morton Conyer’s body. In common with Dr. Mainforth and young Langston, he had known at once that the dead man had not been killed in the smash. The first question which had come into his mind was “How much do these other two know about it?”

Bigges was getting confused under the persistent questioning.

“The Morris was close in by the bank. It might have been moving. It had been moving, but it had pulled up before I hit it . . .”

“Look here, Inspector,” put in Straynge. “I told you we’ve just driven from Wenderby. We left there at two o’clock. It was two-thirty to the tick when the collision happened. You can see that from my watch—the glass broke when the lorry hit us. If you think we’ve been standing by the roadside here, think again.”

“If you left Wenderby at two o’clock, you drove pretty fast to get here at two-thirty,” retorted the inspector. “Over twenty miles that is, on a night like this, too.”

“That’s beside the point. There’s no law against my driving fast on decontrolled roads. I didn’t come round that bend fast.”

The inspector made further notes and then continued his questionnaire.

Who had first opened the door of the Daimler? How had they prised the door open? Had Bigges been sent back to his lorry for tools? What was the condition of the interior of the Daimler when the door had first been opened.

Langston cut in here. “The Daimler was bung full of exhaust gas. After I’d been bending over the body for a minute or two I was simply dizzy. It

was the foul air in the Daimler which upset me. I was all right before.”

Painstakingly the inspector got his statements on paper, read them to those concerned and got their signatures appended. Langston was shivering by this time. The rain had drenched through his coat and run down his collar. His light shoes were soaked, his feet cold lumps of inanimate weight. When the inspector had finished at last, Dr. Mainforth’s placid voice put in:

“If you two would like to come back home with me, I can offer you hot baths and get your clothes dried. You can hire a car to take you back to town if you want to, but you’re asking for trouble if you go on in that state.”

“Thank you, very much, sir. We should be more than grateful,” said Straynge promptly. “I’m awfully sorry you’ve been held up all this time on such a filthy night. It’s uncommonly good of you to offer to take us home with you.”

“Couldn’t do less,” said Mainforth briefly.

They walked back to the doctor’s car—a roomy Austin. The rain was still teeming down, though not descending in such floods as it had been doing before the accident, and the road seemed crowded with traffic. In addition to the police car, an ambulance and a breakdown gang were drawn up at the roadside. The two wrecked cars were tilted forlornly against their respective hedges, and the police were busy with their inevitable measuring tapes. Mainforth called to the inspector.

“Can I get my car through? If not, it’ll mean driving for miles. The other fork’s blocked.”

“I should think there’s room,” replied the Inspector. “You can try, anyway.”

Straynge and Langston got into the back of the Austin, and the doctor edged the car carefully on to the road. Assisted by signals from the police, he drove forward, inch by cautious inch, and managed to get the car through the gap between the two capsized vehicles, and then went ahead when he was signalled all clear.

“Come to think of it, Albert Bigges did the best he could in very difficult circumstances,” said Mainforth, when he had negotiated the second bend and was accelerating on the straight. “He hit hardest what was virtually a hearse, and let you two fellows off lightly. Think what a game the police would have had if you two had been killed, and the Daimler not much damaged.”

“It might have been a godsend to someone whom we’ll call X,” said Straynge dryly. “With Langston and myself dead, that inspector would have been free to indulge the theory which obviously he holds at present—that Stephen and I had been up to some dirty work, and were copped by the lorry just as we were about to make tracks.”

Mainforth chuckled. “Inspector White’s a great fellow for theories. He holds that advancement cometh neither from the right nor from the left, but from the exercise of a deductive faculty.” He yawned over the wheel. “I’ve been on the go since nine this morning. I’ve a ’flu epidemic, odd cases of scarlet, measles and mumps in abundance, and I’ve dealt with two confinements since dinner. In spite of all that I’m glad I happened along when I did. It looks to me as though this is going to be the most interesting death I’ve ever been in at.”

His sentence was interrupted by an explosive sneeze from Stephen Langston. Mainforth went on——

“I’m a great believer in hot whisky and lemon—particularly the whisky.”

“I’m with you,” said Straynge wholeheartedly.

CHAPTER TWO

It was between half-past three and four o'clock in the morning of Friday, January 21st, that Lewis Conyers was awoken by the ringing of the telephone bell in the library below. As he came unwillingly to the surface of consciousness again, his sleep-drugged mind was aware that the telephone had been ringing for a long time, as an accompaniment to his dreams. Swearing huskily, he sat up, switched on his bedside light, saw the time by his watch, and dragged himself out of bed. The phone was still ringing. No one would put a call through at that hour unless it were a matter of urgency. He dragged his dressing-gown round him and went downstairs, heavy headed with sleep, lurching a little as he put out a hand and fumbled for the light switches.

His curt "hallo" when he reached the telephone was answered by a man's voice, and the purport of the message cut through the last haze of sleepiness in young Conyer's brain.

"Is he dead?" he asked abruptly, after the news had got home. The Inspector at the other end admitted the fact with official sympathy, and continued about the necessity of identification, the mortuary, and other details.

Lew Conyers asked abruptly. "Do you want me to come there now?"

The answer was in the negative . . . the weather . . . the state of the roads . . . trees down everywhere. The morning would be soon enough. There was nothing to be done at the moment.

"Where did the smash happen?"

"Dyke's Corner. A shocking piece of road. Do you happen to know where Mr. Morton Conyers had been driving to?"

"No idea. He went out after dinner . . ."

Lewis Conyers hung up the receiver at last, and then crossed the big room to the table by the fireplace, where whisky and a siphon still stood. He poured himself out a stiff drink, and jumped as the door opened behind him. Turning, he saw his mother at the door—a tall woman in brocaded dressing-gown, her silver hair in a long plait down her back.

"Is anything the matter, Lewis? I heard the phone."

He put down his glass and pulled a chair forward.

“Sit down, Mother. It was the police ringing from Strand. There was a motor smash at Dyke’s Corner.”

“You’d better have your drink, dear. You look shaky. Drink it first and then tell me.”

Lewis did as he was bid, marvelling at his mother as he had done a hundred times before. Her self-control was worn like a garment, as close fitting as a glove, invariable, immutable. It was a quality in her which he admired and envied, though he did not share it. His hand shook a little as he raised his glass, and only when he set it down again did she ask:

“Your Father?”

“Yes.”

“Was he killed?”

“Yes.”

He sat down on the arm of her chair, and they were silent for a minute.

Then he said, “Go back to bed, Mother. There’s nothing to be done now—and there will be a lot to do in the morning.”

“Yes. I suppose there will be.”

The deep, soft, slightly husky voice was perfectly steady and quite emotionless.

“I don’t think I’ll go back to bed just yet, Lewis. There are a few things which we have got to say—before the morning—and I think they’re better said now. He was killed in an accident—at that awful corner?”

“Yes. A lorry ran him down, and the car was smashed to blazes.”

“Was he alone in the car?”

“Yes.”

The young man saw his mother’s graceful shoulders heave in a sigh—of relief—and he put his arm round her, while his free hand smoothed back his tousled fair hair. She spoke softly as she went on.

“At least one can say ‘Thank God’ for that—without being blasphemous. If it was just an ordinary motor smash, my dear, we may be let off without any hurtful questions—but we’ve got to be prepared.”

She paused, leaning back against his shoulder, and then went on.

“I know you’ve often wondered why I didn’t divorce him. You’ve been very patient, never worrying me by trying to make me talk. I’ve not got a great many principles, Lewis, but those I’ve got I abide by. For better for worse, for richer for poorer . . . One takes vows with one’s eyes open. I believe in sticking to them. A poor shred of self-respect, but one I have clung to. I’ve done my best to keep up an appearance of decency, when I knew the substance was lacking. I don’t want to give gossip a chance, if I can help it.”

“I don’t know how you’ve stuck it,” he burst out, and she replied.

“My dear, my dear, don’t say things like that—ever. You’ve been a brick. You’ve accepted my conventions, adopted my reticencies—and made life possible here. Carry on a little while longer. Never let it be known that things were awry. If questions are asked, we can at least describe with truth a certain family unity, a dignity, an absence of obvious breaches . . . Yes, I know . . . but it needn’t be said. One thing about decent breeding is that it saves one from letting strangers—and servants—know the seamy side. I was brought up to believe that personal dignity is worth while, and I’ve brought you up to believe it. I don’t think any of my friends say ‘Poor Mrs. Conyers’—even though they know a lot. I’ve always managed to appear happy—especially when I’ve been farthest removed from happiness.”

“I know you have,” he said, his voice gruff and abrupt. “I’ve marvelled at you—and I’ve done my best to do what you wanted, and not plagued you by talking. I’ll do my best now. It shan’t be my fault if anything’s said . . . that you don’t want said.”

“Thank you, my dear. Tell me, did the police ask you any questions on the phone?”

“Only if I knew where he had been driving to. I said that I’d no idea.”

“Lewis, there are a lot of things which you and I have left undiscussed—by tacit agreement. This is one of those rare moments when we can talk without reserve at all, and forget later—if we so wish—just what we have said. We’re alone now, you and I. I shall never repeat anything you tell me, as I know you won’t repeat anything I say to you. *Did* you know where Morton was going when he went out after dinner?”

“No.” He spoke curtly.

Mrs. Conyers did not turn her head to look at him, but she went on though his voice told her that her questions were unwelcome.

“You went over to see Mr. Groves, at Wenderby, didn’t you?”

“I meant to go to see him. I had a book of his I wanted to return. Then I remembered that it was the night of the Hunt Ball, and that Groves would be going, so I went into Strand and looked up Tommy Waring. He’s staying at the King’s Head. We played a hundred up at billiards, and then I drove on to Grove’s house at Malton, near Wenderby, thinking I could leave the book, but it was late when I got there, and the house was all dark, so I gave up the idea.”

“You were late back, dear.”

“Yes. I had a puncture, and the nuts stuck like the devil, and it took the deuce of a time to get the wheel off. I got in about half-past twelve. Were you still awake then?”

“Yes. I was reading in bed.”

Lewis got up from the arm of his chair and stood in front of his mother.

“Then you’ve had precious little sleep, Mother. You’d better get back to bed.”

“Not yet, my dear. I want to say all that I’ve got to say—and please God we needn’t talk of it again.”

Lewis Conyers took a cigarette and lighted it. He glanced down at the big open hearth, and kicked over one of the logs which lay embedded in a heap of white ash. It was still smouldering on the under side, and he said:

“As you will—but we might as well have a fire to look at. It’ll be more cheerful.”

He reached for the bellows and blew a draught of air at the smouldering logs until a flame broke out, and then put some small logs above the flame, so that a cheerful crackle rewarded him.

“That’s better,” he said.

Dorothea Conyers stretched out her hand to the firelight.

“Yes. One might parody the old adage, Lewis, and say ‘Let sleeping logs lie.’ So small a breath to fan an old fire into being again.”

He still knelt beside the hearth.

“What is it, Mother?”

“A fortnight ago I had an anonymous letter. One of those vile things which do find their way to households like ours. I burnt it. It told me nothing new——”

Lewis Conyers swore under his breath, and then broke out:

“That’s over, now. That—and other things.”

“Is anything ever quite over? any fire ever quite dead? any cause finally resolved into effect? I don’t know. I didn’t tell you this in order to complain. Only to explain how I knew that you had received an anonymous letter, too.”

Lewis Conyers got up from his place by the fire and leant against the mantel, looking down at his mother. He was a tall fellow, square-faced, with a good jaw and a petulant mouth. He was frowning now, so that his low square forehead was marked by transverse lines, and the hand hanging by his side was clenched.

“I don’t know if you’re forcing an issue, Mother, but—if ’twere said, ’twere well it were said quickly—and then wiped out. The police said that Father was killed in a collision, a lorry ramming his car from behind and crushing it into the bank. The smash occurred at two-thirty, when I was in bed. I don’t know anything more about it. I didn’t kill him. I know nothing about his death. No.”

With raised hand and imperative voice he bore down her effort to speak. “You have forced me to say this, and before God, it’s true. I’m glad he’s dead. There have been hundreds of times when I’ve wished him dead, but there’s one nightmare you can put out of your head once and for all. I know nothing of his death and I had no hand in it. You’ve got to believe that, or you and I can never be on the same terms again.”

“I do believe it. Oh, my dear, can we hope to be at peace together, you and I, without all this entanglement of wealth and place seeking, all this undercurrent of lies and intrigue? I’m afraid, Lewis. Desperately afraid.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“If there’s anything which the police aren’t satisfied about . . . you threatened him once, you know. He threatened back, Lewis. He said he would put on record what you said . . . what happened. I know, I heard what he said—though no one else did, thank God.”

Her voice broke for once, and her son looked down at her with a troubled face.

“You mean that time he was out shooting. He really believed I took a pot shot at him. My God! What a . . .”

He broke off with an effort, and Dorothea Conyers hid her face in her hands for a moment. When she spoke, her head was bent, her eyes on her clenched hands.

“Lewis, I’ve got to talk this thing out, once and for all. It’s like the fulfilment of a bad dream. How many times have I dreamt that I should wake up . . . and be told that he was dead, and that you . . . were suspected. It’s been an abiding horror to me. My dear, I *know* you’ve told me the truth. I believe you utterly—but I’m afraid what may be said.”

She drew herself erect again and met his eyes.

“I’ve got to tell you everything, Lewis—and you’ve got to tell me everything. When he went out after dinner I was in my room upstairs. I was sitting at the window, in the dark, because my head ached. You know the way you can see the road from my window—the stretch over Chert Common, and the turn by the bridge?”

Lewis Conyers nodded. “Yes. I know.”

“I saw the lights of his car—the Daimler wasn’t it?—down the hill and up the rise to the Common, and then along the level stretch to the bridge. I heard you start up the Hillman. I know the sound of the engine—and I saw your headlights, too, behind his, following him. He turned at the bridge, and you did, too.”

“I told you, Mother—I drove into Strand. There was a car ahead of me for some distance, but I lost sight of it. The Hillman wasn’t travelling well—I expect the tyre was at fault, and I went slowly because the steering wasn’t functioning as it should.” He met her eyes and broke out. “My God, this is awful, Mother. Can’t you believe me—and leave off torturing yourself?”

“I’ve told you I believe you, and it’s true. I’ve told you everything. All right, Lewis. I won’t plague you any more. Only, remember this. If things . . . are difficult . . . you can always rely on me. I want you to feel that you can trust me, and that you’re the only value I have. I’m sorry if I’ve hurt you. It’s just that—for the sake of our future happiness—I had to tell you why I was afraid. I knew you’d been goaded, because of me. It’s better to speak plainly, once and for all, and have done with it. It’s all behind us now.”

She got up from her chair and smiled at him wanly.

“Please God we shall never have to refer to this night again. I don’t generally give way to nerves. I’ve had plenty of schooling in the art of

‘gracious silence.’ Soon you and I will be able to go away, and leave this house—and forget everything but our two selves. Forgive me, my dear.”

“There’s nothing to forgive.” He came and put his arm around her shoulders. “I understand, Mother. I didn’t know you were afraid—of that. You needn’t have been. I wanted you to be happy, and though I’m a fool, I’m not such a fool as to imagine happiness could be won that way.”

She smiled at him—a smile which lighted grey eyes that were infinitely sad.

“I’ll go back to bed, my dear. Perhaps I shall be able to sleep a little now. I’ve got into bad habits—lying awake and listening for I know not what. One’s nerves play one tricks. Good-night—for such of the night as is left.”

“Good-night, Mother—or good-morning.”

He went to the door with her, and put out his hand to press the switch of the hall lights, but she stopped him.

“Don’t put the lights up. I can find my way, and I don’t want to wake any of the servants.”

Light on foot she went on across the wide lounge, and up the stairs, the beam of light from the library gilding her tall slight figure until she ascended out of its range.

Lewis Conyers went back to the library, closing the door behind him. The wood fire was blazing merrily now, and the suave golden light from the vellum-shaded lamps shone softly on polished rosewood, on the golden lattice work of valuable old bookcases, on the squat silver candlesticks on the writing-table, on gilded tree calf and morocco, rose and gold and green—all the rich warm hues of a richly beautiful library. Lewis Conyers saw nothing of the familiar room. He poured himself another drink, and stood with the glass in his hand looking down at the blazing logs. Into his mind came a sequence of memories. He had hated his father ever since he was a small child. He had known, with the intuitiveness of childhood, that it was because of his father that his mother’s eyes were shadowed and heavy. As he grew older he began to realise what manner of man his father was—that handsome, successful brute who rode roughshod over everybody. At one period he had been desperately afraid of him. Then, his schoolboy mind had developed a disgust which drowned fear. He would have left home before his schooldays were over had it not been for his mother. He had worshipped her gracious dignity, her unvarying courtesy, and the reticence which would allow no question or complaint from him. When he had reached

undergraduate age, Lewis Conyers knew pretty well all that there was to be known about his father; his sequence of mistresses, his natural cruelty, his ability to wound his wife with cynical witticisms whose double meanings were vile in intention and subtle in phrasing, his absolute amorality over the stock market, and his devilish cleverness which kept him just on the right side of the law. Throughout it all, Dorothea Conyers remained aloof, gracious and dignified, something in her persistent reticence forbidding criticism or comment. She ran the great houses which her husband owned; it was her taste and knowledge which rendered them beautiful; her quiet control which ordered their service, her spirit which rendered them homelike. Charitable, courteous, and thoughtful, she created a home and a spirit of peace out of the very wreck which her husband had made of her own initial aspirations.

She had kept Lewis from home as much as she could, first at school, then at the University, until one day, in his second year at Oxford, he had refused to go up again, to leave his mother alone. He had said that he did not care for University life; that he wanted to read law, and that he could do that while living at home, with coaching in town. His father had acquiesced, with cynical indifference, and Lewis had grown to hate and despise him more with every day that passed.

Standing by the fire, Lewis went over his past life, realising in a series of visualisations how one figure had always darkened his outlook. He stretched out his arms in a movement of relief, as though a burden had fallen from his shoulders.

“Thank God he’s dead . . .”

He spoke the words aloud, a passion of feeling in his voice, and then, with a sudden longing for fresh air, he turned to the oriel window with an impulse to pull back the curtains and let the wind blow through the room, to change the very air in it.

The bay of the oriel was shut off with heavy damask curtains, a subtle weave of rose and gold and blue, and Lewis gripped the thick silken edge and swung the curtain back with an impetuous swing of extended arm—and then stood still, his breath caught in a jerk, his pulses drumming. In the space between the curtains and the curve of the window seat a man was crouching, looking up at Lewis with malevolent eyes, half-cunning, half afraid. With eyes half-blinded with rage, Lewis Conyers recognised Strake, Morton Conyers’ valet and personal servant.

Lewis never knew how long he stood, looking down at the cowering figure. Realisation seemed to come slowly—the knowledge that this small ferret of a man had been behind the curtains all the time that Lewis had been talking to his mother: that Strake had heard all that Dorothea had said. The pulses swelled in the young man’s temples, hammered until his vision was dazed, and for a while he was unable to speak. Something in his mind was warning him—don’t make a noise. Perhaps she is asleep . . . When at last he spoke, he was amazed that his voice sounded so natural.

“Come outside, Strake. Mrs. Conyers had gone back to bed. I don’t want to disturb her.”

“Yes, sir.”

Wary, calculating, but obsequious in manner, the little valet stepped out into the room, and followed Lewis to the door. The young man led him across the lounge and unbolted the door which gave on to the lobby and the front door. Very softly Lewis spoke again.

“You were there all the time, Strake? You heard what was said?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Undo the bolts and open that door, Strake. You’d better do what you’re told.”

“Think a bit, sir,” said the man softly. “It won’t do you no good to do anything rash. You’d better talk things over.”

“Talk—to you? My God! You filthy sewer rat, d’you think I’m going to bargain with you? Open that door, you plague rat . . . or I’ll . . .”

There was something very menacing about Lewis Conyers at that moment; with fists clenched and head slightly advanced he stood over the small valet, tall, powerful, in his face and low-toned voice a fierceness which terrified Strake. The valet was a small man, used to soft living, a physical coward who dreaded pain.

“For the last time, open that door—and count yourself lucky you’re getting through it alive.”

His voice was quieter still, and Strake in a sudden panic, obeyed, shot back the bolts, and opened the front door. A gust of wind nearly hurled him back; the rain came lashing in from the darkness, torrential, spiteful.

“Get out—now, at once! Get out and stay out.”

Strake whined. “Not on a night like this, sir. Not . . .”

“Get out!”

“You’ll be sorry for this. I know what you did—and your mother knows it, too, the . . .”

Lewis Conyers waited no more. His fist shot out into the other’s face, and he sensed the loathsome impact of hard knuckles against yielding flesh. Strake went down the stone steps backwards, somersaulting from the impetus of that furious blow, a ludicrous figure which revolved like a marionette and then lay still on the gravel of the drive, while the rain lashed down on him. Lewis Conyers closed the front door and leant against it. Suddenly he felt tired—deadly tired and sick. His head throbbed and stars confused his vision, and inertia overcame him so that he was incapable of thinking any more.

He knew that he had done a crazy thing. He had given way to an impulse of violence just when sanity was most needed. Reason told him to open the door again and reconsider what he had done, but reason was defeated by a weight of intolerable weariness. He walked back into the library and slumped down into a chair, his limbs like lead, his head aching. Weariness, excitement, and the whisky which he had just drunk, combined to dull his faculties until he was only conscious of an overpowering desire to sleep. His head slipped sideways until it rested on the arm of his chair and his heavy eyelids closed, and he slept the sleep of sheer exhaustion, not peacefully, but in a sort of dream conflict in which he called voicelessly to his mother for succour.

Rain lashed against the oriel window, and gusts rattled the casements; outside a constable, newly stationed on duty in the drive of the late Morton Conyer’s house, bent his head to the driving gale as he plodded painstakingly up the gravelled sweep. Half-blinded by the rain, he saw little save the ground at his feet until he was within a yard of the front door. Then his eyes fell on Strake, lying prone at the foot of the stone steps.

“Cripes!” was the constable’s individual reaction to his discovery.

CHAPTER THREE

“That’s about it, Superintendent. Cause of death carbon monoxide poisoning. Time of death doubtful, but the probability is that it occurred before midnight. Some bruising on fists and arms previous to death. Considerable post-mortem injuries due to the car collision. No disease or symptoms of poisoning other than the gas. Alcohol taken shortly before death. There you have it in short words of three letters, shorn of technical jargon. Make what you can of it.”

The police surgeon, Doctor Reith Gordon, was speaking of the late Morton Conyers and the manner of his death. Superintendent Webber replied:

“Thank you, doctor. As to what I make of it, it looks like this. Deceased had a scrap with someone shortly before his death. He bruised his fists in hammering that someone, but wasn’t much damaged himself. He was a big chap, but in no sort of training, so it looks as though his opponent can’t have been much of a fighter. Deceased was used to soft living. If he’d been hit about the body, I reckon the bruises would be there to tell us so.”

“Quite right. There’s a bruise on his forehead, but not in a place to cause unconsciousness. Your ‘someone’ fought back—but they didn’t know where to hit. A good one over the solar plexus would have done the job for them.”

“Ah . . . Well, after the scrap it looks as though he got back into his car to drive home. He never got there, because someone did some dirty work with the exhaust pipe, and arranged for the gases to enter the body of the car. He had the windows of the car up and got swimmy in the head. He pulled up, but he didn’t lower the windows because of the rain—or maybe he lowered them and put them up again. Can’t tell. He was drenched, of course, with the rain pouring in after the smash. As for the car, the lorry fairly crumpled it up. No hope of finding any signs of jiggery pokery.”

“Just so. There’s one point—not in my province, of course. Conyers was an experienced motorist. No competent driver would have pulled up at the spot he chose. It was simply asking for trouble.”

“Yes—but if he was feeling woolly in the head, maybe he didn’t realise just where he was.”

“It’s not in my province, Super, but if he was feeling that groggy, it beats me how he took the first bend so neatly. He wasn’t across the road, was he?”

“No. The Daimler was drawn up by the hedge. It might have been better if he had been right across the road—more chance of the car’s being seen. It’s a puzzle, sir, I grant you that. He was killed by carbon monoxide—that’s as good as saying he was killed by exhaust gas, isn’t it?”

“No, but it’s a reasonable inference. Coal gas amounts to poisoning by CO, but there’s always the smell of the by-products hanging around the victim. You can smell it at the autopsy, when the subject’s opened up. This chap’s clothes reeked of exhaust gas, and the by-products—carbon particles in suspension, were in his lungs.”

“Very well. If he was killed by exhaust gas, the interior of that saloon car was poisonous. Mr. Straynge and Mr. Langston both said the Daimler was full of exhaust fumes—reeking of them. No one else could have driven that car without being overcome by the gas. We can’t argue that deceased was doped first, and then put in the car and driven to Dyke’s Corner, because you’d have found traces of the dope at the P.M.”

“We should—and I can tell you we’ve been pretty careful. We’ve had blood tests, as well as analysing the organs. He wasn’t stunned, he wasn’t doped, and I’m pretty certain he wasn’t drunk.”

“Very good. He was killed by exhaust fumes—and he pulled his car up neatly at the most dangerous corner he could have chosen. Perhaps he had to pull up. Perhaps another car blocked his way.”

“Ah!” said the doctor. “Now you’re thinking along my lines. Taking the weather into consideration, if Conyers had seen his road blocked by another car, he’d have pulled up and waited. He wouldn’t have got out because it was raining heavens hard; he wouldn’t have let the window down for the same reason. He would just have sat—and he’d very soon have nodded over his wheel.”

The superintendent nodded. “That seems quite possible, sir. Also, it looks as though he hadn’t driven far since his exhaust pipe was monkeyed with. The gas must have been coming into the car all the time he was driving, but while the car was moving enough air got in to keep the gas down. As soon as he pulled up, the gas got more concentrated.”

Dr. Gordon nodded. “That’s quite reasonable. It’s a fascinating problem. Someone tinkered with the exhaust and disconnected the rear light. As soon as Conyers drove off that someone—or an accomplice—got on ahead and

manœuvred a car into position to block his road at Dyke's Corner. Conyers was a good driver and he'd got a superb car. He pulled up dead when he saw the obstruction and waited for the other chap to get out of the way. Query, did some optimist hope his car would be rammed early on, and that he'd be smashed up while he was still in coma. Verdict, death from misadventure and no questions asked?"

"Maybe they did, sir. Well, our deputy Chief Constable's decided to call the Yard in—so we shall soon see what's what."

The superintendent sounded sore, and Gordon nodded sympathetically. He knew that the deputy official was none too popular with the county men, and he guessed just what the latter were feeling about it.

"It'll save you a lot of work, Super—and pretty dirty work at that. Deceased wasn't a pleasant character; there will be a lot of investigating to be done concerning his nasty ways, and it might well go against the grain with you to bring up some of his doings as evidence. We're all human. Conyers has done harm enough without having chapter and verse published to other folks' detriment. It'll be easier for a Yard man than for you."

"Yes, there's that to it—but I don't think the solution's hard to find in this case. However—not my business to act as jury. The Commissioner's sending Chief Inspector Macdonald down. He's a good man and said to be pleasant to work with. I don't reckon this job will take him long."

The Deputy Chief Constable had wasted no time over asking assistance from "C.O."—the Commissioner's Office—otherwise "the Yard" of popular parlance. Things had not been working too easily under the Deputy Official. The latter held that the County Police had got into easy going ways; they were too self-satisfied and stereotyped.

When Superintendent Webber showed a tendency to jump to a facile conclusion concerning the responsibility for Conyers' death, the Deputy Chief Constable had administered a sharp reproof, and neither man had done justice to the other's point of view. Webber held that his Deputy Chief was not guilty of social snobbery and regard for wealth.

His superior officer thought that Webber had made up his mind too early and was likely to be biased in favour of his own premature judgment.

Chief Inspector Macdonald was very quick to sense this tension, and he had enough perception to see that both parties had a case. The police official who preferred a case against Lewis Conyers would have to be very sure of his case. Macdonald, a man as little prone to respect mere wealth as any in

this world, knew that to charge a very wealthy and influential man on insufficient evidence was to bring the police into disrepute—so far, he sympathised with the Deputy Chief Constable. The latter was right in refusing to accept easy assumptions. Webber on the other hand, was a man of ripe experience in police work. He had a “nose” for a suspect, and no man of his position was likely to undervalue the laws of evidence. Apart from the actual case, Macdonald could foresee a lively voyage for himself, steering between a Deputy Scylla and a constabular Charybdis.

“An open mind is what is wanted here.” Such was the advice of the Deputy Chief Constable, and then Macdonald was left to make contact with a very disgruntled superintendent.

“Tell me just what you make of it,” said the chief inspector. “You’ve been at this job longer than I have, and experience is worth a lot of theory.”

“Ah . . .”

Webber grunted amiably. It was the first comforting word that had come his way that day. He set out his facts—Morton Conyers’ character and manner of life; Lewis Conyers’ attitude to his father and mother. Strake’s evidence. Strake was in hospital, sick and sorry—and very vindictive. He had given a full account of Mrs. Conyers’ conversation with her son, and of Lewis’ own words, and violent treatment of himself.

“You’d better see Strake yourself,” Webber concluded to Macdonald.

“Yes,” agreed the latter. Macdonald had learnt a certain amount about Morton Conyers’ business dealings before he came on the scene. “Have you found out where deceased drove to on the evening of his death?” he inquired.

“No. We haven’t traced his route so far. I reckon he didn’t get far afield.”

“That’s one of the first things we ought to establish,” said Macdonald, “and then to check Lewis Conyers’ movements.”

“Yes. His story’s pretty thin. I could have made up a better one in my sleep,” replied Webber.

“Well—you go into it yourself. There’s motive, all right—and opportunity.”

Macdonald did not go to see Strake first. He went to see Lewis Conyers.

It was five o’clock in the evening when the chief inspector drove up to Cherton Manor, the Conyers’ house, and it was almost dark when he arrived.

He could just see the tall stone chimney-stacks and the angle of the roof, with its sagging roof tree—just enough to tell him what manner of house it was, an ancient manor, unspoilt and dignified.

Macdonald had learnt a little about the “English Woolworth,” and he immediately sensed some other personality than that of Morton Conyers when he entered the stone-flagged lounge, and saw the rugs and furniture and the hangings of the panelled hall.

It was in the library that Lewis Conyers elected to meet the Scotland Yard man. Conyers stood by the mantelpiece, erect, very still, his pallid face frowning.

“Good-evening, Chief Inspector.”

“Good-evening, sir.” In the brief pause that followed their formal greeting, Macdonald had to make up his mind as to his gambit. He had waited for his first impression of the man he was to interrogate.

“Will you sit down?”

The toneless voice was courteous enough, but Macdonald advanced to the other side of the fireplace and held out a hand to the glow of the flames. He liked the wood fire.

“This man Strake is out to make trouble for you, sir.”

His voice held the formal courtesy which was second nature to him, but the observation itself was totally informal. He sensed the fact that young Conyers’ pose slackened a little; he became less rigid and Macdonald looked him straight in the face.

The young eyes were on a level with his own—Macdonald lacked a fraction of six feet. They were very light blue eyes, the pupils a mere pinprick of blackness.

“Yes. I expect he is. Hardly to be wondered at, in the circumstances.”

“Will you tell me just what the circumstances were? I have Strake’s version—I should like yours.”

Conyers’ brows were knit as though he were pondering over the puzzle of this quiet-voiced man. Perhaps the voice had something to do with it. Webber had never learnt to speak quietly, and Lewis Conyers’ nerves were very much on edge.

Suddenly, Conyers sat down, as a tired man sits, heavily.

“I’ll tell you willingly. It’s not a very helpful story so far as I am concerned.”

“That’s why I want to hear your own version of it. Strake’s story was told while he was feeling vindictive.”

“He’d every reason to feel it. I chucked him out into the rain and left him lying there. It was through no virtue of mine he wasn’t killed. If I could have hit hard enough to kill him I should have done it.”

He paused, but Macdonald made no comment. He sat down not immediately facing Lewis Conyers, and pulled his pipe out of his pocket. The man he was listening to was very near to the edge of his endurance and officialdom was not likely to get the truth out of him.

Conyers stared at the older man, sitting there filling his pipe methodically, and suddenly found it easy to talk—not in the curt question and answer manner of a police interrogation, but in manner of a younger man talking to an older one.

“I was in bed when the phone went. Asleep. I think it had been ringing for a long time. I came down here only half awake, my eyes bunged up and my head heavy. The superintendent told me my father was dead and his car smashed up. Just after I rang off my mother came down.”

Conyers reached for a cigarette, and Macdonald who had just struck a match lighted it for him. The light flickered over the two hands, the one hard, lean, brown; the other white, bruised on the knuckles, unsteady. It seemed to Macdonald that Lewis Conyers’ hands were an epitome of himself—at once well-tended, bruised, shaky.

“My mother isn’t a person who talks much,” went on the tired voice. “She just ignores what she can’t help, and does her best with what’s left. I have always respected her reticence. It was all I could do to help her. She talked quite a lot that evening, and put into words things she would never have expressed to any one but myself. We talked things out. Later, she went back to bed. I stayed here by the fire, and had another drink. I remember saying, out loud, ‘Thank God, he’s dead.’ I went to the window because I wanted air in the room—and Strake was behind the curtains there. I suppose he heard the phone and came sneaking down, and when he heard me on the stairs he went and hid behind the curtains. He had been listening all the while—listening to my mother, unburdening her mind. God! I can’t think why I didn’t kill him. It might have been better if I had, filthy rat that he is . . .”

“No. It wouldn’t have been better,” said Macdonald’s even voice. “It’s your mother you’ve been thinking about, first and foremost, isn’t it? For you to have killed Strake wouldn’t have helped her.”

There was silence again for a moment. In his narrative Lewis Conyers had told Macdonald a lot, and the information which mattered had been given indirectly. He worshipped his mother; Macdonald respected that, even though he knew what it might imply in this case. Conyers spoke again, his voice tense:

“If you’d seen Strake hiding there, and realised—what I did—what would you have done?—or doesn’t a policeman do anything?”

“A policeman’s like any other man. I might well have done just what you did—so far as I can tell. I might even have killed him, because I know how to hit. The French have an expression which has legal sanction in their code. They hold that a man can be *hors de lui*—beyond himself, as we say. There are moments when a civilized man asks for blood—but he doesn’t do any good. It’s a good thing you didn’t kill him.”

Macdonald puffed away at his pipe for a moment, while Lewis Conyers studied him. The latter could see the chief inspector’s head in profile—high forehead, nose slightly hooked, upper lip long and jaw strongly marked. The long head and well-marked brows were those of a thinker—a don, a lawyer, or a schoolmaster. The mouth, jaw, and setting of the rather fine head were those of a man of action. About forty years of age, Conyers guessed (Macdonald was actually forty-five), in fine training, and a man of education, but it was the voice that Conyers liked instinctively, low-toned, level, with just enough of a Scots accent to give quality to the a’s and r’s.

“Thanks for seeing my point of view, Inspector. Decent of you——”

Macdonald turned to him.

“I understand why you threw Strake out to lie in the rain, but that won’t help you much. I’m neither judge nor jury.”

“And it’s probable that I shall have to face up to them?”

“It may come to that, sir.”

“Oh, cut the sir. There are some people I can talk to—and you’re one of them.”

“As you will. Speaking unofficially, I think you’re likely to be in a jam. You’d better understand my position. I’m at the beginning of an inquiry, and I have not yet collected any evidence. If, in the course of the inquiry, I

consider that there may be ground for charging you, it would be my duty to caution you that anything you say may be put down and used in evidence against you. At present, I can ask you any questions I like. You're not bound to answer them, but I advise you to do so. It's quite as much my job to clear an innocent man as to charge a guilty one. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly. By way of clearing the decks I want to say that I didn't kill my father. I never had any intention of killing him, because if I'd ever harboured such a thought I could never have looked my mother in the face again."

"Very good. Do you know how he was killed?"

"Yes. In the car smash."

"No. He was dead before the smash. He was poisoned by exhaust gas."

"Good Lord . . ." Conyers caught his breath, and Macdonald went on at once.

"Knowing that, can you hazard any guess as to who killed him?"

Their eyes met again, light blue eyes under heavy lids, weary but alert; dark grey eyes, the colour of slate, under clearly marked black brows, eyes that missed nothing.

"No. I can't."

"Meaning, you won't?"

Conyers paused and Macdonald said, "Take your time. You can't answer a question like that in a hurry."

"Instinct is reflex—immediate, but not hurried," replied the young man quietly. "You've been very decent to me."

"Cut that out. I'm asking you an objective question. The answer has nothing to do with my qualities or yours, with my sympathy or lack of it. It's fact I want."

"Your qualities have got something to do with it. Human beings aren't chessmen. I've no intention of telling you any lies. That's one reaction. The other is this. I don't know who killed my father, but neither will I hazard a guess as to who did so. It amounts to this, I suppose. I did not kill him. I don't know who did, but because I know the manner of man he was, I won't help you. If someone has to hang for murder, I won't be assistant hangman."

“That’s straight. I know where I am—and you know where you are. The questions I am going to ask concern you. You can do as you like about answering them.”

Macdonald knocked out his pipe on the hearth and refilled it, leisurely. His only interest was to get at the truth, and he was prepared to allow Conyers time to think.

“At what time did your father leave this house on Thursday night?”

“About ten minutes to nine. We dined at half-past seven. He went out quite shortly after dinner.”

“Did he say that he was going out?”

“No. He left the dining-room, and had his coffee in the lounge. I had mine with my mother in the drawing-room. As I came out into the lounge again, I saw him going to the side entrance with his coat and hat on. That door leads to the garage.”

“What did you do then?”

“I went to the cloakroom and got my own coat. I then went to the garage. It was raining—a beastly night. I got out the Hillman——”

“The car you usually drive?”

“Yes. It’s a sports model. Does ninety at its best.”

“How long between the time your father left, and the time you left?”

“It depends on what you call the point of departure. I should say he got to the garage ten minutes before I did, but he always runs the Daimler straight in and has to back out. He’s slow in getting away. I always back in—I’ve a separate lock-up, and I leave my car ready to take out. Also the Daimler’s a long body. It takes a lot of reversing, and the drive’s awkward, as you probably noticed. I take it much quicker than he does—did. There’s an awkward turn by the gates—awkward for a big car, and a stiff hill beyond if you’re going to Strand. By the time we’d cleared the hill and turned into the main road—assuming we drove the same route—there wouldn’t have been much in it.”

“Thanks. That’s very explicit.”

Conyers smiled, for the first time since Macdonald had seen him. It was a twisted smile, having a quality of bitterness, but somehow it lent charm to his heavy-eyed face.

“I told you that I wasn’t going to tell you any lies, and I meant it. If there’s any question I can’t answer truthfully, I’ll refuse to answer it at all.”

“Very well. When you reached the main road, did you see the Daimler in front of you?”

“No. To be precise, I saw the headlights of a car. It might have been any car. There’s a good deal of traffic on that road as a rule.”

“Did you catch up the car in front of you, or overtake it?”

“No.”

Macdonald paused. He was mainly interested in getting to the point when Conyers would refuse to answer his questions. In all detection the question arises “Is this man—or woman—telling the truth?” and Macdonald was old enough to know how difficult is the assessment of a liar. In the present case he believed that Conyers spoke honestly when he said, “I’m not going to tell you any lies.” Had he intended to lie he would not have stated in advance that there might be questions which he would not answer. He continued at last.

“I’m not going to ask you if you knew that it was your father’s car in front of you. I’m simply assuming that you did. In your previous evidence you stated that you had a puncture and that you spent a longish time over changing the wheel. You know the roads well. At what point did you pull up and change your wheel?”

“Just beyond the bridge, in the hollow by Rank’s farm. It’s between four and five miles from here.”

“About ten or fifteen minutes drive, presumably. You left here by nine o’clock. Was it at nine-fifteen—approximately—that you changed your wheel?”

“I don’t know the exact time. The distances are as I told you, and it would have taken nearly fifteen minutes to get there.”

“I think we had better get this straight,” said Macdonald. “You changed your wheel, sometime between the hour you left home and the hour you returned. The spare wheel was on the Hillman, and the punctured wheel on the back of the car next morning. In the piece of road you mention—the hollow by Rank’s farm—a nut was found. In the darkness you probably mislaid it.”

“Yes. I did. I thought the others would hold, and it was raining.”

“Quite—and you were near home. Again I’m not asking a question, but making an assumption. You changed your wheel—on the return journey.”

There was silence again, and then Macdonald went on:

“You said that you would tell me no lies. I believe you. I accept what you have said as true. At the moment it’s my own judgment I’m depending on. You said that you did not kill your father. I take that to mean that you had no part or lot in his death?”

“I implied that. I did not kill him and I had no hand in it at all.”

“But you followed his car. You know where he went when he left here that evening. Is that the question you refuse to answer?”

“I can’t answer it.”

“Put it your own way. You have a right to keep silent and you understand the issue. It’s quite plain.”

Macdonald turned in his chair and faced the other again.

“I’m sorry to have to return to Strake’s evidence. There are some actions which seem intolerable to recollect, and Strake’s petty beastliness was of the kind which sticks in the throat—but if I don’t raise the issue someone else will. He spoke of your having received anonymous letters.”

“Yes. My mother mentioned it.”

The young man looked at Macdonald with an appeal in his eyes. “Is there any hope of keeping her out of all this? She doesn’t know anything about it.”

“I’ll do my best,” replied Macdonald. “She will have to appear at the inquest, but the earlier proceedings will be mainly a formality. Later—it may depend on yourself. Your attitude cuts both ways, you know—I speak unofficially, but if you are charged your mother won’t be content to keep out of it. However—to get back to my last point. Will you tell me the purport of the anonymous letter you received?”

“Not very difficult to guess, is it? It contained hints of my father’s affairs, and offers of further information.”

“Concerning people in this district?”

“Concerning his private and personal affairs—not business. I burnt it. If you want to know whether that letter caused me to go out on Thursday evening, the answer’s in the negative.”

“Thanks. Returning to your own time-table on Thursday. You left here at nine o’clock. You arrived at the King’s Head shortly after ten.”

“I believe so. I didn’t notice the time exactly. If I’m allowed to ask questions, can you tell me at what time my father was killed?”

“Probably before midnight. It’s not easy to be exact. The two other men who were concerned in the smash—a Mr. Straynge and Mr. Langston—both gave evidence that the interior of the Daimler was foul with exhaust gas. The rear of the car was too much damaged to ascertain if the exhaust pipe and the floor had been tampered with.”

“But they might have been?”

“Certainly. It could be alleged that they were tampered with before the Daimler was taken out of the garage here. You might as well look facts in the face.”

Lewis Conyers stared into the fire, and then spoke very slowly.

“Thanks for telling me. The superintendent wouldn’t tell me anything.”

“He had the right to act as he thought best. I also have the right to use my own discretion within the scope of our ruling.” Macdonald studied his companion for a moment before he continued: “Going back to your evidence. You reached Strand about nine-fifty and you played billiards with Mr. Waring for some time—till ten-thirty, and when you left the King’s Head you drove direct to Malton, by the Wenderby road. You must have reached there by eleven o’clock. You found Mr. Grove’s house in darkness, and you drove back home, getting in at twelve-thirty.”

“Yes.”

“It’s eighteen miles from Malton to this house. You took an hour and a half to drive it. Obviously you did something else in the interval. You still refuse to account for that time?”

“I do. It had nothing to do with the case you’re working on. I not only didn’t see my father, I didn’t so much as think about him.”

“It’s no use my asking you questions which you won’t answer,” replied Macdonald, “but I tell you frankly you are weighing the scales against yourself.”

Lewis Conyers smiled at him with that half-twisted, charming smile of his.

“I’m putting my faith in you, Chief Inspector. Have you ever been the means of hanging an innocent man?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

“Then I’ve nothing to fear from you.”

Macdonald looked at the young man thoughtfully.

“I’ve told you—my opinions get us nowhere, and facts have a knack of coming to light. I think that’s all I can usefully ask at this juncture. I should like to see your mother some time—not this evening. Meantime, can I see your father’s chauffeur?”

“Certainly. He sleeps in a cottage by the garage. I can ring through to him and get him over, if you prefer it.”

“I’ll go over to him and see him in his own place, thanks.”

Macdonald stood by the fire a moment.

“It’s not my province to give you advice,” he said quietly, “but I’d like to say this. In a case of this kind—a murder case, to put it bluntly—investigations are carried out on a formidable scale. In my own experience I should say that complete frankness is the only desirable course for an innocent man. Lack of it only causes more trouble eventually. To shield another person may appear noble in some lights, but it’s a perversion of justice. It may result in the hanging of an innocent man, with all that that implies to the man’s relatives and friends.”

Lewis Conyers faced him with chin well up.

“Thanks. I understand. I’m honestly grateful to you—for your understanding.”

“Well. Think it over. Good-night.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Morton Conyers' chauffeur was a trim, stocky little man named Frank Braid. He was fair and square and rubicund of face, and Macdonald set him down as an optimist at sight.

He lived in a cottage which had once been the stableman's, close to the converted stone-built stables which were now the garages of Cherton Manor.

Braid opened the door himself to Macdonald and led him into a neat parlour, whose fresh curtains and polished surfaces were a credit to Braid's wife.

"I want to ask some questions about Mr. Conyers' Daimler," said Macdonald, when he was seated in the parlour.

"Yes, sir. Lovely car it was. One of the best."

"So I gathered. Can you tell me how much petrol there was in the tank before Mr. Conyers went out on Thursday evening?"

"Ah . . ." Braid looked at the chief inspector as one who says, "Now you're talking. That's sense, that is."

"Yessir. Just under a gallon there was. We had some words about that. Very annoyed, Mr. Conyers was."

"How was that?" asked Macdonald. "Up to you to see the tank was full?"

"Yes and no, sir. Mr. Conyers drove that car himself. I drive the Rolls and Mrs. Conyers' Vauxhall. You can't answer for a car you don't drive and that's flat. I keep a supply of petrol in cans, just in case someone forgets to fill up. Mr. Lewis, he asked me to fill his tank on the Hillman, which I did. As it happened that used up my last can. I'd reckoned to have a fresh supply up; it was ordered all right but it'd got overlooked and I was short. Mr. Conyers came and ticked me off before he went out. Wanted petrol and there wasn't any."

"And Mr. Conyers wasn't given to listening to explanations on occasions like that?"

"Gum, sir, he wasn't. If he wanted a thing, it'd got to be there. Not that I cared. I was under notice anyhow. I've driven for him three years, and I was sick of being told I was a liar. I told him so—and that was that."

“Three years. As a job it had its points, I take it?”

“Yessir. Very good points, too. Good pay, good quarters, good cars, good tips—but he wasn’t a good master. Ask any of the servants, barring that Strake. They’ll all tell you the same. Howsomever, it was the car you wanted to talk about.”

“We’ll get back to the car presently, Braid. Do you think you’re wise, running down your late master? It’s true I’m investigating his death, and it’s to my interest to hear what you’ve got to say—but don’t say anything you may want to withdraw later.”

“Very good, sir. I’ve told you he wasn’t a good master—and I’m not going back on that. Nasty tempered, foul mouthed, suspicious, free and easy with your missus. All that. If I’d been living in, it’s not three weeks I’d have stayed.”

The man’s blue eyes were very bright, his chin pugnacious.

“If you can find any one in these parts to speak a good word for him—ask ’em what they hope to get for their soft soap. Ask the tradespeople in Strand what they think of his methods. They know him. Been trying to do the dirty on them all through. You ask them. They’ll tell you.”

“Irishman?” queried Macdonald, and the chauffeur retorted instantly, “Yes, sir—and you’re a Jock. Beg pardon. Scotchman.”

“That’s it, and possibly we’ve both got the defects of our races, Braid. You’re impulsive. You’ll need to check your tongue, or you’ll be asking for trouble. Now getting back to facts—how far is it to the nearest garage from here?”

“Two miles. Turn left, down the hill into Cherton village.”

“And if you turn to the right, towards Strand, how far then?”

“Eight miles. Nothing on that road barring farm-houses.”

“But Mr. Conyers had got plenty of petrol to take him to a garage, either way?”

“He should have had. That Daimler’s an eight cylinder, very heavy on petrol. Ten miles to the gallon. There’s some hilly country hereabouts. Maybe if the petrol was low and the engine stalled climbing a steep hill, there might have been trouble starting again if you ran it too fine.”

“Was Mr. Conyers a good driver?”

“Yes and no. Plenty of traffic sense, and plenty of nerve. Liked driving fast, but he hadn’t any mechanical sense. Treated an engine shocking. Let his clutches in with a jerk, roared his engine, didn’t brake till he was on top of anything. No ear he’d got. Couldn’t listen to the revs. Slap and bang, hit or miss. Not like Mr. Lewis. Lovely driver he is.”

Macdonald listened—as a mechanic might listen to an engine—fascinated for the hundredth time by humanity’s opinion of other humanity. A chauffeur summing up his master. “No ear he’d got. Couldn’t listen to the revs. Slap and bang, hit or miss . . . drove fast, didn’t brake till he was on to anything!”

Morton Conyers had had brains so far as money was concerned. His brains had failed to sense the ‘revs’ of an engine, and the reactions of a human being. He had lacked perception in more ways than one, for all his money-making ability.

“Well, he didn’t get to Dyke’s Corner on a gallon of petrol,” went on Macdonald. “Where did he fill up?”

“Ah . . .” the chauffeur nodded understandingly. “That’s the question that is, sir. I’d have told the superintendent so if he’d given me a chance. Not he. Couldn’t see sense. Just asked questions about the condition of the car. Silly. That car was only three months old. A Daimler. You go and ask the makers, I told him . . .”

“You’ll tell somebody something once too often, Braid,” replied Macdonald, and there was that in his tone which made the other say:

“Sorry, sir,” but his grin was impenitent. “Where did he fill up?” asked the chauffeur again. “That’s just it. I can tell you where he didn’t fill up. I know all these garridges and the men in them, too. You take a map, sir, and a pair of compasses, and put a ten mile circle down as the limit of where he got on a gallon of petrol. He didn’t put in at none of them. That’s a fact.”

“Been doing a bit of research on your own, Braid?”

“Sure to goodness, sir. Hits you in the eye. I rang ’em all up, asking one question or another. ‘Seen my old man,’ I asks them. I’m on friendly terms with most of ’em, sir. Spread your custom, I say. I likes a chat, too—and Shell’s Shell, wherever you get it.”

“Undoubtedly,” agreed Macdonald. “Well—having thought your way to this point, Braid, I take it you didn’t switch off and leave it at that.”

“You’re quite right, sir. We’re all ’uman, and we’re all curious, and we all look at a problem from our own interest, so to speak. The superintendent, he’s a very good man, I’m sure, but he’s no motorist. When he wants a car, there’s a police car ready for him, but he don’t look at all this with the eyes of a man used to cars. As I see it, the first question is—not was the Daimler in running order, but where did he get his petrol? If it wasn’t at a filling station, where was it? He didn’t pick it off a blackberry bush. He put in somewhere, and someone obliged.”

“Seemingly,” agreed Macdonald. “Before we go any further, Braid, I think you’ll be well advised to tell me just how much you know about this business. You’ve been making inquiries on your own account, and that’s always a risky thing to do in a case like this. Let me put it plainly. No one looks more suspicious than the man who lets out that he knows rather more than it’s to be expected he should know. I’m giving you a chance to put your cards on the table, here and now.”

“Yes, sir.” The truculent little Irishman faced Macdonald squarely, his face flushed, but his glance not at all apprehensive. “I’ll be straight by you, sir, and glad of the chance. You’re being straight by me, and, no offence meant, you’ve got horse sense. I’ve never truckled to a policeman yet. I’ve had no need, me licence being clean and no complaints made. Me licence is still clean, sir, if you follow me way of speaking, and I’ve no need to be afraid of speaking straight.”

“Without fear or favour, as we say,” said Macdonald. “I’m not here to bully you, but I’m here to get at the facts, the plainer the better.”

“Very good, sir. When I heard about the Daimler being smashed up, and the master killed, I went and had a word with some of my mates in Strand Service Station. They sent out the breakdown gang to Dyke’s Corner. There’s a fellow named Murphy there. He was on night duty and he took out the breakdown outfit. About fifty, Murphy is. He was a sergeant in the Liverpool Regiment in the war—1914-1918. Saw a good bit of casualty clearing and that. He saw the ambulance men move Mr. Conyers out of the Daimler. Murphy knew that it wasn’t the smash killed him. No bleeding and that. Murphy told me. We’re friends. I reckon he told no one else—and neither have I. But there it is.”

“I see. You know Mr. Conyers wasn’t killed in the smash, and you know what that implies. You know he set out with a gallon of petrol—and you know that you are the only person who can give evidence to that effect. Is that right? Can any one else corroborate that statement?”

“No, sir.” The little man held his head well up. “I hadn’t thought that out, but it’s quite true. I’ve only me own word for it, but sir, it’s true. I see now that you could get me in a proper hole, my saying he’d only got a gallon, and him not having filled up anywhere. But it’s true.”

“All right, Braid. Did your friend Murphy tell you the real cause of Mr. Conyers’ death?”

“No, sir. He didn’t know. How could he?”

“Then I’ll tell you. Mr. Conyers was poisoned by exhaust gas.”

“Holy Mary!” The Irishman uttered the words as a prayer and not as a profanity. Macdonald saw that the facts had got home.

“Now you know,” went on Macdonald, and there was something inexorable in his voice as he continued, “You’re quick in the wits, Braid. You can think it out for yourself. I told you I wasn’t here to bully you, but facts can be hard things. No human sympathy about them. You’re a chauffeur, under notice. I cautioned you to be careful what you said about your master, but you said a good deal more than you need have said. You say the Daimler was in order—ask the makers. What’s the good of that now? You’ve seen the wreckage? I thought so. How much chance is there of proving that there had been no tampering? I’m not trying to frighten you. I’m telling you perfectly plainly how things stand. Sit down, man, and think it out.”

Braid’s high colour had gone now. He sat down heavily, his expression very different, but he kept his chin up.

“Yes, sir.” Again he faced Macdonald full. “I understand all right, and I’ll repeat what I said. I’m under notice. He wasn’t a good master. There was only a gallon of petrol in his tank. If I were to swing for it, I wouldn’t go back on any of that.”

“Good. We’ve got things straight so far. Let’s see how much farther we can get. I’m asking you for information now, Braid, and you needn’t be afraid of giving it. As Mr. Conyers’ chauffeur you probably know more about his comings and goings than anybody else. Can you guess where he drove to on Thursday evening?”

“No, sir, and what’s more, I’m not trying to guess.”

The retort was snapped back with spirit, and Braid’s face recovered its colour. Like most Irishmen he thrived on controversy. “I’ll tell you this. There’s more than one girl in these parts had cause to regret she’d ever set

eyes on him. If you're thinking it's meself will tell you where he took his dirty presents, then you can think again, sir, meaning no offence. He's dead, and may the saints pray for his soul—he needs it—but I'm not going to tell you the mischief he did. Then there's this to it. Mr. Conyers didn't have me to drive him when he went out after his pleasure. He drove himself. It's not me can tell you where he went on Thursday evening, and as for guessing—guesses aren't evidence, sir."

"Quite true," replied Macdonald. "Here's a question which involves no guessing, Braid. Where were you after supper on Thursday evening?"

"In me own house, sir, with me missis, and glad to be there. A dirty evening it was."

"Any corroboration of that, Braid? You'll be asked in court, eventually."

"No, sir, and can't be—barring me wife. You know what the weather was like. No one put their noses out of doors. Some evenings the servants from the house comes in for a chat, some of 'em. Not on Thursday. Raining heavens hard it was."

"Got a motor bike, Braid?"

"Yes, sir."

There was silence for a moment. It was no diplomacy on Macdonald's part. He was thinking hard. So apparently was Braid. The Irishman found silence more difficult than speech.

"Say, if he ran himself out of petrol . . . he might have. The car would have stopped," hazarded the little man, as one thinking his ideas aloud.

"Yes," went on Macdonald, "and some motorist found him stranded, and said, 'I've got a can in the back, I can let you have some, but are you sure it's not ignition trouble, or the carburettor. Let's have a look' . . . Could they have got at the exhaust, anyhow?"

"No, sir—as you know, if you're used to cars."

"But if that someone had previously tampered with the Daimler," mused Macdonald, "they might have uncorked the booby trap. Again, assuming that Mr. Conyers drove to some house less than ten miles away, and parked his car outside. Someone might have taken the opportunity of doing the same thing. They could have put some more petrol in his tank and monkeyed with the gears or clutch plate, so that the car was half immobilised. The engine would run but the transmission was faulty. The

chemists say that one part in a hundred of carbon monoxide—exhaust gas—is deadly. It wouldn't have taken long.”

Again a pause: Braid was silent now, and Macdonald asked abruptly:

“You say Mr. Lewis Conyers is a lovely driver. Is he a good mechanic?”

The Irishman's eyes gleamed. “I thought that would come,” he said. “It's the sort of thing some folks love to say. I'll tell you this, sir. Mr. Lewis never had nothing to do with this. He's as decent a man as God ever made. Takes after his mother. No, sir. 'Twasn't Mr. Lewis.”

“I asked you if he were a good mechanic.”

“He knows how to treat a car and he's a good driver. As for engines—what's a chauffeur for? I saw to it his engine was clean and ran pretty.”

“When did he ask you to fill the tank of the Hillman?”

“Before dinner, when he came in.”

“Did you tell him it'd mean using up all your spare petrol?”

There was a pause before the Irishman answered—and Macdonald knew he was thinking and anticipated the answer.

“No. Why should I? Mr. Conyers had run his Daimler into his garridge when he came in. Generally if he's using it again he leaves it in the drive. He just ran it in, and went back to the house by the covered way there—pergola they call it. I didn't reckon he'd be taking it out again that evening.”

Macdonald considered again. If this point could be proved—that Morton Conyers had run his car into the garage it probably meant that he had had no intention of going out in it again on Thursday evening. In this case, something had happened between tea and dinner on the Thursday to make him change his mind. Macdonald noted the point, hoping to get independent corroboration of it later.

“When did you last tune the engine of the Daimler, Braid?”

“I ran it a bit most mornings. No need to touch it. Perfect it was. A Rolls looks pretty, I grant you, but for engines, there's not much in it. Both tiptop. That Daimler had as fine an engine as there is in the world. A cat purring made more noise. You could hear the tyres on the gravel, but the engine you couldn't hear at all. He'd slap her into reverse like a proper heathen, and she never gave a grunt even.”

Macdonald sat up and reached for his gloves which were on the table beside him.

“I think that’s about all, Braid. I’m not going to ask you to sign a statement. Most of our talk needn’t go on paper—yet. The points which matter are these. Mr. Morton Conyers left here with only a gallon of petrol in his tank. Mr. Lewis Conyers had asked you to fill his tank and you did so. By the way did you notice how much petrol there was in the Hillman next morning?”

Braid flushed. “Gum, there’s not much you miss,” he said slowly. “There was five gallons on Thursday evening when I filled up. The Hillman runs eighteen miles to the gallon. There was two and a quarter gallons left on Friday morning. About fifty miles that car ran—if she wasn’t filled up in the interval.”

“Very good, Braid. You’re evidently a careful observer, and you’ve got wits. The latter ought to warn you not to talk. The less you discuss this case with your friends, the better.”

“Yessir. You’ve given me something to think about. It never entered my head that a Yard man would ever come and tell me that I looked like a murderer——”

“Steady on, Braid. No one’s told you that. What I have told you is to look facts in the face.”

“Facts? It’s them that’s looking me in the face and the devil a lot they are, thanking you, sir.”

Macdonald went back to his own car wondering if Braid’s wits were sharp enough to perceive all the implications of his own evidence. The C.I.D. man agreed with the Deputy Chief Constable; an open mind was needed. On the other hand he recognised that certain points in the chauffeur’s evidence would be seized upon by Superintendent Webber with much enthusiasm. If it was nothing but chance which had dictated Lewis Conyers’ order concerning the filling of his own tank, it looked a very unfortunate chance, for him.

CHAPTER FIVE

Morton Conyers had been killed on Thursday night, January 20th, or in the small hours of the Friday morning. The inquest was held in the Tun room of the market town of Strand on Saturday, January 22nd.

On the afternoon of that day Sir Giles Pellew arrived at Strand Place to stay with his friends Colonel and Mrs. Merryl.

The Merryls were the most influential family in the locality of Strand, living in the big house on the outskirts of that pleasant little town, where Merryls had lived since Plantagenet days. Colonel Digby Merryl was a Justice of the Peace; further he was informal arbiter in many disputes which never came before the magistrates. He owned a large tract of land between Strand and the more northerly market town of Bamsden, twelve miles away, and he contrived a comfortable, though not wealthy manner of life, nicely balanced between problems pertaining to taxes, and a conscientious benevolence in his dealings with his tenants. Most of the latter were farmers, and many of the Colonel's worries were caused by the agricultural depression, which involved, all too often, a choice between remitting his rents or letting the farms go out of cultivation.

Merryl was a kindly man, and passionately interested in the problems of land owning and farming. He loved the country and understood the mentality of his slow-spoken tenants, but he was conservative to a fault.

"It's good to see you, Giles," he said, when he welcomed Pellew in the hall of Strand Place. "You haven't been to stay with us since 1930—and I never go up to town if I can help it. Too much noise and bustle for me. We're slow movers down here."

"But you're in the news these days," replied Pellew. "Strand's going to be the centre of a cause célèbre, it seems. One of the hustlers has got himself bumped off in your country lanes, I hear."

Pellew was a man of sixty, a barrister with a great reputation and his handsome face was alight with interest as he faced Merryl. The latter gave an unhappy movement of his heavy shoulders.

"Conyers? A bad business I'm afraid. I was always sorry he came to Cherton Manor, and as for his confounded Stores, I hate them like poison. Ah, here's Anne. You remember her?"

Anne Merryl came running up with hands outstretched.

“Of course, he remembers me! I saw Sir Giles in town before Christmas, Daddy. You always forget that London’s only a couple of hours’ run.”

Her hands holding Pellew’s, she tilted back her face and smiled up at him.

“Aren’t you intrigued with our local crime?” she laughed. “It’s the most exciting thing that’s happened in Strand since the corn riots, so the farmers are saying.”

“It’s very distasteful to me to hear you being flippant about a matter of this kind,” put in Colonel Merryl, but Anne threw an arm round his shoulders and went on unabashed.

“Darling, murder’s news these days, and when the English Woolworth gets done in mysteriously almost at our back door, of course, I’m thrilled to the marrow about it. I’m dying to hear about the inquest. There are the most lurid rumours going round. Tell us, Daddy!” She turned and laughed over her shoulder at Pellew. “Daddy won’t, of course. He pretends to be superior and speaks about it as ‘a matter of this kind,’ but he’s just as curious as anybody else. I’ve been out with the Bicester—John Vaughan drove me over and mounted me—and now I’m dying to hear all the thrills!”

She seated herself on the arm of one of the big chairs by the fire, adding, “Come on, Daddy, out with it! You know you’re yearning for an appreciative audience, and here we are, simply hanging on your words. Tell us about it before Mummy comes down. She’ll pretend she doesn’t want to hear, and she’ll make you tell her all about it in camera. I know!”

Pellew laughed.

“No use saying ‘don’t tell the children’ these days, Digby. They know more about life than we do—or they like to think they do. Honestly, I should be deeply interested to hear the facts. It happens that Roland Straynge, who was involved in the smash, is working on a brief with me, so I heard that part of the story at first hand.”

“Roland Straynge—I danced with him on Thursday evening,” said Anne. “One of the world’s most beautiful, with a voice and vocabulary fit for the tongues of men and of angels. If he’d only followed my instructions properly, he’d never have gone near Dyke’s Corner, and then there would have been no smash at all, and the English Woolworth wouldn’t have met a sticky end—just yet.”

Pellew met Colonel Merryll's eyes, and said, "How long have the Conyers been at Cherton, Digby?"

"Two years come Lady Day. I regretted it very much when I heard they'd taken the place. It was difficult. Very difficult."

Anne laughed softly. "I'll tell you about the difficulties, Sir Giles. I know much more about them than Daddy does, because it was the women who made them—the ladies, rather."

"The county in short?" asked Sir Giles.

"That's it. What the tradespeople call the gentry. All the squirearchy agog, and Mrs. this and Lady that saying 'My *dear*, what *shall* we do? Of course, he's a tradesman in one sense, with that great new shop at Bamsden, but he's a very important man in his own way, and his wife was one of the Warwickshire Verneys, and we do need subscriptions . . .' And so forth and so on, until old Lady Brigges upped and said, 'Tradesman! Rubbish! He's a financier. Perfectly respectable. I shall call and ask Mrs. Conyers to subscribe to the Women's Institute.' Well, some called and some didn't, but Mrs. Conyers was never at home, although she did subscribe to the Women's Institute. She returned every one's cards, but always at a time when they were sure to be out—and there you are. They're accepted, but not known. 'Difficult' is the word Daddy uses."

"There's a son, isn't there?" put in Pellew, and Anne nodded.

"Very much so. A very reticent young man, rather nice. Drives a sports car. I got off with him one day when I was riding and Bess shied at his outfit. I liked him. I thought of cadging a job as fashion expert in one of John Home's stores. They pay enormous great wages, and the Bamsden shop is all out to corner the local tailoring."

Pellew laughed. He couldn't help it. The sight of Merryll's face as his daughter rattled on was comic in its severity.

"All the girls are doing it, Digby. Fortnum & Masons and Golden Arrow Sportswear and all the rest. There's no such thing as a shop girl any longer. They've become fashion advisers and beauty experts and figure specialists."

"I don't like it," growled the Colonel, and Anne put in:

"Never mind, Daddy. I didn't actually cadge a job. I only thought about it—and Lewis Conyers is rather nice." She turned to Pellew. "Now, haven't I given you the line you wanted? Plutocrats who put the county in a quandary. The English Woolworth was a bold bad man, full of bawdy stories and

popular with the men though they wouldn't own it. Mrs. Conyers is remote and said to be 'charming,' especially by people who've never seen her. The son is a nicely behaved young man with a pleasant voice and an inferiority complex. That do you?"

"Excellently," said Pellew, and Anne went on:

"Now Daddy, your turn."

"It's a wretched business," said Merryl. "Goodness knows where it will end. Conyers wasn't killed in the smash at all. He was poisoned by exhaust gas. The inquest was very brief. They had the formalities of identification and asked a few questions about Conyers' health. Straynge and Langston had to describe the accident, and the lorry driver was called. Then they had the medical evidence, and immediately on top of that the police asked for an adjournment—to get further evidence."

Anne suppressed a surprised whistle, but Pellew nodded.

"Yes. I gathered from Straynge about the cause of death. It's a tough problem for the police."

"Is it true they've got a C.I.D. man down?" asked the irrepressible Anne, and Merryl nodded.

"Yes. I saw him. A good type, I thought. Looked as though he'd seen training. A man named Macdonald."

"Macdonald, by jove! They're looking for trouble then. He's one of the ablest men the Commissioner's got. A first-rate fellow. He had a year at Oxford, I believe, then he was in the London Scottish—D.S.O., M.C. Then he joined the police and worked his way to where he is now. One of the best products of our police system."

"What a thrill!" exclaimed Anne. "Ask him to dinner, Daddy. Is he vampable?" she asked Pellew.

The latter chuckled. "To the best of my knowledge and belief, no. Definitely no. He has been described as the politest puritan of them all. He's a hair-splitting Scot in the middle forties. Logical, obstinate and impervious to influence of any kind. He's a bachelor, of course."

"Well, all that only puts me on my metal. If I met him while I was out riding, and I took a toss, would he pick me up, or pass by on the other side?"

"I expect he'd pick you up and give you in charge for riding without due care and attention," said Pellew.

Colonel Merryl had been uttering disapproving sounds, and he said to Anne:

“Go and find your mother my dear, and tell her that Sir Giles wants his tea.”

“Yes, darling—and you can tell me the gist of what I’m not to hear later. You needn’t bother, you know. I’ve seen the late lamented. Once was enough. If ever a man’s eye gladdened indiscriminately, his did. He may be dead—but he was a nasty piece of work when he was alive.”

She ran off across the hall and up the shallow oak stairs, a slim, lithe creature, with hair of flame, curling off her face as absurdly as a da Forli angel’s. In her gold-coloured jumper and short skirt, Anne Merryl had a quality of sunlight—radiant, health-giving, vital.

“What a lovely child she’s grown!” exclaimed Pellew. “You ought to give her a good season in town, Digby. They say marriages are made in heaven but it’s up to you to see she meets the right type of applicant.”

Merryl sighed. “Yes. I suppose you’re right. It’s difficult to understand these young people of to-day. Anne’s twenty-one. She looks a child—and an angelic child. What she doesn’t know, heaven alone can tell. She’ll talk of perversion and contraception, of companionate marriage and atheism, until I don’t know if I’m on my head or my heels.”

“Better to talk about them and be done with ’em,” replied Pellew. “Getting back to this business of Conyers’ death, Digby. Do you know anything about him at first hand?”

“A bad lot,” said Merryl disgustedly. “Why, I can’t pretend to understand, but women were fools over him. One of the troubles was his money. He’d give any girl presents which would turn her head. Took them out driving with him, to road houses and night clubs and any den of vice he chose. Between ourselves, he’s landed more than one decent girl in trouble since he’s been in these parts. It makes me sick to hear Anne talking about him.”

“What about his wife?”

“Ah, poor soul! She’s a good woman, I’m told. Stuck to him because she’d a sense of duty. I don’t know. With a fellow like that . . . it’s difficult.”

“Aye. Goes against the grain these days,” said Pellew. “In my grandfather’s time, it was the very other. A man’s fancy took what it would, unquestioned. Well, they’re both called to their account.”

“I wish the account were closed, Giles. There’s going to be trouble all round before the thing’s over. People are talking—as they’re bound to talk. There are too many folk who may have had a motive, and they’ll all have to put their cards on the table. Ah, here’s Alice.”

Mrs. Merryl was a lady of comfortable proportions who made no attempt to keep in line with modern fashions, and consequently retained her natural dignity. The quartet adjourned to the drawing-room for tea—a room of old-fashioned chintzes, with a lovely faded Aubusson carpet, where china and silver stood sedately on shelves and tables in the same places they had occupied for a lifetime. Tall paper white narcissus stood in blue and white bowls, scenting the warm air, and the first freezias and hyacinths from the greenhouses added their fragrance.

Mrs. Merryl talked placidly of old friends, of children now grown up, of marriages and betrothals, and Anne sat silent, her blue eyes smiling at her elders.

“Have some cake, Daddy. It’s nice,” she put in at last, and Pellew said appreciatively:

“A very good cake. As good as Gunter’s.”

“Quite,” said Anne mischievously. “It’s John Home’s cake from Bamsden.”

Colonel Merryl groaned, and his wife said:

“Anne darling, I wish you wouldn’t shop there. It’s not fair to our own tradespeople.”

“If our own tradespeople would sell cakes like this, I shouldn’t go to John Home’s,” retorted Anne. “In Laing’s Bakery in Strand you can buy three cakes. One is rich fruit. Awful. One is seed cake. Awfuller. One is Madeira. Awfullest. Then there are little sponge cakes with pink, green or white icing. I’ve eaten them since I was three. I never want to eat them again. It’s the same with everything, Sir Giles. Fruit, groceries, fish, meat—at John Home’s you can get what you want, not what the tradespeople think you ought to have. I could go to John Home’s at Bamsden and order everything we wanted for the week in less than half an hour. I can get my hair done—as well as they do it in town. I can get anything in the chemist line from Molyneux’s scents to the latest slimming tablets. I can see the newest stuffs, the latest belts and button-holes, and see it very comfortably. Bamsden used to be a dull little one-horse market town. Now it’s John

Home's. He may have been a bad hat, but he revolutionised one town in England."

Pellew nodded. "The old order changeth," he quoted. "Do you ever think of the other side of the picture, Anne? All the small tradespeople—decent folk with a tradition of their own, all pushed out to make room for John Home? One of the pleasures of these small market towns is in knowing the shopkeepers—sons of the fathers who ran their businesses before them."

"And their grandfathers and great grandfathers, always in the same old way!" cried Anne. "If we've got to live in a modern world, we've got to conform to progress or perish. You can sentimentalise over the old-fashioned shopkeepers if you like. I just know they're awful! Besides, the economics of it are all wrong. The rural areas are poor enough. We don't want everybody who has money to spend to do their shopping in London."

"You prefer their money to enrich John Home?" queried Pellew.

"It's not only that," she protested. "John Home's a very good employer. He trains local talent and pays it well. There's more money circulating in Bamsden, and more comfortable families there than there have ever been before. Hats off to John Home!"

"I wish you could see the damned shop, Giles," burst out Colonel Merryl. "The fellow bought up the whole side of the Market Square, and built his store on modern lines—plate glass, chromium and concrete. Neon lights as well. He bought out those of the tradesmen who were willing to sell—I believe Rough the butcher, and Wall the grocer, came to terms with him. Those who refused were slowly starved out. He just let them be—and proceeded to undercut them until they went out of business. A damnable thing! He was about to do the same thing here in Strand. He approaches the tradespeople after having decided on a site suitable for his premises. With trade as it is to-day, plenty of shop-owners are only too glad of the chance to sell, and once he's got his foot in, God help the others. It's the most abominable form of monopoly."

"I don't think you're fair about it, Daddy," persisted Anne. "It's a monopoly in a way, but it's for the general benefit. It's not anti-social in any sense. You've got to admit John Home's a good employer. He pays a living wage—and then some. He has a council of employees, and a bonus system, as well as providing sports grounds and gymnasiums and a swimming-pool. Look at the girls in the draper's shop in Strand—underpaid, anæmic creatures, coming into an ice-cold shop on winter mornings, snivelling with colds all the winter, bullied by old Green. A loathsome life! Look at Boles,

the chemist—obstinate old idiot, always certain he’s right because his father and grandfather were chemists before him. Look at that weedy assistant of his—a half-starved little misery. I don’t like the wretched youth, but I go out of my way to be decent to him because I know Boles bullies him.”

“Poor boy. Wilkes his name is. I believe he worships Anne,” put in kind-hearted Mrs. Merryl, and Anne went on hotly:

“And that old reprobate Boles is one of the chief people to run down John Home’s, and tell lies about their prices and methods. Then there’s Manton, the butcher—another horror. Look at his shop in summer. Flies all over the meat and no cold storage. I’ve seen into the cellar where he stores his meat—and smelt it. It stinks—to use a good old English word—and Manton’s leading the agitation to keep the Strand chamber of commerce in the good old ways. What was good enough for our fathers is good enough for us—and all that.”

Pellew laughed. “Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings——” he chuckled. “There are two sides to it, Digby. I admit I see your point of view, but Anne has put the other very well. The small trader, owning his own shop, was a monopolist, and he has underpaid his employees and exploited the necessities of the country folk who had to buy their goods at his shop or go without. Independence has often been used as a cloak to inefficiency, and unwillingness to oblige, and economic unsoundness.”

“Maybe, maybe,” said Colonel Merryl. “Still, if good *can* come out of evil, I hope to goodness that Strand may stay unaltered—for my lifetime. It’s been the same since I was a boy. We’ve dealt with the local tradesmen, we’ve had meat from Manton’s and potions from Boles’, and we’ve thrived on it. All this modern rubbish about cold storage and germs and vitamins and ultra violets, it leaves me cold. The Elizabethans were a finer race than ourselves, physically, and they had none of this crank rubbish.”

“No,” said Anne softly. “What was their infant mortality rate, Daddy? What about cholera and typhoid and plague? Not so good.”

She got up and walked over to her disgruntled parent and put an arm round his hunched shoulders. “Darling, you sent me to a good school. They taught civics and elementary economics, and history of social reform. If you’d wanted me to agree with you about John Home and Strand, you ought to have had a nice genteel ignorant governess for me, who’d have taught me to be a lady, and not to argue with my parents. Bless you!”

She kissed the top of his head, adding, "I'm taking Dingo for a stretch, the dog's bone lazy. I'll put on my new taffeta for Sir Giles, and play the lady all the evening!"

She walked across the room with the lithe gliding "mannequin walk" she sometimes affected and went into the hall. Stock, the butler, stood sedately aside for her to pass, a salver in his hand. Anne glanced down at the card on it—and her lips pursed to a whistle. She glanced round the hall and saw a man standing at the far end. Dingo, Anne's dog, was making friends with the stranger, paws up against a Burberry, nose twitching inquiry, tail waving slowly.

Anne walked promptly down the hall in the direction of the visitor, seizing a heaven-sent opportunity. Chief Inspector Macdonald—an opportunity to try her powers.

"Down, Dingo! Heel, sir!" she said authoritatively. The dog continued to nose the stranger.

Macdonald straightened himself, and made a formal bow as Anne said:

"I'm so sorry. I hope he's not worrying you."

"Not at all. He's a nice dog."

"A very nice dog—one of the home farm sheep dogs. They're a lovely breed."

"This one ought to be trained," said Macdonald. "They're grand working dogs, but if you keep them in the house they get spoilt and lose their wits."

"He's quite a young dog yet," said Anne, and Macdonald replied:

"Just the time for him to learn his job. It's all wrong to make a pet of a sheep dog."

Anne's chin went up a little and her blue eyes met Macdonald's.

"You see he's my dog," she retorted.

The C.I.D. man smiled down at her and repeated his little formal bow, at once friendly yet remote.

"I apologise," he said gravely. "I was looking at the matter purely from the dog's point of view."

Stock had returned to the hall, and cleared his throat as though apologising for his intrusion. Anne slipped her hand in the dog's collar and, as Stock murmured "The Colonel will see you in his study, sir," she flashed

a smile up at Macdonald and turned away towards the cloakroom to collect her coat and cap. When she came into the hall again, she saw Pellew standing by the fire.

“I’ve seen him,” she breathed in a stage whisper. “The C.I.D. man.”

Sir Giles laughed. “You have, have you? Did he respond to treatment?”

Anne tilted her head sideways. “Not exactly. My technique’s good, but I know my limitations. All the same—he’s talkable to. I wonder why he’s come here.”

“I expect he’s asking for local information from your father. Digby knows conditions hereabouts better than any man alive.”

Anne fondled the dog’s long silky nose as she replied slowly, “It must be awfully difficult—digesting the personalities of a whole neighbourhood. People are saying beastly things, you know. They were betting to-day as to whether Lewis Conyers would be arrested after the inquest.”

It was her voice which caught Pellew’s attention. As a barrister he listened for the implications of voices as much as to an answer in words.

“Don’t dwell on the business, Anne. Better leave it alone,” he replied quietly.

She looked up at him. “Lewis didn’t do it,” she said abruptly. “I know him—rather well. I wish I could talk to that man in there.”

She turned away, calling to the dog to follow her, and let herself out of the front door, leaving Pellew standing by the fire horrified by that brief revealing sentence.

“Poor old Digby!” he said to himself. “That lovely child. Good gad, it’s unthinkable!”

Instinctively he turned and glanced towards the door of Merry’s study, and a frown settled on his handsome old face. He knew that Macdonald had the reputation of a quick worker.

“This won’t do,” said the old barrister to himself.

CHAPTER SIX

Sir Giles Pellew had been right in his guess as to the reason which brought Macdonald to Strand Place. The C.I.D. man came to ask for Colonel Merryl's assistance in the matter of local lore. As resident squire and magistrate the Colonel knew a great deal about the inhabitants of Strand, and he was perfectly willing to give Macdonald any information he possessed.

The chief inspector got a very clear picture of conditions in the small market town and the rural area, and information as to the characters of some of the inhabitants. Being a fair-minded man, Colonel Merryl interspersed his own observations with some of his daughter's opinions, to which Macdonald listened with interest and amusement. Anne, he gathered, was a clear-headed, as well as an attractive young woman.

Conservative, Merryl might be, but he was shrewd and observant when it came to assessing human nature, especially that of his tenants, and the folk of Strand.

"There's an anonymous letter writer busying himself—or herself—hereabouts, sir," Macdonald had said. "I should like to run the writer to earth."

Merryl shrugged his shoulders. "With a fellow like Morton Conyers about, there's always opportunity for blackmail," he said. "What about that valet of his? A rogue, if ever I saw one. I've noticed him in the town."

"He's every appearance of roguery, but I doubt if he's the letter writer," said Macdonald. "Men of Strake's stamp only write news in exchange for money, and I don't think that motive inspired the letters in question."

It was dark when Macdonald left the big house, and a sharp shower of rain was lashing down, cold and vicious, promising more floods in the waterlogged countryside. Macdonald drove carefully along the narrow roads, making his way back to Cherton Manor, because he wanted to study the roads under all conditions. Half a mile from the lodge gates his headlights picked out a girl's figure advancing towards him, head down against the driving rain, while a streaming long-nosed sheep dog trotted cheerfully ahead, tail waving, quite indifferent to the weather. Macdonald pulled up, dimmed his headlights and opened the door of the car. He had

recognised the girl from Strand Place, and realised how wet she must be in that driving rain.

“Can I give you a lift back?” he called to her. “It’s a beastly evening.”

“Oh . . . nice of you! But won’t it be an awful bore—you’re driving the other way, and there’s Dingo. He’s streaming.”

“Jump in,” said Macdonald, opening the rear door of the car. “Dingo can stream—he won’t hurt anything. This rain is ill-tempered. It hits you. Is there anywhere I can turn near at hand?”

Anne scrambled into the car, pulling off her drenched beret. In her mind there flashed a thought, “How like him to put me in the back.” Aloud, she said, “Yes, there’s a lane on the right, about a hundred yards on. I never thought it would pour like this.”

“It’s bad luck on the farmers; they can’t get on their land,” observed Macdonald, driving on until he reached the lane, backing into it and turning with a skilled quietness which won Anne’s approbation. In the gloom of the car she risked a plunge which she might not have hazarded had she been facing the quiet-voiced man in front of her.

“Chief Inspector, are you here because of Morton Conyers’ death?”

“Yes.” The monosyllable was not encouraging, but she went on:

“I expect you’re thinking I ought to mind my own business. By the way, I’m Anne Merryl.”

“I have just been talking to your father, Miss Merryl. I’m sure he would have no objection to my giving you a lift in this rain, but I’ve an idea that he would object strongly to your taking a personal interest in a murder case.”

Anne laughed ruefully. The car was a very quiet car, and Macdonald was driving slowly, and she had no need to raise her voice as she replied:

“I expect he would, but I do take a personal interest in it all the same, because Lewis Conyers is rather a friend of mine. I hated hearing people, who were out hunting, betting about whether he would be arrested.”

“It was a hateful topic to bet on,” replied Macdonald.

They were nearing the lodge gates, and Anne plunged again. “Have you got five minutes to spare, Chief Inspector?”

Macdonald drew his car close up to the hedge, put on the hand brake and switched on the light inside the car. Then he turned and looked at Anne

Merryl.

“Certainly,” he replied, “but I think it would be better to tell your father if you have anything relevant to say. Also, you’re very wet and you ought to get indoors and change.”

“I’m used to being wet, and it’s you I want to talk to,” she replied. “Can you tell me if there’s any likelihood that Lewis Conyers will be arrested, or is it just malicious gossip?”

“I can’t tell you at all,” replied Macdonald. “In the first place, I don’t know. In the second, I shouldn’t tell you if I did. That’s not discourtesy, it’s plain common sense.”

“After that, I ought to accept a very plain hint and ask you to drive me up to the front door,” said Anne. “I’m not doing so because I believe in my friends. Lewis Conyers didn’t do it, Chief Inspector. I know he didn’t.”

Macdonald studied the face turned to his; it was no longer provocative or smiling, but very intent. A charming face, it seemed to Macdonald, but a child’s rather than a woman’s; he replied gently, although his words were uncompromising:

“Either you know something about the case I am working on, or you don’t, Miss Merryl. On the first assumption, I am bound to point out that if you have any evidence to put forward, this is not the occasion to give it. You should say anything you have to say in the presence of a reliable witness—preferably your father, or a man of law like Sir Giles Pellew, whom I met just now. If you don’t know anything relevant, to assure me of the integrity of your friends is wasted effort. My opinion counts for nothing, you know. It’s facts that matter.”

“Yes. I see. Thanks for putting it so clearly.”

Anne was not in the least put out of countenance by a speech and manner which could only be described as deflating.

“There was one thing I thought of telling you about—some letters I had. I can’t show them to my father. He wouldn’t understand.”

“I see. Do you mean anonymous letters?”

“Yes. They’re pretty revolting productions, but you can ignore that. Obviously I shouldn’t show them to—anybody, but after the trouncing you’ve just given me I don’t think I need be afraid of showing them to you.”

“You certainly need not be afraid that the police will use them indiscreetly,” replied Macdonald. “I would much rather that you showed the letters to your father or mother, but if you won’t do that——”

“I won’t—and that’s that. I’m of age, Chief Inspector. I’m not a child.”

“You may be of age, but you’re still a child—in experience. I’m very sorry that you have received anonymous letters, and I shall be sorrier still if that fact proves to have any bearing on a murder case. Since you have chosen to tell me about the letters, I’m bound to admit that I want to see them. I’ve got my job to do—but I’d much rather do it without any assistance from you.”

Macdonald had turned so that he was now facing the girl in the back seat, and she could see his keen incisive face, and the observant glance of impersonal eyes.

“There’s nothing romantic about murder,” he went on. “An inquiry of this kind is a sordid, often a degrading business—not a subject for you to take interest in, even academically.” A smile lighted his thoughtful eyes. “You have put me in a quandary. I should like to say, ‘burn those letters, and keep away from police proceedings’—but I can’t. I should be glad if you will let me have them. Will you post them to me?”

“Yes. I will. I wish I could make you understand my point of view. I’m not an exhibitionist, or trying to seek sensation——”

“I never imagined you were,” replied Macdonald. “I think I understand your point of view, but I still regret that you should interest yourself in the matter. I’ve got to make this plain. If the letters in question are relevant, I shall have to tell your parents so. I’m a detective, but I can’t enter into a conspiracy with you to keep silent about things your people ought to know.”

“Really, you’re a bit breath-taking,” she laughed, and Macdonald returned dryly:

“You didn’t expect scruples from a policeman, did you? That’s because you’re still a child. You won’t understand my point of view until you’re much older.”

She shot back, “If, after all this deflating, I just burn those letters . . .?”

“You’re at liberty to do so,” replied Macdonald, “but you have a logical mind. To tell me about the letters and then to burn them—that would be childish, wouldn’t it? I’m staying at The Black Boar, by the way. Now, I think you’d better get indoors.”

He drove on up the drive, and then added over his shoulder, "Can you type?"

"Yes. I can."

"Then type your envelope, please."

"It was nice of you to remind me of that," said Anne impulsively. "They do talk in this town."

"They do." Macdonald pulled up by the front door. "I've no right to give you advice, Miss Merryl, but a policeman's functions are numerous. Don't discuss this business. Don't think you can find things out—or rather remember, if you do try to find things out, that inquiries are apt to behave boomerang-wise."

"Meaning, mud sticks?"

"Just that."

"Thank you very much—for the lift, for listening, and for your advice."

"Not at all. Good-night."

Macdonald let in his clutch silently, and the long car slid off down the drive as Anne Merryl ran up the steps and let herself in at the front door, the wet sheep dog rushing past her into the hall.

She took off her coat and threw it down over a settee by the door and turned towards the fire. Sheltered by a big wrought-iron screen, Sir Giles Pellew was sitting by the fire reading.

"Hallo, Anne! You got more than you bargained for!"

"I did. It poured heavens hard—and the chief inspector gave me a lift home. Positively chivalrous!"

"He's a nice fellow, Anne, but he's got a one-way mind. No frills about him; he's just a man to be trusted."

"So I gathered. I talked to him a bit. He told me to mind my own business—very politely put, but that's what it amounted to. Later, he said that if I had anything relevant to say, I must say it in the presence of a responsible witness—like you, or daddy."

"That man's got sense," said Sir Giles. "I hope you haven't anything—relevant—to say, Anne."

His voice was dry, but Anne Merryl looked up at him unperturbed.

“I rather hope I haven’t, too,” she replied. “Still, if I do think that I’ve any information which has a bearing on the case, I suppose it’s up to me to produce it. I’ve got to go and change now, but may I talk things over with you sometime?” The smile which was seldom repressed for long lit up her eyes again as she added, “That long-jawed image of a detective told me I was a child. I always imagined that if you went to a C.I.D. man and hinted you’d got information, he’d be all agog to hear it. This specimen said, ‘If you have information this is not the place to give it,’ and suggested the presence of a reliable witness—like you.”

“Perfectly correct,” said Sir Giles dryly. “You don’t realise that the C.I.D. men of to-day are very different in type from the popular conception of them, Anne. There have been men in that branch whose zeal has outrun their discretion, but with men such as Macdonald in authority, correctness is no longer under-estimated.”

“He’s certainly correct. I only hope to goodness he didn’t think I went out into the rain with the intention of cadging a lift.”

It was Pellew’s turn to chuckle. “If he’d thought that, the lift wouldn’t have been forthcoming,” he replied.

Running up to her room, Anne stripped off her wet skirt and stockings and made for the bathroom. All the time she was bathing and dressing, her mind was busy with thoughts of Lewis Conyers. She had first met him by chance, in the manner she had described to her parents, but the acquaintance had not stopped there. Anne Meryll was fond of walking, and in the previous autumn she and Lewis Conyers had met several times on the common between Cherton and Strand. At first their meetings had seemed accidental but later Anne knew that she had walked in a certain direction because Lewis Conyers would be haunting the paths hoping to see her. She had asked him to come to Strand Court, phrasing the invitation in the casual modern manner, but he had made an excuse to avoid accepting it—rather to Anne’s relief, for she knew that her parents would disapprove of him. She wondered now why she had been so secretive about her acquaintance with him, and knew in her own heart that it was because she feared what her parents would say. Not for herself; she was too independent of mind to care on that count, but something in Lewis Conyers’ sensitive guarded expression had awoken pity in Anne. She liked him, and she was sorry for him. The feeling went so deep that she dared not risk arousing the plain speaking which acknowledgment of her friendship with Lewis would arouse.

“I should have gone up in smoke if they’d been beastly about him,” she admitted to herself.

Pulling her golden taffeta frock over her head she gave a sudden gasp as she faced the situation in which she found herself. Those letters: she had undertaken to show them to Macdonald. Her parents—her friends—the whole county would know of those secret meetings with Morton Conyers’ son. Patting her dress into place, she looked at herself in the mirror, and saw her cheeks flaming, her eyes bright. She went to the bureau, unlocked it, and pulled out the two anonymous letters which had disgusted her so much. Her first instinct had been to burn them. She had kept them because she had meant to show them to Lewis Conyers, because they were obviously an attack on him. Anne believed that Lewis was straight—honest, scrupulous and innately lovable. If someone was attacking him, he ought to be told, and to find out who the attacker was.

The letters were curious documents; they were written on cheap white paper such as might be used for lining drawers. The paper was carefully ruled in pencil, and the wording was printed in capitals, such as a child might write. Both letters were clean, and the whole effect was one of carefulness. The first ran: “There’s more folks than you goes a-blackberrying to Chert Common, miss. There’s a little hollow up near the quarry where fine fruits grow. Seen a lot, them bushes have. He’s no fellow for the likes of you. Bad blood it is. You be warned and don’t let him be mucking you about, the dirty liar. One who knows.”

The second ran: “You pretty silly thing, ain’t I warned you? I saw you in your silver frock last night, and him a-slinking in by little side door. There’s black work afoot. You leave him be. Folks’ll soon be talking of what he done.” This effort was signed by a neat diagram of a gallows and dangling rope.

Anne Merryl had had no difficulty in grasping the allusions in these letters. One sunny day last October she had met Lewis Conyers on Chert Common, and they had sat down in the little hollow near the quarry and talked the golden afternoon away. Just talked—of books and verse, of places and buildings, of country and horses and dogs. It had been a good afternoon, in which the mellow sun had warmed them into a pleasant intimacy of mind—no more. The weather had broken shortly afterwards; then, in November, Anne had gone to London. Christmas followed shortly after her return, and she had only met Lewis for brief moments, and the anonymous letter had lost its first sting, and lay, half forgotten, in her bureau.

The reference in the second letter was far more disturbing. A few days before the Wenderby Ball, Anne had met Lewis Conyers and asked him if he were coming to the dance. He had said no, he didn't go to any of the local entertainments. She had laughed at him for his stand-offishness, and told him about her new frock. It was Lewis who had said he would come and stand on the pavement and watch for her when she arrived, and Anne, with that queer pang of pity in her heart, had told him to come to the side door of the Assembly Rooms at Wenderby at eleven o'clock, and wait for her in the small parlour. Anne knew the Assembly Rooms well; she had danced there from the period of her children's parties; she had helped at the bazaars and jumble sales and whist drives which were held there with boring regularity every winter. She knew that the small 'parlour' on the ground floor would not be in use during the Hunt Ball, and she knew that she would have no difficulty in unbolting the side door.

Thinking back to that impulsive suggestion when she had told Lewis Conyers to come and see her new frock and smoke a cigarette with her during an interval, she knew that two motives had been in her mind. One was that she was sorry for Lewis Conyers; she perceived his own lack of self-confidence, his persistent fear of a snubbing, even from herself, and her impulsive, "well, if you can't come and dance, you can come and see my frock," had brought a light to his eyes which altered his whole aspect. Secondly, there was enough recklessness in Anne's own nature to enjoy issuing a challenge. Lewis had always been so guarded, so correct, and so impersonal in his attitude towards her that Anne was piqued into rousing him towards a less Victorian attitude. In some queer way his humility moved her in a manner she herself could not understand, and yet he exasperated her. Her invitation was like the throwing down of a glove; by the very unconventionality of her behaviour she was encouraging him to come out of his shell. He would not come and see her at her own home; he would not make any move towards demanding any place in her life. "Either he can behave like a human being, or he can just liquidate," she had said to herself.

Lewis Conyers had kept his tryst. The few minutes they had spent together in the bare little parlour of the Assembly Rooms had moved him to come out of his shell to the extent of one sentence which troubled Anne considerably as she remembered it. She had said to him:

"Next year you must come to the ball, like a reasonable creature," and he had replied:

"You know quite well why I don't come to things—and why I don't say and do the things I want to do. There is one reason, and only one. People

don't take me on my own merits or—demerits. They say, 'He's that man's son.' ”

The bitterness in his voice had caused Anne to give a cry of expostulation, and he had got up quickly, his face drawn with nervous tension.

“Sorry. I oughtn't to have said that. Bad taste—but one must say things sometimes, or burst. Thanks for letting me come. It was marvellous of you.”

He had almost rushed away after that, as though afraid of being alone with her a minute longer, and Anne had stayed a little while longer in the bare little room, conscious that she was more moved than she had ever been before.

The next morning she had heard of Morton Conyers' death when his car had been wrecked by a lorry. She had said to herself, “Now that's happened things will come right. Poor Lewis. How awful to be glad that one's father is dead.”

It was not until later that she had heard the rumours and suspicions current in the neighbourhood and had coupled them in her mind with the anonymous letter she had received two days ago. Now it seemed clear—someone was deliberately attacking Lewis Conyers, and that someone knew the facts about Morton Conyers' death.

The real reason that Anne had not told her parents about her meeting with Lewis at Wenderby and the subsequent anonymous letter, was that she was certain that they would try to make her promise to suppress the evidence as irrelevant to the case and damaging to her own reputation. Colonel Merryl would have been horrified at his daughter's association with Lewis Conyers in any case; to think of her being involved as a witness in the sordid business of Morton Conyers' death would be intolerable to him.

Small wonder that Anne's cheeks flamed as she remembered that she was now committed to sending those letters to Macdonald. She had imagined when she first thought of approaching him that her part in the story could be kept secret. She was beginning to realise now that she might have to come out into the open and face her parents' sorrowful consternation and the gossip of the neighbourhood.

“Was I a fool—or wasn't I?” she asked herself. “Would it have been better if I'd burnt the damned letters and kept quiet?”

Anne Merryl was—as Macdonald had been quick to perceive—a very young girl, intelligent and logical but lacking experience in assessing human

nature. Her mind was mature, but her emotional qualities lacked the control which only age can bring. She found herself torn between two impulses—feeling for Lewis Conyers and feeling for her parents. Despite her argumentative attitude and her freedom of speech in their presence, Anne had an old-fashioned regard for her parents, and she was beginning to realise the extent to which her own impulsive behaviour might hurt them. Then, again, she remembered the flippant things she had heard said about Lewis Conyers that morning—the cynicism with which he had been named as a likely suspect—and she was glad that she had committed herself to sending those letters to Macdonald. If Lewis had an enemy, the sooner that enemy was identified the better for him.

“And now I suppose I’ve got to own up and tell Daddy and Mummy the whole jolly story,” she groaned to herself. “What fun for all of us!”

CHAPTER SEVEN

On Monday morning, Chief Inspector Macdonald and Superintendent Webber met early for a discussion of progress. To Webber's query "Arrived at any conclusions yet?" Macdonald shook his head.

"Nothing of that kind. You've got a case cut and dried in one sense, Super, only you've no essential evidence to back it up with. You've only got supposition. Braid, the chauffeur, has produced a few fresh points which may interest you."

Macdonald recounted Braid's statements regarding the shortage of petrol in the tank of the Daimler, and Lewis Conyers' order to Braid to fill up the tank of the Hillman. Webber got rather red in the face.

"Why the devil didn't Braid tell me that?" he asked wrathfully, but Macdonald sidetracked the question by asking another.

"How does that evidence seem to fit in with your suspicion of young Conyers?"

"It fits all right," replied Webber. "Lewis saw to it that his father wouldn't get more than a certain distance without filling up. That's to say, the shortage of petrol would have compelled deceased to go in a certain direction——"

"So one might have assumed," said Macdonald. "Now let's study the Ordnance Survey for a bit, and consider your road system hereabouts. In order to simplify things as far as possible, one can regard the chief roads in question as forming a triangle. The apex at the north is Strand, the base can be regarded as a line drawn between Rayne's Cross on the west and Cherton on the east. This triangle is intersected from the apex to the base by the secondary road via Dyke's Corner, where the smash occurred. This road is an alternative to the main road, north to south. Thus our most important roads are (A) the main road north to south between Banstoke and Reading. (B) the Dyke's Corner road. (C) the road from Rayne's Cross to Cherton. (D) the road from Cherton to Strand.

"Now the main road was obstructed by road repairs and a fallen tree on Thursday night, so it can be dismissed, but since the Daimler was pulled up at Dyke's Corner, I think the triangle I have mentioned may be considered as the strategic area."

“That’s plain enough,” agreed Webber, but his face showed clearly enough that he thought Macdonald’s preoccupation with the road system was not of great importance.

Macdonald lifted his eyes from the map to explain his line of thought.

“As I see it, there are three questions we have got to answer before we can make any headway,” he said. “The first is, why did Morton Conyers go out at all on such a filthy night? Next, where did he go? Next, where did he get petrol?”

Webber nodded. “The third question depends on Braid’s evidence,” he put in. “If Braid’s lying, Morton Conyers didn’t have to get petrol.”

“Quite—and if we can prove that Conyers didn’t get any petrol, we know that Braid’s lying, and that will be a very important point. Braid has no alibi for the hours in question; he was under notice, and he hated Conyers. Obviously, moreover, a chauffeur would have been able to monkey with the exhaust pipe more easily than any one.”

“Yes, that’s plain enough,” said Webber. “Now about these garages——”

“Yes. About the garages,” said Macdonald. “The nearest filling station to Cherton Manor is in the village of Cherton itself—two and a half miles from the Manor. As a matter of common sense, one would assume that if Morton Conyers were short of petrol, he’d have driven direct to the village to fill up, because no motorist would have risked being without petrol in a sparsely populated district on a night like Thursday night, *but*, according to the evidence—what there is of it—Conyers did not turn towards the village, but away from it. Strake reported the conversation between Lewis Conyers and his mother, in which Mrs. Conyers said, ‘I saw the lights of his car going over Chert Common.’ That’s on the Strand road, in the opposite direction from the village of Cherton and the filling station. That conversation was a private one, remember. I assume that Mrs. Conyers saw what she said she saw. Her son agrees that Strake’s report of that statement was correct. Also, for what it’s worth, the people at Cherton Garage say that Morton Conyers did not put in for petrol on Thursday night. Further, incidentally, they uphold Braid’s statement that the consignment of petrol in tins which Braid had ordered was not despatched to Cherton Manor on Monday afternoon as it should have been.”

Webber scratched his head. “Well—and so what, as my kids say?”

Macdonald laughed. “Like this. I am disposed to accept as true the facts that Morton Conyers had only a gallon of petrol in his tank—because I see

no object in Braid's lying about it—and that Morton Conyers took the turning to the left towards Strand.”

“Then he did just what you said no motorist would have done. He risked running out of petrol. It was a cert if he took that road. It's just over eight miles from Cherton to Strand, and dead lonely. There's only one garage along it, and that closes at six o'clock. It belongs to James, the blacksmith, and he doesn't live there. If Conyers took that road, he had to turn off somewhere for petrol.”

“Exactly. Now there's a road which turns off the Cherton-Strand road two miles beyond Cherton Manor, which runs to Rayne's Cross. By that route it's just over nine miles from the Manor to Smith's Garage at Rayne's Cross, but three miles of it is downhill. The Daimler could have run down that long slope without any help from the engine. The gradient's fairly steep at the top—I cruised down best part of it in neutral. Not a desirable way to drive, but it can be done all right.”

“You're arguing that Conyers turned off towards Rayne's Cross and filled up at Smith's Garage. What do they say about it?”

“Smith's say that Conyers didn't put in there—as every other garage owner in the district says.”

“Doesn't that point to the fact that Braid was telling lies?”

“Not of necessity. Someone at one of the garages may be doing the lying. We've assumed, more or less, that Morton Conyers was killed by exhaust gas leaking into his car. There's no proof of that. If he were shut into a lock-up garage into which exhaust gas was being pumped, he would have been killed.”

Webber stared. “His own lock-up, for instance?”

“Possibly, but not probably. Now with regard to Smith's Garage at Rayne's Cross, there are two points which seem relevant. The first is that the owner of the garage has an exceedingly attractive daughter.”

“Yes. Name of Linda. Smart these girls are nowadays.”

“Very smart. Now Linda Smith, when I saw her, was wearing a wristlet watch, platinum set with diamonds——”

Webber snorted. “Silver set with paste?”

“Not a bit of it,” replied Macdonald. “I put in at the garage to get a broken lead repaired and came across the daughter in the office. I noticed

her watch and asked her if it kept good time. She said, 'Oh, it's a dud. Won't even go.' I said watches were my long suit and offered to have a look at the works. The mainspring was broken. I also made a note of the makers and the number. It's what you'd call a pedigree watch. The makers are Derillé—a famous Geneva firm. All their watches are numbered, and they don't make one that's retailed for less than £25. This one must have cost a hundred, at least."

Webber gave vent to a prolonged whistle. "Sure?" he asked.

"Quite sure," replied Macdonald placidly. "How many people in this district would have been likely to give a girl like Linda Smith a watch of that value?"

Webber grew red in the face again. "You're right. Either Morton Conyers gave it to her—or she stole it."

"Easy enough to find out," replied Macdonald. "I've cabled Derillé's. They will tell us the retailers—and the retailers will have a note of the buyer."

"And Morton Conyers went to Smith's Garage to get value for his dirty presents," growled Webber.

"Perhaps. There's another point: The lorry driver, Albert Bigges—who smashed into the Daimler—is a regular employee of Dalton's Transport. He drives from the Potteries to Southampton via Reading and Basingstoke, and he fills up by contract at regular garages. Smith's at Rayne's Cross is one of them. There may be nothing in that, *but* I'm willing to bet that Morton Conyers gave Linda Smith a valuable watch, that Fred Elsom, Smith's partner, is crazy about Linda Smith, and that Albert Bigges is by way of being friendly with Fred Elsom."

"My God! What a dirty business the whole thing is."

Webber spoke lugubriously, and Macdonald replied.

"It's a pretty good mix up. Surmise is no good to us. What we want is evidence, and there's not much concrete evidence yet. To get back to my original queries. Why did Morton Conyers go out on Thursday night, after he'd run his car into the garage as though he were not going out again? I think the answer is a telephone call which was put through on his private line at seven-fifteen. It came from a call-box at Rayne's Cross."

"Look here," burst out Webber, "if what you're getting at is true, do you think that girl would have been such a fool as to go on wearing the watch

Conyers gave her?"

"I don't know yet that he did give it to her," replied Macdonald, "but I'd say she's silly enough to do anything. She is of the variety who runs to looks and not brains. In her case she only connects cause and effect with setting lotion and lipstick."

Webber was looking at the map. "It fits," he said despondently. "Morton Conyers could have been gassed at the garage, put back in his car, and driven to Dyke's Corner—and then Bigges was given the office to crash the Daimler."

"It's just one of those nice theories which one makes at the outset of a case," said Macdonald. "We've got Lewis Conyers, Braid and Fred Elsom. On paper we could make out a pretty damning case against any of them—but we haven't got any evidence to support any one case."

When Macdonald left Webber, he went and parked his own car in the Market Square at Strand and wandered round the square looking at the shops. It was a pleasant little town, of a type which is found all over England. At one end of the Market Square was the church, whose architecture varied from Norman to Perpendicular, with a noble west tower of the Decorated period. Around the church were clustered some good houses of Queen Anne's period, their comely tiled roofs making a pleasant patch of colour against the big elm trees in the church yard. The buildings round the other sides of the square were a medley showing some Tudor work in mullions and transoms, some quaint attempts at baroque ornamentation in the old market hall, and some really beautiful Georgian doorways and fanlights. The roofs were at all heights and angles, some of old tiles, decrepit and warm hued, some shingled, some slated.

A lovable group of buildings to look at, Macdonald thought, but obviously inconvenient and probably insanitary—old houses which had been adapted as shops, and had everything to be said against them except their appearance. Macdonald knew that it was in the market square that Morton Conyers had been wanting to obtain land, and that it was here that he had been wishful to buy out the tradesmen in order to build John Home's store which would supersede the old-fashioned shops. The chief inspector was anxious to hear the opinions of some of the tradespeople on this topic, and he made his way to the barber's shop, as being the most probable establishment for gossip.

Suffering an unnecessary haircut, Macdonald found that Mr. Ingle, the barber, was bursting with conversation on the inevitable topic. It was hardly

necessary for Macdonald to make an opening on this score—the local sensation was related to him with a wealth of detail. In Mr. Ingle’s opinion, Morton Conyers’ death was a tragedy. It was very evident that the barber had not been one of the opponents of John Home’s scheme.

“A deplorable thing for Strand, sir,” went on the barber. “Mr. Conyers would have improved the place out of all knowing. A wonderful man he was. I only hope his son will carry out the father’s intentions.”

A very few questions put Macdonald in possession of the sentiments of the whole market square. Mr. Ingle himself had been only too anxious to sell his premises and the goodwill of his business in order that he might retire himself, while his son and daughter were to be found positions in John Home’s, as was his assistant ‘young lady’ Miss Wilkes. The Baker, Laing, and the Butcher, Manton, were really agreeable to the project and were only standing out for higher terms, but certain ‘die hards’ in the Chamber of Commerce had resolved to stand out against the ‘enemy’ (as they regarded Conyers) at all costs. Of these (as Colonel Meryll had reported) the obstinate Matthew Boles, of ‘The Pharmacy’ was one. The chemist, together with Josiah Green, the draper, and William Stokes, the grocer, were in determined opposition, but the loudest of the opposing voices was that of Charles Shenton, the newsagent, whose shop was in a strategic position in the middle of the west side of the square. Shenton had opposed Conyers with a fury which many of his fellow tradesmen thought very ill-advised. In addition to his newsagent’s business, Shenton was a printer, and the proprietor of the Strand *Advertiser*, the local paper.

“Between you and me, Shenton’s a bookie as well,” confided the barber. “He’s the centre of all the betting that goes on in the town, and I tell you the extent of it’s something shameful. Does more harm than drink, and that’s a fact. Shenton reckons he’s a very important person—and he’s worth a lot of money, I’m not denying that—but the town would be better without him, and I’ve as good as told him so. He’s all cock-a-hoop over Mr. Conyers’ death. Shocking bad taste, he’s shown. ‘And what about Mr. Qualified Conyers now?’ he asked me.”

Macdonald just managed to evade the highly scented brilliantine which the barber was preparing to lavish on him, and shortly took his departure.

Not unnaturally he made his way towards the premises of the newsagent, bought several papers, including the current number of the local product, and made inquiries about the possibility of getting London newspapers delivered early in the morning to a village a few miles out of Strand. The

nature of his inquiries and Macdonald's own authoritative manner impressed the assistant with his possibilities as a good potential customer, and the girl retired to "make inquiries" with the hoped for result that the proprietor shortly appeared in person.

Charles Shenton was of a type very familiar to Macdonald. He was a tall stout red-faced fellow, with a manner partly bluff and ingratiating, partly condescending. A bully, undoubtedly, a smart business man, certainly, but a man who was addicted to heavy drinking, and who had a vile temper—so Macdonald placed him without hesitation. Shenton assured his promising customer that papers could be delivered to him at any time he wished, and Macdonald nodded.

"Very good. I'm glad to hear it. I've been told that John Home is opening a branch in Strand shortly, with a news-delivery as at Bamsden."

Shenton laughed. The laugh of a very satisfied man.

"There was some rumour of the kind. All knocked on the head now, though. In any case, nothing would have come of it. Some of us prefer to be independent, and not to truckle to these American boss methods."

"Quite—but I'm told it's not too easy to remain independent when a concern like John Home's gets going. Wiser to make terms while you can, isn't it?"

"The only terms John Home would have got out of me would have been given with my boot," replied Shenton. "I can afford to disregard concerns of that kind. See here: if John Home opens in Strand, he's got to have part of the Market Square—no other position in the town's any good to him. Now, I own this property, and the premises adjoining, as well as the land at the rear. Freehold. You can't get over that—not in England. On the opposite side there's Mr. Boles, the chemist. He's a freeholder, too. Can't touch him. The church isn't for sale, nor the Rectory. That leaves the north side. See that small slip of a shop—Dunn, the harness maker. I've just bought his premises—one up on John Home, sir. It's only a small bit of land and a tumbledown shop, but it prevents John Home getting his frontage. These millionaires and their chain-stores! Fight 'em, sir, fight 'em! Only wants a bit of gump."

Macdonald gave a quiet laugh. "You're an optimist, Mr. Shenton. I admire your foresightedness, but it's not easy to fight a concern like John Home's. I've watched the procedure. If John Home can't get what he wants at once, he'll look for the best point of attack and play a waiting game."

"How so?"

“That chemist’s shop, now. Boles. Doesn’t look too prosperous. John Home’s game would be to open another chemist’s and undercut Boles. How long would it take to put him out of business?—and with all the will in the world, a man your size can’t make an offer to compete with John Home. You can’t go on doing it indefinitely. Foreclose when you’re in a position to do so—but you can’t compete for long.”

Macdonald’s wily speech had the effect he had calculated. He had no inside knowledge of the finances of Market Square: he had simply used his wits to sting the other man, and had succeeded. Shenton’s face grew purple.

“I’ll ask you to say what you mean, sir. What’s your business? If you’re an agent for John Home’s——”

“I’m nothing of that kind. I’m simply a visitor making inquiries.”

Shenton laughed, but the sound was not good tempered.

“If that’s so, you’ll know John Home’s taken his last fence. I reckon we shan’t be troubled with him and his schemes any longer. He was a live wire, I’ll say that for him, the dirty dog that he was. No board of directors is going to follow Morton Conyers’ policy of expansion. Better safe than clever, the directors will say. I reckon we’ve heard the last of it.”

“I wonder. Thanks for an interesting conversation,” said Macdonald. “Good-day to you.”

Shenton came to the door of his shop as Macdonald went out, and the latter strolled along leisurely lighted a cigarette, and went into the King’s Arms and ordered a cup of coffee. The coffee turned out to be just as bad as Macdonald had anticipated; hotels in English market towns seemed to him to specialise in a brew which resembled nothing in particular, but coffee least of all. When he considered that he had worn down Shenton’s patience as a watcher, the chief inspector made his way to Boles, the chemist’s. It was an old-fashioned shop, with The Pharmacy lettered above the window, and a display of the huge glass phials of coloured liquids with which every pharmaceutical chemist once used to decorate his window. The interior was dark and questionably clean, and a long lank youth with marked adenoidal tendencies regretted his inability to supply Howard’s Quinisan, and recommended Ammoniated Quinine as a desirable alternative. Macdonald countered by asking how long it would take to procure the preparation he had asked for, and his persistence led to the appearance of the proprietor—Matthew Boles, a tall cadaverous man of fifty, who was himself suffering

from such a streaming cold that Macdonald began to wish that his bottle of Quinisan was really obtainable.

Boles snuffled. "No demand for it here: Strand's an old-fashioned town and people are conservative in their medicines. Ammoniated quinine, now . . ."

The chemist's remarks gave Macdonald an opening for some derogatory remarks about such firms as John Home's. Rather to his surprise, Boles was quite mild in his rejoinders. He went so far as to admit that a John Home, with vast capital behind him, might be able to provide better service than the small tradesmen.

"But the big store never gives the same quality of individual interest and service," observed Macdonald pleasantly, and Boles gave a gruff laugh.

"Quite true, sir. I've been in business here twenty-five years. My father was here for thirty years before me, and his father before him. I know the complaints of the folk in this town better than the doctors do themselves. I've always taken a friendly interest in them—Tom's cough, and Dick's rheumatism and Harry's stomach trouble. Bottle of the usual, Mr. Boles, they'll say. Still, I'm not denying that a firm like John Home can give a wider choice in all these new proprietary drugs, and then there's the cosmetics trade—not in my line at all."

"All the same, you wouldn't have welcomed a John Home store in this town, surely?" queried Macdonald, while Boles packed up the shaving soap and other items which his pleasant customer had indicated.

"There's two ways of looking at it, sir," said Boles, with a glance towards the door, lowering his voice a little. "When I first heard of John Home's offer, I said 'No' instinctively. I like my own shop, managing my own business, carrying on as my father and grandfather did before me—but a man gets tired as he grows older, and there's a lot of worry and bother what with government regulations and income tax and that. A good offer's worth considering. Still, it was difficult. I didn't want to let my fellow tradesmen down, them all being against it. However—I reckon we've heard the last of it, as you may know."

"You think Mr. Lewis Conyers won't urge the scheme—if he inherits, as he doubtless will——?"

"Mr. Lewis may stand by the offers made, but he won't force them," replied Boles. "That's to say he won't drive a man out of business because

that man won't treat with him—and that's the only method by which John Home could be established in Strand. That'll be three and six, thank you."

"Thanks," said Macdonald, producing his coins. "A curious accident—that of Morton Conyers' death."

"Very curious. Deadly stuff, that carbon monoxide gas," said Boles.

"I expect there's a lot of gossip about it in the town," went on Macdonald and Boles nodded.

"You may be sure there is. Every one's asking what took Mr. Conyers along that road that night. It's a very bad road, and if it was Strand he was aiming for, it's not the road he'd have chosen."

"But judging from the general trend of gossip it seems improbable that Mr. Conyers came to Strand at all that night," persisted Macdonald.

"Of course he didn't. When his car was found, it was facing Strand—he was coming towards it, not going away from it——"

"Easy enough to turn a car round," came in adenoidal accents from the darkest corner of the shop. It was the assistant, the much bullied Wilkes, voicing his private opinion—as doubtless every other person in Strand had been doing.

"You get on with your work, and don't get talking about what doesn't concern you," snapped Matthew Boles, and then turned to Macdonald again.

"I get tired of the nonsense they're talking in this town, sir. Every jackanapes repeating gossip that some Tom, Dick or Harry made up. Out for sensation—comes of going to these American films. You wouldn't believe the nonsense you hear in this Square."

At that moment a short stocky fellow came in and bought some shaving soap, clapped down his money on the counter, and emerged on to the pavement just beside the chief inspector.

"Old Boles bullies that boy something shocking," he said, "and he's not such a fool as all that, Wilkes isn't. Something in what he said about that car of Conyers' being reversed, if there's any truth in the rumours of foul play. Conyers was seen in Wenderby that evening, I hear."

"According to rumour he was seen all over the county," replied Macdonald.

"Maybe—but there was a lot of folks abroad in Wenderby that evening. The Hunt Ball, you know. Some of the young fellows from here went to see

the gentry arriving, and I've heard they saw the Daimler in Wenderby. Well, if that's so—why was the car facing Strand when it was found?"

"The point is—can any one swear that they saw the Daimler in Wenderby—or is it just a case of someone else seeing it—like the Russian troops in England early in the war," replied Macdonald.

"Ah! That's a very good parallel. Personally I believe Morton Conyers was seen in Wenderby."

"Did you see him yourself?"

"No. I didn't. Still—you wait and see."

Macdonald went and had lunch at the King's Head, where he studied the local paper, which gave a full, if florid account of the Hunt Ball. He still agreed with the Deputy Chief Constable—an open mind was needed.

CHAPTER EIGHT

It was the Deputy Chief Constable who next asked Macdonald, “Have you come to any conclusion yet?” and again Macdonald shook his head.

“No, sir. It’s what you might call a fluid case. It keeps on taking different shape. There are a lot of possibilities, but until we’ve established Morton Conyers’ movements on Thursday evening we’ve nothing certain to go on. With a man like Conyers, it’s easy enough to find people with motives for killing him, but the method chosen was pretty subtle. He might have died in his own car, because the exhaust was tampered with, or he might have been shut in a lock-up garage or other enclosed space and gassed there. We can’t say how, or when. It’s a case in which patience is needed. Evidence is coming in, slowly, but we’re nowhere within sight of the real facts yet.”

“The simplest explanation is that the exhaust was tampered with, and that Conyers drove on until he was overcome by the gas. He pulled up—and the rest followed as Webber argued.”

“It’s not quite as simple as that, sir. The Daimler was found only fourteen miles away from Cherton Manor. Deceased left home about eighty. In a car as powerful as the Daimler, it’s inconceivable that he could have taken much more than half an hour to drive fourteen miles—probably less. The simple assumption that he drove direct to Dyke’s Corner, pulled up there, and was overcome by the fumes in his own car, is no longer tenable in face of the further evidence which has just come in. We have now got reports from two motorists, one of whom passed Dyke’s Corner at nine-thirty approximately, on Thursday evening, and the other of whom passed there at ten o’clock. The Daimler was not standing there when those drivers passed, so it’s obvious that Conyers did not drive direct to the spot where he was found.”

The Deputy Chief Constable smoothed his well-shaven cheek thoughtfully.

“I see. That complicates matters. About this chauffeur, Braid. Do you think he’s lying?”

“I can’t see any point in his lying, sir, unless he was hoping to make me assume without question that Morton Conyers did go to a garage between the time he left home and the time of his death, but Braid discounted that idea by volunteering the information that he had inquired at all the local

garages and his master did not put in at any of them. For what my opinion's worth I'd say that Braid isn't subtle enough in mentality to work out an elaborate scheme of falsification. He's a hot-headed impetuous fellow, but not devious minded. I'm disposed to take what he says at its face value, and I have an idea which may materialise about Conyers' movements that evening, although I may take some time to substantiate it. Certainly, I have no hopes of arriving at a quick conclusion to the case."

Macdonald, as an emissary of Scotland Yard, and also as an investigator of singularly independent mind, did not wish to put down all the evidence he had collected until he was able to see just where that evidence was tending. He was conscious that the county authorities—from the Deputy Chief Constable to superintendent and his subordinates—had allowed themselves to become biased at the outset of the case. Webber had decided in his own obstinate way that Lewis Conyers was guilty. The Deputy Chief Constable, up against Webber before the case opened, was sure that the superintendent was wrong, and the deputy official was anxious to hit upon an alternative suspect. Braid had certainly had opportunities to tamper with the Daimler, and his evidence was uncorroborated, but the Deputy Chief Constable did not know that Macdonald's own independent research had gathered in other likely suspects—and Macdonald was keeping his own counsel temporarily in order to preserve his independence of action. Having weighed up Braid's evidence about the petrol, Macdonald had decided to accept it, because he could see no purpose in the man's having lied on that point. Having accepted Braid's evidence as to the amount of petrol in the tank of the Daimler, Macdonald had belaboured his wits to think out a method of discovering where Conyers had obtained more petrol, and had arrived at a conclusion by a simple yet astute piece of detection. Webber could have discovered the same facts for himself—in Macdonald's opinion he should have done so—had he attended to the smaller details of the case.

After Conyers' death, the contents of his pockets had, of course, been examined. In an inner pocket was a note-case holding nineteen pound notes. Thrust into a pocket in his overcoat was a ten shilling note and a sixpence. Macdonald learnt from Conyers' bank that on Thursday afternoon the dead man had cashed a cheque for twenty pounds. To Superintendent Webber the presence of the money in Conyers' pockets simply conveyed the fact that he had not been robbed. Macdonald noted that the nine shillings and sixpence expended would have exactly covered the cost of six gallons of Shell. Conyers, on this assumption, having paid for the petrol with a pound note from his wallet, had thrust the change into the pocket of his overcoat. Acting on this assumption, Macdonald had treated the ten shilling note with

fingerprint powder. The note (a moderately clean one) had then shown an admirable print of a large thumb and first finger—the prints of fingers which had been in contact with engine oil. Macdonald, through his visit to Smith's garage on the previous day, was now in a position to prove whose fingerprints marked the ten shilling note found in Morton Conyers' pocket—a matter which Webber could have determined without difficulty had he not allowed his mind to become biased by his original suspicions and assumptions. Macdonald found that both the superintendent and his Deputy Chief were difficult to co-operate with simply because they tended to accept obvious conclusions, and it was on that account that Macdonald was avoiding stating his own researches until he could judge their importance and trend in the case he was investigating.

After his brief interview with the Deputy Chief Constable in Strand, Macdonald set out in his car for Smith's garage. As he drove through the colourless countryside on this winter morning he allowed himself to meditate on human nature as demonstrated to a detective. In every case he investigated he came across the foolishness of humanity in all degrees. In his pocket reposed now the anonymous letters sent to him by Anne Merryl. Common sense should have told her to show those letters to someone in authority who would have had their origin investigated. While making all allowances for her youth and inexperience, Macdonald regarded her behaviour as lacking in the elements of common sense. Again was the case of Linda Smith. The investigations of his department had put Macdonald in possession of the fact that the Derillé watch had been sold to Morton Conyers—who had doubtless given it to Linda Smith, who ought to have had more sense than to have taken it. Not that Macdonald made the mistake of crediting women with all the world's foolishness. He had met men who were quite as foolish as any young girl, and with less excuse.

His rather comminatory—and extremely Scottish—train of thought was interrupted at that juncture by the appearance on the road ahead of him of Miss Linda Smith herself. He was now about a mile from Rayne's Cross and the garage, and he decided to give Miss Smith the opportunity of answering questions without the embarrassment of a witness. From what Macdonald had gathered in a recent conversation with Webber, Mr. Smith would be likely to give his comely daughter "a leathering" if he realised that she had been accepting valuable presents from Morton Conyers.

Pulling up a few yards before the girl drew level with him, Macdonald considered the sophisticated product before him; clad in a short fur coat, a cerise scarf tied round her fair curls, Linda Smith was as pretty a creature as

one might meet in a day's march. Blue-eyed, rosy-cheeked, full-lipped, healthy and buxom, she was a picture of health and seductiveness.

Macdonald got out of the car and met her inquiring smile with a very straight face. Producing a card, he said, "I am a detective inspector on duty. I want you to answer some questions concerning Mr. Morton Conyers. If you would rather be questioned in the presence of your father or mother, I will drive you back home."

The colour came rushing up to her face.

"I don't know what you mean. I don't know anything about him."

"Then how came it that yesterday you were wearing a watch which Mr. Conyers bought? I know he bought it, and I know where he bought it. I assumed that he gave it to you. If not, where did you get it?"

"What does it matter to you?"

Her face was white now, her lips trembling, and Macdonald replied gently enough:

"I am investigating the death of Mr. Conyers, and I want to know where he drove on Thursday evening."

"I don't know. I never saw him."

"Will you tell me just what you were doing on Thursday evening from six-thirty onwards?"

Again the colour rushed into her face. "I never saw him. I don't know anything about it. I was at Wenderby all Thursday evening, at the Assembly Rooms. It was the Hunt Ball. Milly James, she'd got a job to look after the ladies' cloakroom—their cloaks and that—and she said I could come and help so's I could see the dresses. We went over to Wenderby together, me and Milly, in Ronny James' van, and we was there until ever so late—after two it was when we left."

"What time did you leave home?"

"Half-past six, it was. Ronny had to leave some parcels in Frayle, so we had to start early. He came and fetched us back, too."

"Did you see Mr. Conyers in Wenderby that evening?"

"No. I didn't. He wasn't at the Hunt Ball."

"When did you last see him?"

“Not for a long time—a fortnight or more.” She was watching Macdonald with big frightened eyes. “I don’t know anything about it, sir. Honestly, I don’t.”

“So much the better for you,” said Macdonald. “I shall have to see your friend Milly James, so you had better give me her address.”

“She lives with her dad—he’s the grocer at Rayne’s Cross. Milly’s been out as parlourmaid, but she doesn’t like service. She and I was together all Thursday evening; we watched the dancing a bit from the gallery, but we stayed together.” The girl looked up at Macdonald pleadingly. “You won’t tell my dad about that watch, will you? He’d half kill me. I told him I bought it cheap with some money I’d saved.”

“I can’t promise, but I won’t tell him unless I have good reason to,” replied Macdonald. “I stopped and spoke to you on the road like this so as to avoid telling your father—if possible.” He looked down at the lovely frightened face and said abruptly: “If you take presents from rich men like that, you’ll land yourself in trouble, some day.” He turned back towards the car, adding, “If you’ve any sense at all, you’ll keep quiet about this. There’s a chance nothing more need be said. Make the best of it.”

“I shan’t say a word. Oh, dear, I wish I’d never seen him.”

Leaving the girl to continue on her way, Macdonald drove on to the garage. The lad in charge of the petrol pumps told him that Mr. Smith was out, up at Colonel Boyd’s. Mr. Elsom was in charge. Macdonald went into the office and found Fred Elsom at the desk. The latter was a dark, comely fellow of thirty, pleasant to look at despite the oil stains of his trade, and his soiled engineer’s overall. Macdonald produced his official card and watched the other’s face while he studied it. The young man in front of him looked obstinate—his jaw gave evidence of that—but he also looked impatient—a born fighter, and a quick-tempered one at that.

“I wanted to see Mr. Smith, to ask him about cars which put in here on Thursday evening,” began Macdonald.

“He wasn’t here on Thursday evening. He went to Basingstoke to see his sister who was ill, and he stayed the night,” replied Elsom.

“Who was in charge here?”

“I was. I slept here in the office.”

Macdonald looked him straight in the face. “How much petrol did you put in the tank of Mr. Conyers’ Daimler when he put in here on Thursday

evening?”

The chief inspector had not been interrogating witnesses for twenty years for nothing. He knew exactly the meaning of the tenseness which made Fred Elsom's muscles stiffen, of the stillness which held his taut frame. The mechanic's blue eyes, very bright under their black brows, met Macdonald's aggressively.

“He didn't put in here on Thursday evening. I've said so already.”

“I know you have. I'm giving you a chance to tell the truth.”

Elsom's cheeks flushed a swarthy red. He took refuge in blustering.

“You know you're safe enough,” he countered. “If I hit a cop I'm done for. You sit there and tell me I'm a liar. I tell you to get out. If you don't believe me, do the other thing.”

“Use your wits and don't bluster,” replied Macdonald. “That sort of attitude's not going to help you. You say that Mr. Morton Conyers did not come here on Thursday. When did you last see him?”

“Not for a fortnight or more.”

“You're sure of that?”

“I've said so. I've nothing more to say.”

Elsom sat very erect, his eyes blazing, his fists frankly clenched now. He did not understand Macdonald's trend in his last question: his one desire was obviously to use his fists.

Macdonald continued: “I'll put my facts down quite plainly and you can think things over. On Thursday afternoon, Mr. Morton Conyers drew from his bank twenty pounds, in pound notes. After his death the contents of his pockets were examined, and in them were nineteen pound notes in a wallet and a ten shilling note and a sixpence in an outside pocket. The ten shilling note has your fingerprints on it. If you want to know how I know this, it is because I handed you a pound note when I was getting petrol here yesterday and you gave me a ten shilling note in change which I afterwards examined for prints.”

Young Elsom sat very still, staring at Macdonald, and the latter went on in his quiet steady voice, “The ten shilling note in Mr. Conyers' pocket was almost new. It was only issued the previous Monday. Therefore it had not been in his pocket for a fortnight—when you say you last saw him. Those are the facts, and I'm giving you a chance to explain them.”

The flush had died out of Elsom's face, leaving it curiously grey. His eyes looked past Macdonald, out of the open window, his glance fixed on the fields and bare trees beyond, as though seeking to fix a vision of the kindly familiar countryside. At last he spoke, his eyes looking in puzzled fashion at the quiet man opposite to him.

"All right," he said, his voice quiet and dogged. "You're out to fix Conyers' death on me. Get on with it."

"I haven't charged you with his death. If I'd been going to charge you I should have cautioned you. You may have had the opportunity to kill him, as well as the motive—and the means—but you're not alone in that. I said that I was here to give you a chance of speaking the truth."

Elsom caught his breath, and his stubborn jaw relaxed as he took a deep breath.

"You mean that? You're not framing me?"

"Don't talk like a fool. Police cases aren't framed in this country. We're out to get the truth. If the facts about that ten shilling note were put before a jury, together with the fact that Mr. Conyers left Cherton with only a gallon of petrol in his tank, plus the fact that he had been giving valuable presents to Linda Smith, I don't think they'd hesitate about their verdict, *unless* you can prove just what you were doing all Thursday night."

Meeting the stare of Elsom's blue eyes, Macdonald went on, "If you like to tell me the truth—on the assumption that you're innocent—I'll do my best to put what you say to the proof. If you persist in saying Conyers didn't come here on Thursday night, I've no option but to put the facts before the authorities."

Elsom wiped the sweat from his forehead. "I didn't kill him. I swear I didn't touch him, but—oh, my God, how can I prove it?"

"If you didn't kill him, it's my job to help prove it, because I'm out to find the man who did. Now what about it?"

Elsom put his head in his hands.

"Murphy rang up from Strand and told me Conyers was dead—and that he wasn't killed in the smash. I got the jitters. I said he hadn't been here. No one saw him here. I thought——"

"I know what you thought. I want to know what happened—if you're willing to tell me."

The dark-skinned face flushed again, as though rage overcame the fear which had clutched him.

“He came along here soon after nine. I was busy with a lorry. I heard him sounding his horn outside the Smiths’ house yonder—he used to drive round by the fork which branches off the main road past the house. I’d seen him do it before. The house was empty—no one at home. Then, a bit later, when the lorry was gone, he came up here and told me to fill his tank. I put in six gallons of Shell. When he’d paid for it, and got his change, I told him if he didn’t quit mucking round Linda, I’d stop him if I swung for it. I tell you that—I didn’t care a damn what I said. I just saw red. He never said a word. He sat there with a sneer on his face and started the car up and drove off.”

“How far behind him was Mr. Lewis Conyers when they both set off again?”

Elsom did not answer at first, and Macdonald added, “Half truths are no good to either of you. You understand the situation well enough, I can see that. Probably the fact that you knew Lewis Conyers was following his father was another reason why you said the latter hadn’t put in here that night.”

Again the dusky red came up over Elsom’s face.

“He’s a decent chap, sir. He didn’t do it. That I’m certain——”

“You may be, but the only way to prove it is to find out who did do it, and I shall never do that unless I get the real facts.”

“Mr. Lewis passed here a couple of minutes after Morton Conyers left.”

“And they both turned towards Strand—about nine-thirty?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now, I want to hear about what happened for the rest of the night. I know you are contractors for supplying petrol to several firms of lorry owners, and that the lorries drive by schedule and have to keep to a timetable. I’m getting those schedules from the firms in question, but you can tell me what times the regular arrivals come in.”

Macdonald spent half an hour noting the facts he needed. His argument was as follows: Elsom was alone in charge of a busy all-night filling station. If he had murdered Conyers and driven the Daimler to Dyke’s Corner, he would have had to leave the petrol pumps unattended. To have driven the six miles to Dyke’s Corner would have taken about ten minutes; to arrange

Conyers' body in the driving seat a couple more—but the murderer would have had to return from Dyke's Corner to the garage. The hilly road made the employment of a push bike improbable. It would have taken too long. Elsom would not have dared to leave the garage unattended for long. His absence once noted would have been a damning factor in an indictment. Macdonald asked him if he had a motor bike. Elsom answered the question readily; he did not follow the reason for asking it.

“Yes, but I lent it to my brother and he had a smash up in Warwickshire. It's not come back yet—some fuss over the insurance.”

“When did you lend it to him?”

“Fortnight ago.”

Macdonald considered the time-table he had made out concerning Elsom's activities while on night duty that Thursday evening. Macdonald was a fair-minded man, innately. Further he had all the Scots thoroughness which prides itself on doing a job well. He did not leave it to Counsel for the Defence to prove that his evidence was not real evidence at all. Looking at his time-table he perceived that Counsel for the Defence would be in a strong position to prove that Elsom could not have driven to Dyke's Corner between half-past ten and two o'clock unless it could be proved that he'd had a motor cycle or a car to bring him back to the garage. Macdonald did not believe that he could have done it in the intervals of time at his disposal—but the bare possibility remained.

Putting aside that possibility, Macdonald continued on his devious route to Strand, in his mind the knowledge that Elsom could not have put through the telephone call to Conyers at seven o'clock (his time-table proved that) and the probability that Morton Conyers, with six gallons of petrol in his tank, had left the garage at nine-thirty followed by Lewis Conyers in his Hillman.

“And now for the Wenderby theory,” he said to himself, putting his notebook back in his pocket.

CHAPTER NINE

On the evening of the same day on which Macdonald had made contact with the tradesmen of Strand Market Square, certain of the shopkeepers met at the King's Arms for an informal session of the Strand Chamber of Commerce. Their usual deliberations were almost forgotten, because the topic of Morton Conyers' death relegated customary business discussions to the background.

It had become known in Strand that Scotland Yard was investigating the case, and every shopkeeper in the town, in common with the other inhabitants, wished to air his own opinions on the matter.

Mr. Shenton, the newsagent and printer, loud voiced and dictatorial, was as certain of his own opinion in this matter as he was on the proper policy towards the matter of John Home and his proposals. In the privacy of the meeting, speaking as "amongst friends," with privilege and no prejudice, Mr. Shenton gave it as his opinion that the case was simple, though he failed to see how it could ever be proved.

"The exhaust of his car was tapped and connected up with the body of the car. Easy enough to do it when you've plenty of time. Conyers drove on until he felt ill and pulled up—or had to pull up because of some obstruction in the road—and he kept his engine running and collapsed before he was aware what was happening. Then someone—and without naming names it's easy to get at the someone—drove the Daimler to Dyke's Corner and left it, with Conyers' body in the driving seat, at a place where a smash was almost inevitable."

"Look here, that won't do," put in Mr. Josiah Green, the owner of the unheated draper's shop which moved Anne Merryl to wrath. "If Morton Conyers was killed because there was exhaust gas in his car, I can't see how anybody else drove the car, not once the exhaust was tampered with."

Shenton tapped his head. "Do use your brains, my boy! You're an A.R.P. warden, aren't you? Haven't you been teaching us what gas masks are for—and hasn't every inhabitant in these parts had a gas mask served out to him? If this is a murder we're talking about, I reckon it ought to be called A.R.P. murder. Shouldn't be surprised if it was those gas masks put the idea into someone's head."

“Well, that beats the band, that does!” gasped Mr. Green, scratching his long-jawed bristly chin.

“Now that’s a clever idea of yours, Shenton——”

“Sticks out a mile,” replied Shenton scornfully. “That’s how it was done, you bet. As for *why* it was done—well, with Strake’s evidence, that answers itself.”

“Oh, come now,” protested Ingle, the barber. “I don’t hold with insinuations like that——”

“Call it an insinuation if you like, I call it horse sense,” said Shenton.

Mr. Boles, the chemist, put in a word here, his voice hoarse from a cold which (as Mr. Shenton had pointed out) any chemist ought to have been able to cure.

“It’s not so easy as all that,” he argued. “As it happens I hear a bit of gossip from Cherton Manor because the parlourmaid’s a niece of mine by marriage. Mr. Conyers was out in his Daimler all the afternoon. He didn’t get in till six o’clock. Mr. Lewis Conyers didn’t get in till seven, and he went and dressed straight away. Braid, the chauffeur, was in his own cottage between six and seven—one of the gardeners dropped in to see him, and then he had his supper. If the car was all right in the afternoon—and it was, obviously—when was the exhaust tampered with? It’s plain enough that neither Lewis Conyers nor the chauffeur had any time to do anything of that kind between the time Morton Conyers came in at six and the time he went out again.”

“Now, that’s a very interesting point,” said Mr. Ingle eagerly. “If that can be proved——”

“It’ll prove nothing,” said Shenton, in his loud, dictatorial voice. “The exhaust could have been tapped any time—a hole bored in it and a tube run up through the floor boards. Say a rubber tube was used, and plugged till such time as seemed convenient. Rig the booby trap in advance, and take the stopper out at the time you choose. If you use your wits you can think out ways and means easily enough—but, as I’ve said, suspicion’s one thing, proof’s another. Well, gentlemen, I’ve got some work to do. I must be getting along.”

Most of the members made a move at the same time as Shenton, but Ingle tapped Mr. Boles on the shoulder, and said,

“Just a word before you go, Mr. Boles.”

Ernest Stokes, the grocer, remained behind also when Shenton took his departure with his principal cronies. Stokes was a short, stout fellow, with red hair and a heavily jowled face. His rather protuberant blue eyes were shrewd and observant, but he moved slowly and heavily on account of heart trouble which made him inclined to pant on exerting himself. Before John Home's arrival on the scene at Strand, Stokes, Ingle, and Boles had been firm friends and allies. Some coolness had grown up between them when Ingle had been anxious to come to terms with the John Home proposition, but since Morton Conyers' death the three old cronies had drawn together again.

When Shenton and Green had left, Mr. Ingle turned eagerly to the chemist. Ingle was short, plump and cheerful-looking, his well oiled hair brushed smoothly across his round head and curled up in an old-fashioned "quirk" above his low forehead. Boles, the chemist, was tall and cadaverous, a powerfully built man with a fine solid skull. But his appearance was marred by large fleshy ears, whose lobes he twisted nervously while cogitating.

"The long and the short of it," meditated Mr. Stokes, suddenly observing what a quaintly assorted pair were the short, dapper little barber, the tall, melancholy, ill-groomed chemist.

"The fact is, I've been wanting a word with you in confidence, Mr. Boles," chirruped Ingle, his high-pitched voice lowered discreetly, as he thoughtfully put to rights the crumpled collar of Mr. Boles' coat.

"Seems to me there's likely to be a lot of trouble before this business of Mr. Conyers' death is settled. It looks like reflecting disrepute on the town and on all of us. We need to be very careful what we say. Shenton, now. I don't like his tone at all. Very ill-advised. Such talk isn't going to do the town any good at all."

"I quite agree with you, Mr. Ingle," put in the red-haired grocer heartily. "It's a very nasty business altogether, and I'd like to say at once I don't hold with the things they're all saying about Mr. Lewis Conyers. Shenton, now. He'll be getting himself into trouble if he goes on talking in the way he's doing."

Boles blew his nose vigorously, before he replied.

"I quite agree," he said. "Shenton's much too aggressive. Always has been, in my opinion. Now I agreed with him at first that we didn't want John Home's Stores in Strand. Went all against the grain—but Shenton made a

mistake in the way he went about things. His manner, now—threatening, it might have been called.”

“Ah . . .” murmured Messrs Ingle and Stokes in chorus. “Ah . . .”

“Not that I’m suggesting . . .” put in Mr. Boles hastily, and the barber put in in his high sing-song voice,

“No, no, no, Mr. Boles. None of us is suggesting anything.”

“But if you ask me, gentlemen, Shenton’s boasting a bit too soon,” said Mr. Stokes. “That idea of his about the gas mask, now. Clever. He *is* clever—but speaking in confidence, which of us in this Chamber of Commerce, apart from Shenton, would have thought of a thing like that?”

“I tell you, I feel thoroughly uncomfortable,” said Ingle, wriggling his plump shoulders unhappily, and Boles nodded his melancholy head, tugging at one large ear.

“I quite agree with you,” he affirmed. “Shenton’s making a great mistake going round the town saying we’re well rid of Conyers and things like that. In my own mind I’m certain Conyers was killed by an accident. All this talk, tampering with exhausts and such like. Tommy nonsense! Now we’re all three of us motorists—we all own cars. Would it have occurred to any of us to go boring holes in exhaust pipes—and as for the gas mask idea, well, it’s just wild talk. Not likely.”

“Likely or not, someone thought of it, as we’ve just heard,” said Stokes portentously. “Now I was all against this John Home business, as you know. Likely I said some silly things in the heat of the moment, me being partial to my business, but I don’t want Scotland Yard coming poking round the Market Square, and hearing about bad blood in the town, and threats, and all the rest. Not good for trade. Fact is, I don’t trust Shenton. He wants all of us under his thumb, and that’s where he’s got too many folk already, what with debts, and betting, and mortgaged property.”

“You’re right,” said Ingle plaintively, “and Shenton’s a hard man, too. There’s my wife’s cousin, Bigges the harness maker. Shenton’s foreclosing on him . . . but that’s neither here nor there. Shenton’s a very smart business man, we all agree as to that, but I don’t feel comfortable talking to him. Now you, Mr. Boles, you’re what I call a very reliable man, with good powers of judgment. You’ll agree with me, Stokes, I’m sure?”

“To be sure,” said Stokes heartily. “I’ve always said Mr. Boles saw further than most of us, and there’s no one I’d rather trust when it comes to the point.”

The chemist looked at his fellow tradesmen in a puzzled way, as though uncertain where these eulogies were leading, and the barber put in hastily:

“It’s like this, Mr. Boles. Stokes here, and myself, we’ve been putting our heads together, and we wanted to discuss things with you and hear what you make of it. In my business I hear a lot of gossip—and I don’t want to repeat anything inadvisedly.”

“Just so. Just so,” said the grocer heartily. “Very well put.”

Mr. Boles seated himself by the fire, frowning at a twinge of rheumatism in his leg, and nodded his large head ponderously.

“I’m quite agreeable to discussing any point you wish to raise, Mr. Ingle, and I agree with you—the less gossip in the town, the better. Does a lot of damage, does gossip.”

Ingle sat down facing Boles and leaned forward, his face pink with excitement.

“Now do you remember a man named Walsh, Mr. Boles—James Walsh, a farm labourer out at Haddington?”

The chemist twisted one ear thoughtfully, and stared at Ingle in a surprised way.

“I call to mind the man you mention. Got a young wife and an infant that suffers from croup. What’s Walsh been saying? Not that I’d set much store by Walsh, myself.”

“Walsh told me in confidence that he walked in to Strand on Thursday night by the Rayne’s Cross road, his wife being worried over the baby, and she sent him to get some medicine from you, Mr. Boles.”

“Quite right,” agreed Boles after a moment’s thought. “Walsh rang my bell just as I was going up to bed. Ten o’clock it was. Fortunately no dispensing was needed—it was a proprietary preparation he wanted. I handed it out to him immediately and told him to hurry home with it.”

“Ah! Glad to know he was telling the truth,” said Ingle. “He said you answered him out of the window upstairs. Now Walsh told me something very important. He said that he saw Mr. Morton Conyers’ car pass him while he was walking to your shop in Strand that night, Mr. Boles. About half a mile from Strand it was, on the Rayne’s Cross road.”

“How did Walsh know that it was Mr. Conyers’ car?” inquired Boles sceptically.

“Because Walsh knows the number. He’s seen Mr. Conyers drive past his own cottage to that widow lady’s at Haddington. It’s known Mr. Conyers has a fancy that way, though that’s neither here nor there. The point is, Walsh knew the car all right—and a very striking car it is. Now Walsh says the car was heading for Strand, and it passed him about nine-forty. You may have heard—there’s a story going round that Mr. Conyers’ Daimler was seen in Wenderby.”

“So it was. I’ve heard that from several people,” said Boles.

“Ah—now if you were driving to Wenderby from the Rayne’s Cross road, what route’d you take. Across the Market Square, here, wouldn’t you?”

“I suppose I should. There’s no other way,” replied Mr. Boles.

“Just so. Now that’s just what Mr. Conyers didn’t do, seemingly. Ted Cotton had a breakdown with his van—puncture, it was, and he had to change his wheel in all that rain, and a difficult job it was. Ted Cotton was in the Market Square with his van just by the Wenderby turning, and he knows Mr. Conyers didn’t drive his Daimler across the Market Square between nine and ten o’clock on Thursday night, Mr. Boles. I’ve put all this together myself, chatting with my customers.”

“I don’t see where you’re leading, Mr. Ingle,” said the chemist. “Are you trying to prove that Morton Conyers never was seen at Wenderby?”

“I’m trying to get at the facts of the matter and decide what I ought to do,” said the barber. “I don’t want to get myself mixed up in a police case, and I don’t want a lot of gossip in the town. I’m trying to make sense of these stories.”

“Quite right, too,” said the grocer firmly. “You listen to him right to the end, Mr. Boles. Very smart I thought his ideas were.”

“It’s like this, Mr. Boles,” said the barber excitedly. “At nine-forty Mr. Conyers’ car was driving towards Strand—and there’s no turning off that last mile of Rayne’s Cross road until you get to the town—and though his car was seen in Wenderby, it didn’t pass through the Market Square here when you’d have expected it to. Now I ask you—if Mr. Conyers turned off the road to avoid the Market Square route, how did he get to Wenderby? There’s only one other way he could have got there—and that’s by the private road which runs behind the west of the Market Square.”

“Through Shenton’s yard and by his printing works,” put in Mr. Stokes. “Right of way, that is.”

“Well, I’m absolutely . . .” gasped the chemist, his exclamation broken off by a series of sneezes which shook him almost in a spasm. “This is a very remarkable thing you’re suggesting, Mr. Ingle,” he continued. “Do you realise what you’re implying?”

“Ah . . .” murmured the barber portentously, and “Um-m-m . . .” breathed the grocer heavily. Little Ingle looked round the room almost fearfully, and lowered his voice almost to a whisper.

“There’ve been a lot of ins and outs in this business of John Home, as *you* know, Mr. Boles. Morton Conyers had his own way of going to work. He didn’t approach the Chamber of Commerce in the first place. He made proposals to different property owners privately—and Shenton was the chief obstruction, so to speak. Now Morton Conyers was a very bad man to get up against, I’m told. All very well for Shenton to talk big and boast about how Conyers had met his match this time. Silly that is. Shenton isn’t big enough to fight a man Morton Conyers’ size. Now say if Shenton saw the red light, as they say . . . and realised he was going to be up against it. Seems to me he *might* have approached Conyers and offered to do a private deal.”

“Come, come,” protested Boles vigorously, “you’re going too fast. It’s not to be thought of that a man like Conyers would go out of his way to see a fellow like Shenton, late at night, too, and on a shocking night like that _____”

“Now that’s just where you’re wrong, Mr. Boles,” said the barber earnestly. “You may or may not believe it, but that’s just what Morton Conyers would do. Very clever man, he was, and no trouble was too much for him when he’d made up his mind to get a thing. He came and called on me one evening—a fortnight ago, it was. Very pleasant he was. ‘Nothing like a quiet talk, Mr. Ingle,’ he said. Now I ask you”—and the barber spread out his hands appealingly—“if Mr. Morton Conyers took the trouble to call on me, wouldn’t he have gone to see Shenton, if Shenton had said he’d a proposition to make?”

“That’s reasonable, that is,” put in Stokes, rubbing his hands together excitedly.

Mr. Boles looked more pallid than ever in his agitation over these disclosures and he rumbled up the few thin locks of dark hair which grew above his ears until the barber looked quite concerned.

“I don’t like it, Ingle, I don’t like it at all. Very unpleasant, your whole line of reasoning.”

Mr. Ingle's plump face had become very red. "Murder's unpleasant," he broke out unexpectedly, "so's usury. So's buying up mortgaged property and foreclosing on the owner, and so's a lot of other things you and me knows about in this town, Mr. Boles."

"Now, now, stick to the point," put in Stokes. "I understand your feelings, Mr. Ingle, but feelings won't get us nowhere. A cool head's what's needed here."

Mr. Ingle was certainly not feeling cool in the head; he mopped his face and panted a little in his excitement.

"Yes, yes," he stuttered, "quite right, Mr. Stokes," but Boles put in in his deep hoarse voice:

"Even if what you suggest is true, and Conyers *did* go to see Shenton, there's nothing in that. Conyers' car was seen in Wenderby late that night."

"Maybe, maybe, but who's to prove that Conyers was driving it?" asked Ingle. "There's a lot of hearsay about the Daimler being seen in Wenderby, but can any one swear to the fact that Conyers was in it? For all the evidence there is to the contrary, Conyers might have been somewhere else. Anyway, what did he go to Wenderby for? He wasn't at the Hunt Ball."

"Now, you take a word of advice from me, Mr. Ingle," said Boles, leaning forward and talking very seriously. "You've been worrying over this too much. You leave it all alone. You'll get into very serious trouble if you go talking like this. With Mr. Stokes and me, it's one thing. With anybody else it might land you in Queer Street."

Mr. Ingle sat up looking very red and obstinate.

"What I want to know is, Mr. Boles, do I go to this Scotland Yard man and tell him those points I'm sure of—one, that Walsh saw Mr. Conyers' car just outside Strand, two, that Mr. Conyers never drove across the Market Square between nine and ten?"

"You'll have to please yourself about it, Mr. Ingle, but you've asked my advice and here it is. Don't go interfering—leave things to take their course. If you're asked, answer. Otherwise, keep out of it. Once you let it be seen that you're insinuating things against Shenton, you'll be in trouble."

Ingle still looked obstinate.

"I'll think it over, Mr. Boles, but you mark my words. If Conyers was murdered, the man who did it isn't far away."

“Well, I’m blessed!” After Mr. Ingle had taken himself home, the chemist turned to the grocer. “I wouldn’t have believed it!”

“Believed what?”

“That Ingle hated Shenton enough to make up a story like this.”

“Ah,” said the grocer thoughtfully, “there’s times when you see ’uman nature with the lid off, so to speak. There’s lots of feelings is kept stoppered down in a place like this, for all it’s so quiet, seemingly. With a man like Shenton there’s always trouble underneath. Shenton’s like Morton Conyers in a small way—wants to be a monopolist. It’s true he’s a money lender on the q.t. and he gets people under his thumb. I don’t know if Ingle’s had any dealings with Shenton, but I’m pretty sure Ingle’s son, Bob, has got into the fellow’s hands, and poor Bigges, he’s in a mess, too. Comes to this. If Ingle can do Shenton a bad turn, he will. Hates him like poison, does Ingle, for all that he’s afraid to stand up to him when they meet.”

Boles sat and brooded over the fire, his big ungainly shoulders humped up to his ears.

“I don’t like it,” he said. “Ingle had better leave it alone.”

“Maybe he had, but likely he won’t,” said the grocer. “Things go on for a long time, and grievances just pile up, and then something happens—like Conyers’ death—and the lid comes off! ’Uman nature’s like that.”

“But does Ingle really believe Shenton had a hand in it?”

“Well—someone killed Conyers. That’s a plain fact. I don’t believe myself that son of his did it. He’d got other fish to fry that night. It comes to this, Mr. Boles. If Conyers was killed in Strand, it’s as likely Shenton did it as anybody.”

“Who said he was killed in Strand?” demanded the chemist. “That’s all Ingle’s idea. My eye and Betty Martin. If Conyers was killed in Strand, how was he seen at Wenderby?”

“Ah—but was he?” asked the grocer. “In cases like this, you get all sorts of rumours. Folks all round are saying this and that. The superintendent tells me he’s had reports from all over the county saying Conyers’ Daimler was seen here, there and everywhere. Always happens in a case like this. Lots of people coming and going for the Hunt Ball. Plenty of Daimlers, too, for that matter.”

“That’s true enough. It probably wasn’t Conyers’ car at all that that man Walsh saw.”

“Oh, yes, it was. Walsh knows the number—and he got it right. That’s about the one bit of evidence you can rely on. I wish you couldn’t.”

“Why?”

“Won’t do us no good in Strand to have a murder tacked on to us,” said Mr. Stokes lugubriously. “Bad for the town, whichever way you look at it.”

Boles nodded. “The best thing Ingle can do for the town is to get real solid evidence that Conyers was seen in Wenderby,” he said tartly, and Stokes nodded.

“Quite right. Better for Ingle himself, too. It’s a fool’s trick accusing other people. It’s a difficult point, Mr. Boles. The superintendent knows that. These boys who say, ‘I saw Mr. Conyers’ Daimler’—just bragging, as likely as not. They may know a Daimler, but I doubt if one of them knows Mr. Conyers’ by sight, let alone the number of his car. It’s easy enough to say they saw it. Smart Alocs I call ’em. Making up stories. I wish we could pin it down and find some real evidence on that point, Mr. Boles.”

Stokes leaned forward, breathing heavily. “Ingle’s gone and proved that Conyers was driving to Strand. Well, I’m beginning to wish he hadn’t. It’s like fixing the murder in this town. What does that mean? The police will be pestering all of us. If Ingle’s proved Conyers’ car was heading for Strand, and that it didn’t pass through the Market Square, I’m beginning to wish someone else could prove that Conyers really *was* seen in Wenderby.”

Boles was listening with a frowning, intent face.

“Pardon me, Mr. Stokes, but I wish you’d make your position a little clearer, seeing we’re speaking in confidence. First you seem to agree with Ingle that Shenton’s likely to be mixed up in all this, then you turn round and say you want to prove something different.”

Mr. Stokes got rather red in the face, and leaned forward in his turn.

“I’ll put it plainly, Mr. Boles. It wouldn’t surprise me at all if Shenton *is* mixed up in it; very much mixed up, but I don’t want it said that Conyers was murdered at my back door, so to speak. My premises adjoin Shenton’s you’ll remember. If Conyers *was* seen in Wenderby, it looks as though he wasn’t killed in the town at all. Seems to me, if there’s any way of proving Conyers was killed in Wenderby—well, it’d be more comfortable all round.”

Mr. Boles nodded his heavy head. As a fellow tradesman of Stokes’, he understood the workings of the grocer’s mind. Stokes suspected Shenton all right, and Stokes would be glad enough to see Shenton in trouble—but

Stokes didn't want to help to prove that Conyers was murdered close to his own premises.

Boles cleared his throat and spoke slowly and impressively.

"It's not for us to try to concoct evidence, Mr. Stokes, neither one way or the other," he said severely, "but I see no objection to our trying to get at the real facts. The point you're worrying over is this; was Mr. Conyers seen in Wenderby, or was he not? You say it might have been anybody's Daimler was seen that night. Quite true. Now, something's just occurred to me. Mr. Conyers drove through Strand on Thursday afternoon."

"Yes. I saw him," agreed Stokes.

"As it happens, so did I," went on Boles. "I was standing by the door when he passed, and I said to myself, 'Ah, he's been in Bamsden.' Now, why did I say that, Mr. Stokes?"

"Blessed if I know, Mr. Boles."

"Ah—think again. Thursday in Bamsden——"

"God bless my soul! I get you," exclaimed the grocer excitedly. "They was having a big appeal for the cottage hospital and selling flowers like on flag days—big flowers to tie on car bonnets."

"That's it!" said Boles. "Now, Mr. Conyers had got one of those flowers on his radiator—a big yellow thing it was, and he'd got a small one in his buttonhole."

"Now I come to think of it, I believe he had! and I never noticed it," exclaimed Stokes excitedly.

"Now if we find out from the boys who say they saw his car in Wenderby that the Daimler they saw had got one of those flowers on the bonnet, it seems to me more like evidence, Mr. Stokes. Bamsden's twenty miles away from Wenderby. There weren't many of these flowers about in Wenderby that night. It's worth looking into. It's not conclusive, but it seems to me it'd help narrow the issue as they say."

"You're a marvel, Mr. Boles. That's a good, straight, honest piece of thinking, that is. I'll look into it. If we could get evidence that Conyers was driving his car in Wenderby between ten and eleven that night—well, it'd be better for Strand."

Boles tugged at the heavy lobe of his ear. "Better for Strand—and better for Shenton," he observed.

It was late when the two tradesmen parted, but Mr. Stokes did not go home immediately when he left the King's Arms. He was in a state of excitement and only too anxious to probe further into the problem they had been discussing. The fact was that Stokes' state of mind could be described as "pull devil, pull baker." He had no love at all for Shenton, and at first he had been enthusiastic over Ingle's theory that Shenton might be involved in Conyers' death—until he remembered that his own garage abutted on to Shenton's yard, and that if suspicion were to be pointed at one tradesman in Strand, it might easily be pointed at another.

When he parted from Mr. Boles, Stokes took a narrow turning called Ryder's Rents, and walked on until he reached the last cottage in the row. Here lodged Albert Wilkes, Mr. Boles' assistant in The Pharmacy, and Stokes wanted a word with the chemist's assistant, if the latter were still up. There was no difficulty in ascertaining this point. Through an uncurtained window on the ground floor the grocer could see Albert Wilkes sitting at a table, his head clasped in his hands as he bent over a book, lighted by the unshaded rays of an oil lamp beside him.

Mr. Stokes went to the window and tapped on the glass, and saw young Wilkes raise a pallid, terrified face and look wildly round the room. Mr. Stokes, his face close to the window, smiled reassuringly, and at last Wilkes got up, his eyes still bulging with terror, and opened the window.

"What's the matter?" he stuttered, and Mr. Stokes answered reassuringly:

"Nothing's the matter, young fellow. I just want a word with you, that's all, and seeing you through the window I thought I'd save waking up your Ma by knocking at the door. Now you just go and let me in. Nothing to be frightened about."

Wilkes did as he was bid, and in a moment or so Mr. Stokes entered the barely furnished, comfortless little room, where Albert Wilkes had been working.

"Ah!" said Mr. Stokes, glancing down at the text books on the table. "Working at your pharmacy studies, I see. Very sensible. Now, you go into Reading for evening classes once a week, don't you? Thursdays, isn't it? I've often seen you boarding the seven o'clock bus in the Market Square."

Wilkes stared, but said nothing.

"Play truant some nights, though, don't you? Well, well, we can only be young once. Last Thursday, now—gave the evening class a miss, eh?"

Nothing to worry about, young fellow. I'm not here to bully you. I just happen to know you went over to Wenderby—to see the gentry arrive at the Hunt Ball, eh? Very pretty, I've no doubt."

"Well, and what if I did?" demanded Wilkes.

He still looked suspicious, but his alarm at the grocer's unexpected appearance had died down, and he spoke surlily.

"Now, don't you get uppish, young fellow. Mr. Boles, he'd be none too pleased if he knew you went gadding about, neglecting your studies. Not that I'll give you away—oh, no."

"He knows," said Wilkes lugubriously. "Been on at me something awful. It's nothing but Wenderby and neglecting my duty until I'm so tired of it I could drown myself."

"Now, now! Never say things like that," said Mr. Stokes. "Mr. Boles is a very clever man, even though he is a hard master, maybe. Now the reason I came along was this. You were with Tom Dillon in Wenderby, weren't you, and you both saw Mr. Morton Conyers' car there, eh?"

"What if I did?" said Wilkes morosely. "Other people saw it, too. You ask Tom Dillon."

"Yes, yes. Tom Dillon." Mr. Stokes knew—and Albert Wilkes knew—that Tom Dillon was "soft," a big hulking undeveloped fellow, one of a family all tending to be "naturals."

"Now, Tom Dillon, what he says isn't worth much," went on Mr. Stokes, "but you're a smart fellow, and if so be you're the only person who can give reliable evidence on a certain point, you've got to speak out."

"I don't want to get mixed up with no police," said Wilkes.

"Ah! There's a lot of folks feel that way," said Mr. Stokes, "but I'm not the police, and you can talk freely to me. Now, tell me this. How do you know for *certain* that it was Mr. Morton Conyers' car you saw and him in it? Better be careful, young fellow. If you're just telling stories for the sake of looking important, you *will* get yourself into trouble with the police."

Albert Wilkes looked obstinate as he retorted:

"I saw his car all right, and him in it. Passed us in the street close to the Assembly Rooms."

"Anything special about that car of his?" inquired Stokes, eyeing Wilkes severely. "How should you know one car from another?"

“I know that Daimler,” said Wilkes obstinately. “I tell you I saw it under the street lamps, and it’d got a big yellow flower in front, like Colonel Merryl had on his. I tell you I saw Mr. Conyers quite close. He’d got a light-coloured coat on and that big hat of his.”

Stokes stood with his chest well puffed out, feeling very important.

“Now why didn’t you tell Mr. Boles about this?”

Wilkes went very red.

“I got sick of him grumbling at me. I tried to say I hadn’t been in Wenderby, in case he sacked me. Besides, I don’t want to go giving no evidence to the police. They just worry the life out of you if you once get mixed up with them. There’s other people saw that Daimler as well as me. Let them talk.”

Stokes looked down at the cringing young fellow thoughtfully. Boles, he knew, had the name of a hard master. He was amiable enough among his fellow tradesmen, but it was said that he bullied his assistants, and was a close, suspicious man in business. Wilkes, moreover, might find it difficult to get another job if Boles sacked him, for he had a slow mind and a poor physique. Stokes felt that he understood the situation, and moreover, he felt one up on Boles. He had got this important evidence out of Wilkes by speaking firmly, yet kindly, to him.

“Well, as to other people, we’ll see,” said Mr. Stokes. “You’ve done quite right to tell me the truth plainly, but I advise you to keep a still tongue in your head to other people. When the police *do* question you, and it’s a certain thing that they will before long, you answer them straight as you’ve answered me, and you’ll have nothing to be afraid of. I’ll see you don’t suffer by speaking the truth. If Mr. Boles sacks you, well, I dare say I can find a job for you. I know your poor mother’s had a hard time since she was widowed.”

“Thank you very much, Mr. Stokes,” replied Wilkes.

After the grocer had gone, the pallid faced lad put his books and papers together. As he did so, his hands began to shake, and suddenly he sat down at the table and began to cry, his face on his hands, while a rigor shook his lanky, under-nourished body, and his thin hands twitched beneath the lamplight.

CHAPTER TEN

Macdonald's inquiries after he left Smith's garage, were of the nature called "routine." The point which he had established when he proved his surmise that Morton Conyers had put in at Smith's garage for petrol was a very important one. It satisfied him that Braid was telling the truth in his evidence concerning the shortage of petrol in the tank of the Daimler, and it also satisfied Macdonald that Braid was guiltless of tampering with the Daimler's exhaust. If the latter had been the case, Braid would have seen to it that there was plenty of petrol in the Daimler on Thursday night in order to remove the necessity of Conyers' calling at a garage, where the escape of exhaust gas might have been noticed by an alert garage man.

Having eliminated certain possibilities, Macdonald also established others—notably that Lewis Conyers had deliberately followed his father, having pulled up while Conyers loitered outside Smith's house, sounding his Klaxon to attract Linda Smith's attention, were she in the house.

At this stage in his inquiries, suspicion could be regarded as equally balanced between Lewis Conyers and Elsom—as the guilt might well be shared between them. Macdonald left the garage with a lively interest in his next step—that of proving—or disproving—whether Morton Conyers' car had been seen farther afield than Dyke's Corner. The chief inspector was in possession of the many rumours reported to Superintendent Webber, in which the Daimler had been seen by more than a dozen witnesses in the district. That most of these witnesses were unreliable was patent, as their reports would have proved the Daimler to be in at least four improbable places, some miles distant, almost at the same moment. Every police case produces misleading evidence of this kind, and Thursday night was complicated by the fact that a lot of cars had been on the roads around Strand owing to the Hunt Ball.

Macdonald was a good hand at interrogating country folk. He talked to cottagers, to farmers, to roadmen, to roundsmen. He learnt who was ill, who was courting, who was out of work, who was prosperous. He found that old Mrs. Speed had died on Thursday night—and the doctor had been at the Hunt Ball—not that it mattered, poor soul, it was her third stroke anyway. Mrs. Bates, at Chilton on the Green, had had her first baby Thursday night, and the district nurse had had to cycle through all that rain from Strand to Chilton—drenched she was, too, poor thing . . .

The district nurse was next run to earth and interrogated, and produced the information that Ben Walsh of Haddington had walked into Strand between nine and ten o'clock to get medicine for the baby. Macdonald succeeded in making good friends with the nurse, who told him that Walsh had once been in trouble with the police over a matter of poaching, and though he was unwilling to give any evidence to the police, the nurse believed that Walsh could produce information concerning Thursday night if he were tackled in the right way.

Ben Walsh was tackled very firmly indeed by Macdonald, who soon elicited the fact that Walsh had seen Morton Conyers' car on the road about a mile from Strand between half-past nine and ten o'clock on Thursday night. Walsh knew the number of the car, and was certain that it was Conyers' Daimler. Questioned kindly enough by Macdonald, he described how the car had sent a flood of muddy water over him. Drenched he had been. Arrived at Boles' shop, Walsh had been told to stand on the pavement while the chemist wrapped up the bottle of medicine, and the labourer had got home about eleven o'clock, soaked to the skin. He admitted, under further pressure of questioning, that he had seen Lewis Conyers' red car only a few minutes behind the Daimler. Walsh admitted that he had told Mr. Ingle about seeing the Daimler, but he had not mentioned the fact to anybody else. The man was evidently very unwilling to go to the police with evidence lest he become involved in further trouble with them.

Mr. Ingle had always been kind to him and his missis, said Walsh; "always friendly and glad of a chat, is Mr. Ingle. I told him I didn't want to go giving evidence in police courts. Always makes trouble for you if they can, them police. I reckon Mr. Ingle's smarter than that there superintendent. He knows what happened."

After this outburst of confidence Walsh resumed his natural cautious surliness, and Macdonald left him and drove on to Strand to call on the barber.

Mr. Ingle was only too ready to talk, he was, in fact, bubbling over with excitement over his own cleverness, and that of Mr. Stokes and Mr. Boles. The whole story of the identification of the Daimler at Wenderby by reason of the yellow flower on the radiator cap was poured out with a wealth of detail. Macdonald was very much interested in this point. When he had first examined the Daimler he had noticed the wire and the hard centre of the artificial flower still attached to the radiator cap—all that the rain had left of the once flaunting yellow flower. It seemed as though Morton Conyers' action in buying the flower and attaching it to his radiator was going to have

unexpectedly potent consequences in narrowing the issue concerning his murder.

After Mr. Ingle had given his evidence concerning Ted Cotton, and the fact that Conyers had not continued on his way through the Market Square to Wenderby, Macdonald asked the barber quite bluntly exactly what he (Ingle) assumed from this evidence, and the little man went very pink about the ears. He was remembering Boles' cautionary remarks about not accusing other people too readily. Eventually Macdonald got the barber to commit himself. Ingle took the chief inspector outside to the back of his own premises, and pointed out the roadway which ran at the back of the shops on the western side of the Square, between Shenton's shop and the yard where his printing works stood.

"That's the only other way you can get through to Wenderby," said Ingle. "If Mr. Conyers didn't drive through the Market Square, he must have driven that way—or his car must have been driven. What you'd call a noticeable car, sir. It was seen in Wenderby all right. Mr. Stokes and Mr. Boles have pinned that fact down all right."

It took little effort on Macdonald's part to induce Ingle to mention his suspicions of Shenton. Discretion forgotten, the barber outlined his theory, which was to the effect that Conyers had been killed on Shenton's premises, and his car driven to Wenderby with the intention that it might be noticed (as indeed it had been) and the assumption set up that Conyers had left Strand alive.

"Very ingenious, Mr. Ingle," said Macdonald, his face rather sardonic. (He had been quick to sense the fact which had so much surprised Boles—that Ingle hated Shenton rather worse than poison.) "Still, Mr. Shenton's is not the only property which opens on to that by-road. Your own garage backs on to it, too. Now, I wonder if you could prove without a doubt what you were doing on Thursday night?"

Ingle's jaw dropped. "*Me?*" he queried. "Of course, I could. I was at home all the evening, Mrs. Ingle being laid up in bed with a nasty cough and me not liking to go out and leave her alone in the house, the girl having gone gadding over to Wenderby. Mr. Stokes, he was at home, too, because he told me so, but Shenton was out. His wife and son drove over to Reading to a whist drive, and when Barker—he's the fishmonger—called in for a word with Shenton, why he wasn't at home."

"There seem to be quite a number of people who're anxious to provide candidates for the hangman," mused Macdonald later. "Webber obliges with

Lewis Conyers, the Chief Constable offers Braid, the barber and greengrocer back Shenton, and common sense suggests Elsom. What has the chemist to say about it, and his adenoidal assistant?"

It was early closing day in Strand, but Mr. Boles was at home, and asked Macdonald into his dingy shop. The big, pallid, ill-kempt man seemed to fit the melancholy atmosphere of his shuttered shop, but the chemist had a dignity and reticence which marked him out as a more thoughtful man than his fellow tradesmen. He accepted Macdonald's official card without any show of surprise and answered the questions put to him simply and clearly.

Yes, Ben Walsh had called for physic for his baby at ten o'clock or thereabouts Thursday night and had been duly served. Mr. Boles had learnt that Wilkes, his assistant, had played truant from his evening classes and had gone to Wenderby, thus becoming the *fons et origo* of the statement that Morton Conyers was seen in Wenderby. Wilkes was not in the shop at present. On early closing day he often went for a walk in the country, especially on a fair day like the present one, but he would probably be in before dark and the chief inspector could find him at his own home in Ryder's Rents.

"What is your opinion of Wilkes, Mr. Boles? Would you say he was a reliable fellow?"

Mr. Boles pulled his ear and considered before he answered.

"He's not bright, Inspector. Far from bright. He's slow in his studies, slow to learn anything, untidy and bad at figures—but he's careful. That's why I've kept him. What he does do, once he's learnt a thing, he does well. He doesn't make up stories—because he's not bright enough. I don't mean to say he isn't honest—he is—but he's truthful because he hasn't the imagination to be anything else. I'd rely on what he told me." Scratching his long chin, Boles nodded his head. "In the matter of this business of seeing Mr. Conyers' car at Wenderby—I believe him there. I had a job to get the story out of him. Obstinate as a mule he is. In my father's day Wilkes would have got a strapping for some of his ways—but there, give him his due. He saw that car and he's owned up about it. Come to think of it, it's a good thing he did. If Mr. Conyers did drive to Wenderby—and there's no doubt he did—it was Providence that Wilkes saw him there. Some of the tradesmen in this town are drawing too much on their fancy, it seems to me."

Macdonald nodded. "Yes, it's facts we want—but some of the fancies are surprising. You've got some strong rivalries among your fellow tradesmen, Mr. Boles."

“Ah—you’ve noticed that? When I look at this town, I often think it’s a good argument against Socialism,” said the chemist in his hoarse deep voice. “Talk about making men equal—it’s all rubbish! Start a man like Ingle and a man like Shenton at the same point—in a few years Shenton will have doubled his capital, and Ingle will be going cap in hand to borrow from him—at big interest, too. Not that I’m saying that’s so in fact. It’s just that you’ll always get a Shenton in any group.”

“As in a larger section of the community, you get a Morton Conyers,” observed Macdonald.

“Ah,” said the chemist thoughtfully, “and because some folk had reason to hate Conyers, you take it for granted he was murdered, Inspector? It seems a tall story to me. Isn’t there a chance that his death was accidental? All this talk of Ingle’s—surely you don’t take it seriously?”

“When I’m on a case, I’ve got to take every report seriously, Mr. Boles,” replied Macdonald. “What Ingle suggests is quite within the bounds of possibility. Getting back to the evidence about the Daimler on Thursday. I understand that it was you who originally noticed the yellow flower on the radiator when Mr. Conyers drove through Strand in the afternoon. I suppose there’s a possibility that Wilkes would have noticed the flower at the same time?”

“No. I can answer that question for certain,” replied Boles. “Wilkes was in the dispensary—through the door there—cleaning the shelves and so on. He was in there all the afternoon, trade being slack, and you can’t see the Square at all when you’re in there. Perhaps you’d care to step in?”

Macdonald went through the door at the back of the shop and stood in the small dark dispensary and glanced at the bottle-laden shelves. As Boles said, no one working in here could see out into the Square; in fact if the door of the shop was closed, no one in it could see outside, owing to the miscellaneous goods hung in front of the glass.

“There’s an exit at the back, I take it?” asked Macdonald, and Boles nodded.

“Yes, the door behind you gives on to the yard. No, not that door, sir. Allow me. That is my dark room. I took a lot of interest in photography at one time. This door. As you see, we have a roadway at the back, but only for our own use. It’s a cul-de-sac—blocked by Black’s workrooms there.”

Standing beside Macdonald at the back door of the old premises, Boles went on:

“I don’t know if I’m right in guessing what you’re thinking, but there’s no way of slipping round to the front from here. To get into the Square you’d have to walk to the farther end there, past several shops. It’d take quite a bit of time.”

“Yes. I see,” said Macdonald. “It’s quite an important point as you have gathered. What an ancient jumble of buildings! Some of these outhouses must be centuries old.”

“That’s so,” replied the chemist. “My father was a bit of an antiquarian, and he said those stables, or garage as they are now, must date from Tudor times. A real bit of history they make, all these outbuildings. One shed after another, all back to back. Very unhealthy for habitation they’d have been.”

“And not too safe for garaging and stables,” observed Macdonald. “If a fire started here, you’d have trouble.”

“Maybe—but they’ve stood a tidy time. We’re proud of our old town, Inspector.”

Boles stood with one hand on an ancient beam which supported the roof of one of the lean-tos. “It’s lasted a long while—it’ll last me out, maybe.”

Macdonald took his leave after another glance round the cul-de-sac, genuinely interested in the jumble of low outbuildings which leaned up against the antiquated houses, and he was then bowed out of the shop door by Boles, who stood and watched him cross the square. It was very pleasant and peaceful in the winter sunlight, and Boles looked at it lovingly.

“Out of date, maybe,” he murmured, “but good enough for me.”

Closing his shop door, he went upstairs to his parlour and was just settling down for a nap when the bell rang at his side door and he went downstairs again with a sigh. Mr. Shenton was on the doorstep.

“Good-afternoon, Mr. Boles,” said Shenton. “I thought I might find you at home. Nursing that cold of yours, I hope. Nasty things, colds—Rheumatism, too. A great bother it is. Not to be wondered at with the shocking weather we’ve been having. Could I step in for a moment?”

Shenton, red-faced, ostensibly friendly and hearty, had an expression on his face which did not entirely bear out his amiable words. Boles was somewhat puzzled, trying to assess the look of mingled curiosity and aggressiveness in the other’s rather bulging eyes, but the chemist replied with his usual sedate dignity.

“Come in, Mr. Shenton. You know your way upstairs. There’s a nice fire in the parlour. As you say, nasty, cold, unhealthy weather. The damp tells on a man as he gets older.”

“A man’s as old as he feels, so they say,” observed Shenton as he climbed the stairs. “You’ve always had damned good health, Boles. Been lucky that way. We can’t have you getting pneumonia. Wouldn’t do at all. A good strong toddy’s the thing to ward off a chill. A hot rum and lemon’s worth all the physic in the world, no disrespect meant.”

Once in the parlour Shenton stood with his back to the fire, his hands in his pockets, his feet well apart. Boles seated himself in an old-fashioned “grandfather chair” and looked inquiringly up at his visitor.

“So you’ve had a visit from this C.I.D. chap,” went on Shenton. “As it happened I was round at the back there, looking at Black’s property, up against yours. I’ve a reason to take an interest in it. That’s between you and me.” Mr. Shenton winked, but Boles’ heavy countenance showed no response, and the other went on. “What did you make of this inspector fellow, Mr. Boles? He does a lot of poking about, but he doesn’t seem to be getting anywhere.”

“A very civil, sensible sort of man, I thought,” replied Boles mildly, and Shenton snorted.

“Umph! Civility, my eye. Soft soap won’t get him far. They’re all alike, these big Yard men. Out to pander to the big pots. If he’d got a ha’pooth of sense he’d have seen how the land lay fast enough. Superintendent Webber, now, he’s sure enough in his own mind. The sooner the case is brought to a head, the better for everybody. Put a stop to some of the malicious gossip that’s going round.”

Shenton gave another snort as he finished his sentence, and eyed Mr. Boles with an inimical stare.

“People do gossip,” agreed Boles. “Not to be wondered at, I suppose, though I’ve always avoided gossip myself. It’s a mistake to go casting aspersions. However, we don’t all see eye to eye as to that.”

“No, and we don’t all see eye to eye about other matters, neither,” retorted Shenton. “There’s one bit of gossip going round the town which I’d like to have a word with you about, Mr. Boles. I’m told you’re withdrawing your opposition to John Home’s proposals. Thinking of selling up after all if the firm stands by the late lamented’s offer?”

“Indeed,” said Boles. “Now I wonder who told you that . . .”

“Ah! These things get round,” replied Shenton darkly. “Seeing we’ve been associated in our opposition to the scheme, I’d like to know just where you stand, Boles?”

The chemist scratched his long chin thoughtfully and studied his companion before he replied.

“If the matter comes up for discussion, you’ll soon see where I stand, Mr. Shenton. At present the scheme is dropped—and I don’t think it’s likely to be revived.”

“Very interesting, Boles. Very interesting. Inside information, so to speak?”

Shenton’s tone was a cross between blustering and sarcasm, but Boles spoke as quietly as ever.

“Nothing of that kind. Just common sense, Mr. Shenton. There’s a lot of nasty rumours about concerning young Mr. Conyers, as you know well enough. I reckon he’ll be glad to leave Strand, and never come near it again. I don’t think we shall hear any more of John Home in this town.”

“So that’s what you’re thinking, is it?” said Shenton. “Well, I hope you’re right. As for Lewis Conyers leaving this place—well, we shall see. I think his goose is cooked. I was having a chat with young Wilkes. He’s a close bird—but he’s got more powers of observation than one might credit.” Shenton stood and swayed backwards and forwards on his feet, his chin well up, his paunch forward. “Has your friend in the C.I.D. put Wilkes through it yet, Boles?”

“I believe not. Wilkes kept his mouth shut at first. Afraid of losing his job, silly fellow, going off staring at the gentry when he should have been working.”

“About the most useful job of work the silly fellow ever did, or is ever likely to do,” snapped Shenton. “Now, look here, Boles. There’s been a lot of nasty, malicious rumours going round. Oh, yes, I know. Ingle and Green and Stokes, and that little crowd. I don’t make the mistake of thinking you’re responsible for any of it, Boles. Not at all. Now, Ingle—well, he’d like me put somewhere else. We needn’t say where, but I know. I’m no sort of fool. I said just now I’d like to come to an understanding with you—about our future policy in the Chamber of Commerce. You’ve got influence, Boles. In your quiet way you get your ideas over, as they say. Perhaps you can get it into Ingle’s head—and Green’s head—and Stokes’ head—that they’d better pipe another tune. There’s going to be trouble for them, else.”

Mr. Boles looked perturbed, his forehead lined with a frown as he replied:

“I’ve been very sorry about all this gossip. Very ill-advised. Not that I’d pay any attention to it myself . . .”

“Oh, wouldn’t you, by God! Very high-minded and all that. You wait till someone goes round trying to fit a noose for your own neck, Boles! I know! Not that I’m bothering about Ingle. I’ve no need to bother—but I want to know where I stand with you.”

“We’ve always got on very pleasantly, Mr. Shenton. This business seems to have upset everybody. Turned their heads.”

“You’re right—but it’s not turned yours, Boles. Sensible chap you are. Now I told you I’d been having a look at that property up against your premises at the back here. I’m thinking of buying. There’s talk of a Cinema being built here—and that’s the very bit of land for them. Entry on to Market Square, big area behind. Buy it now—and sell later at a stiff profit. You might care to put up a bit of the capital, and make a joint concern of it?”

“So that’s your idea, is it?” said Boles slowly, and Shenton nodded.

“That’s it, Boles. Very profitable it’d be. You think it over—and just use your influence, Boles.”

The chemist stared at the man standing before him.

“I see,” he said slowly. “Very generous of you to suggest my taking a share in it. Very generous, indeed.”

“Well, there’s two sides to it, Boles. It’d take a bit of capital, and you might care to put some up. It’d be well worth your while. Then—one good turn deserves another, as they say. I’m making this proposition to you, as one old friend to another. Cementing an old friendship, so to speak. In return, you can do a lot to scotch all this gossip we know about.”

Shenton shifted from one foot to another, glanced at his watch and then added:

“Fact is, a man doesn’t always want to make a statement to the police about what he was doing at such and such a time, if you take me. If it comes to an inquiry, Boles, we might do worse than put our heads together. Meet privately to discuss policy in this John Home business. Something of that kind, if you follow me?”

Boles looked at the other squarely.

“Yes, Mr. Shenton. I follow you.”

“And you consider this little matter of the property at the back here,” went on Shenton. “It’d be money for nothing. I know the Cinema’s coming. Well, I must be off. Glad to have had a talk, Boles. Co-operation’s a great thing, and you and I between us have done a lot for the town.”

After Shenton had left, the chemist sat and stared into the fire. Boles was a very intelligent man.

“So that’s his idea, is it?” he said to himself.

When Macdonald had left the chemist’s shop, he crossed the Square to Ryder’s Rents and inquired for Wilkes; he was told that “Albert,” as the young man was called, would be in to tea at five o’clock.

“About the insurance was it, sir?” inquired Albert’s mother anxiously and Macdonald smiled back at her in his pleasant way. He knew nothing of Albert’s insurance, but he replied:

“Nothing to worry about, Mrs. Wilkes. Just one or two points to settle.”

“Thank you, sir. I’ve been bothered about Albert. He’s not too well. Forgetful like. I don’t like to see him look so peaked, but he’s always been a funny boy.”

When he returned to the Square to pick up his car, Macdonald saw Shenton being admitted by Boles—and guessed that the reason of Shenton’s visit was to pump Boles about his (Macdonald’s) recent visit. Curiosity was very much to the fore in Strand at the moment.

Macdonald’s next business was to call at Cherton Manor. His routine inquiries were developing into a circular tour, and he hoped that Lewis Conyers might be more forthcoming now that certain facts had come to light. On arrival at the Manor he was told that Mr. Lewis was out, but the parlourmaid went to inquire when he was expected back. When the girl returned, she told him that Mrs. Conyers would like to speak to him if he could spare the time, and Macdonald was taken through the oak-panelled hall to a white-panelled boudoir at the back of the house.

Mrs. Conyers rose to greet him with quiet dignity and self-assurance, her low voice pitched pleasantly in tones which contained no hint of nervousness.

“I am glad to have the opportunity of speaking to you, Chief Inspector. My son has talked about you, and told me how considerate you were to him.”

Macdonald bowed.

“It is good of you to see me, madam. I did not ask to see you before because I realised that you must have suffered from the strain of these past days.”

She smiled at him—a smile which made her face look more sad than when it was still.

“Thank you. I am grateful to you. Please sit down.”

Indicating a chair for Macdonald, she sat down herself in a straight-backed chair facing the light, and looked at Macdonald steadily.

“I should like to be frank with you, as, I hope, you will be frank with me. Inevitably you must have learned a good deal during the course of your inquiry concerning my husband, and you know that my position has not been an easy one. The thing which troubles me now is not the loss of a husband from whom I had become estranged—but the position of my son, whom my own words involved in suspicion. It is a very horrible position for me, Chief Inspector.”

Macdonald bent his head. “Yes. I realise that,” he replied quietly.

Mrs. Conyers looked at him intently, her eyes challenging his own.

“I know that Lewis did not kill my husband,” she went on, still in the same quiet, controlled voice. “You might argue that I should plead that in any case, being admittedly devoted to my son, but, if I were afraid that Lewis is guilty, I should not have sought an interview with you. It is because I know—from my own judgment and intuition—that Lewis did not do this thing, that I welcome you here, hoping that any questions you ask me may help to establish the truth.”

“I am very glad that you do hold this conviction of your son’s innocence,” replied Macdonald. “It must be no small comfort to you—but, if you are so convinced, can’t you persuade him to be frank? He does know—something. He is shielding somebody.”

“Yes. I admit all that, but I should find it hard to beg him to go back on a course of action in which he believes that he is acting rightly. It would be a species of maternal blackmail to use his affection for me to compel him to

go against his own nature. I had been hoping that the truth might emerge without any such plea from me.”

“The facts which have emerged up till now are hardly helpful to your son,” replied Macdonald. “It seems probable that most of these facts will later be entered as evidence. I am quite willing to entrust you with them now, if you wish.”

A half smile lighted his grey eyes pleasantly. “You may be surprised at such an offer from a detective officer, but I think that you have the intelligence to realise that any attempt to utilise such information given to you in confidence would be prejudicial to your son’s case.”

She smiled in return—an ironical smile this time, which did something to restore animation to her tired face.

“Yes, Chief Inspector. I’m not unintelligent. I realise that your offer is dictated by a desire to probe deeper into your case, not from sympathy or sentiment of any kind. If I can add anything to your facts, I will do so.”

Macdonald paused a moment to formulate his statement, and then began dryly:

“On the Thursday in question, your husband left this place at eight-fifty with only a gallon of petrol in his tank. He was followed by your son in the Hillman, the tank of which was full. Your husband drove to Smith’s garage at Rayne’s Cross, where he was subjected to some plain speaking from Elsom, the garage mechanic, who had a grudge against him. Your husband drove on—presumably—since his car was seen by a farm labourer a short distance from Strand, and your son’s car following it. The drivers of the two cars are at present presumptive, but I believe myself that each car was driven by its respective owner. Your son is known to have gone to the King’s Head in Strand and to have spent at least an hour there, though the times are not beyond question. Considerably later, your husband’s car is reported to have been seen in Wenderby—and your son was undoubtedly in that place.”

“One moment——” Mrs. Conyers raised her hand and Macdonald paused. “Is it fair to ask *who* saw Lewis in Wenderby? I haven’t asked him any more about that evening, but I’m not his mother for nothing. I think I have guessed what took him to Wenderby.”

“If you wish me to answer that question, I will do so,” replied Macdonald. “He went to see Miss Meryll at the Assembly Rooms.”

“I guessed that,” replied Mrs. Conyers, and suddenly her steady control broke and she cried out, “If only I knew who was following who that awful

evening! Did Lewis set out to follow his father, to learn goodness knows what of his actions for my sake—and did Morton realise he was being followed and reverse the game, following in his turn?”

“I admit that that notion had occurred to me,” replied Macdonald quietly. “I’m sorry, but I told you to begin with that the evidence to date does not look hopeful for your son. It does look as though Mr. Morton Conyers, knowing he was followed, gave the pursuit the slip in the by-ways of Strand, and later took it up, as you say, with positions reversed. At the present juncture the prosecution would postulate that possibility—as well as the probability of an eventual quarrel when your son realised what had happened.”

Mrs. Conyers had recovered her self-control, and she spoke quietly.

“And can you tell me how my son, in one car, killed his father with exhaust gas—in another car—and then drove both cars from Wenderby, the one to Dyke’s Corner, the other back here?”

“The difficulty exists, but it is not insuperable,” replied Macdonald quietly. “I won’t distress you by hazarding suggestions as to how it was done. I have done what I undertook to do—given you the evidence to date. Now—are you willing to answer some questions?”

Mrs. Conyers nodded. “Perfectly willing. I am grateful to you for your frankness, and I honestly believe that I have nothing to lose by telling you anything I know. Meantime, will you take tea with me? I feel a cup of tea would help to make me a more lucid witness. To you, a case is a case, Chief Inspector. To me——”

She spread out her hands in a gesture of utter weariness, and Macdonald responded:

“Yes. I know what you mean, but some conception of humanity is an essential part in the make-up of an investigator who seeks to solve human problems—and then”—his smile suddenly lighted his lean face—“I should be very glad of a cup of tea.”

“Then press the bell for me. One day, Chief Inspector, I should like to ask you to tea with me—when this tyranny is overpast, as the psalmist has it. You see, I’m quite confident.”

“Believe me, I shall accept the invitation with very great pleasure,” replied Macdonald. There was something about Mrs. Conyers which he liked and respected, and his own humanity, as well as his ingrained courtesy,

bade him accept her hospitality. To have refused it at this juncture was a gesture which Macdonald shrank from making.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Macdonald made no further reference to his case until tea had been brought in, and he and his hostess had drunk the fragrant brew. Macdonald was something of connoisseur in tea, and he chatted to Mrs. Conyers concerning the relative qualities of China and Indian teas, of the ceremonial serving of green tea in China and Japan, of the tea blocks of the Tibetans, and the famous black tea of the Nilgiri Hills. He found her a very charming companion, and was able to congratulate her with enthusiasm on the quality of the Lapsang suchong which she offered him.

“And now—your questions,” she said at length, putting down her cup and leaning tranquilly back in her chair.

Macdonald pulled an envelope from his pocket and began. “You have received anonymous letters at certain times in the past few months?”

“Yes. Three altogether. I am afraid that I burnt them. They were unsavoury productions.”

“Can you remember their wording?”

“Not with precision. They all concerned my husband, and his affairs with women in this district.”

“Will you tell me the names of the women mentioned?”

“If you consider it essential, though I am very loath to do so. One was a girl named Linda Smith; one was a married woman named Hubbard—or some such name. The other was a girl in the hair-dressers’ shop at Strand. I don’t think her name was mentioned.” Mrs. Conyers’ voice was steady and expressionless, but the frown had deepened on her low forehead. “It was not the first occasion in my married life I had received the attentions of an anonymous letter writer, Chief Inspector. I invariably burn such productions.”

“Quite. Was any threat expressed in any of the letters?”

“No. They were written, apparently, only with the intention of giving me information—of a nature which I did not require or desire. I had been aware of the state of things they described for a great many years and resolutely ignored it. I don’t wish to interpolate my own code of behaviour into this

discussion, but I have followed the course of action which seemed right to me.”

“I understand. Can you describe the appearance of these letters?”

“They came in cheap white envelopes, neatly addressed in pencil in capital letters. The letters themselves were written in the same way on white paper, thin and rather glossy, like the lining paper we use in drawers. They were carefully done, with neatly ruled pencil lines, as though somebody had taken quite a lot of trouble over them. What a queer kink in some small mind—to spend so much attention on such a sorry business.”

“Yes. The important thing for us is to arrive at some conclusion concerning the writer. It appears that his or her intention was to attack your husband through giving information to you.”

“I see what you mean—though it looked to me as though it were just the work of some small malicious busybody trying to work off a grudge against me.”

Macdonald smiled. “I don’t know if anybody has a grudge against you. If so, I haven’t met them. People hereabouts speak of you with respect and gratitude so far as I can gather. I think the attack was aimed at your husband—as a similar one has been aimed at your son through the medium of Miss Merryl. Fortunately she kept her specimens of anonymous activity. This one, I take it, resembles the ones you received.”

Macdonald handed his companion the first of Anne Merryl’s letters, that mentioning Chert Common. Mrs. Conyers read it with a frowning face.

“How disgusting!” she cried indignantly. “This refers to Lewis and Anne Merryl, then?”

“Yes. I saw Miss Merryl yesterday evening. She says that she and your son did meet in that spot once or twice last autumn. After they had parted, she saw Shenton, the Strand newsagent, in his car, driving behind her.”

“Good heavens! Isn’t that the man who led the opposition to my husband’s plans in Strand? I have read some of his articles in the local paper.”

“That’s the man. Local opinion in the town is hazarding a theory that Shenton was responsible for killing your husband—but there isn’t a fraction of evidence to that effect yet.”

“Chief Inspector!” Mrs. Conyers leant forward, her eyes suddenly very bright. “Those letters—attacking Lewis and my husband. Couldn’t Shenton

have written them? The paper they are written on is just the sort of paper sold by stationers for drawers and shelves. Shenton hated my husband—you know that—and he hated Lewis, because Lewis said he was going to summon him for keeping a dog chained up in an inhumane manner.”

“It’s a possibility—among a host of other possibilities,” said Macdonald, and Mrs. Conyers put in:

“If you proved that the paper and the envelopes were obtained—or could be obtained from Shenton’s shop——”

“That would prove nothing,” said Macdonald. “Any one in the district could have bought them. These letters do seem to prove that someone had a grudge against your husband and against his son, but there’s this to be considered. Speaking quite bluntly, a great many people in the rural area had a grudge against your husband, and that feeling may have been reflected on to his son. I want to see the latter as soon as possible, because, although he would not answer any of my questions about following his father’s car, I think he may be willing to answer questions about his presence at Wenderby when he realises that Miss Merryl thought fit to give me these letters.

“However—to leave that for a moment. I wish you would give me your opinion of the man Strake.”

Mrs. Conyers gave a small shrug of the shoulders.

“It’s hardly to be expected that I should give a dispassionate opinion on that subject, Chief Inspector. I don’t think I have ever felt more bitter over anything than I do about Strake and his spying. Obviously, I dislike him—loathe him. I always disliked and mistrusted him, because it was easy to see he was of the spying variety. I can’t imagine how my husband tolerated him, though I believe Strake is a skilful valet. Lewis once asked my husband to get rid of him, after finding Strake in his bedroom without a shadow of an excuse, but Morton only laughed. He may have set Strake to spy on Lewis. I don’t know.”

“Strake is obviously an unpleasant type, and one whom I distrust instinctively,” said Macdonald. “He is trying to make as much mischief for your son as he can——”

“What explanation does he give of hiding behind the curtains and eavesdropping?” asked Mrs. Conyers wearily.

“What you might expect—I don’t believe him, but I’ve no means of disproving his statement. He states that he heard your son threatening his father—before dinner—and that he was anxious. When Mr. Morton Conyers

did not come in, Strake says his anxiety was increased. He heard the telephone ring, and went down to answer it. Finding your son at the phone when he got down, Strake says he listened in great perturbation, and then, realising that if his presence were detected he might be in danger of assault, he slipped behind the curtains, hoping for a chance to escape unobserved. According to his own account, his self-concealment was dictated by fear. Unfortunately the upshot lends substance to his argument.”

Mrs. Conyers’ face was almost grey as she listened, and Macdonald added, “If it’s any comfort to you, I don’t believe a word of it. I think Strake is a mean, lying humbug, and potentially, at least, a rogue. Also, I have learnt from his former employers that he is a very competent chauffeur. He spent Thursday evening—according to his own account—in a small room in your husband’s suite which he used for cleaning and pressing clothes. There is, of course, no corroboration of this. I asked Mr. Morton Conyers’ lawyer to ascertain as carefully as possible whether any valuables were missing from the former’s property—but nothing has transpired.”

“Is there anything discreditable in Strake’s former career which my husband might have discovered?”

“If so, we have not unearthed it. I’ve nothing against Strake officially. My own dislike of him counts for nothing.”

Macdonald got up here. “I think I have covered the ground pretty thoroughly. Speaking unofficially, may I say that I’m sorry that there is so little of a reassuring nature to tell you?”

“You are very kind, Chief Inspector. I am grateful to you. Somehow you’ve made me more hopeful. I know you’ve got to be impartial, but you don’t take it for granted that Lewis is guilty—like the superintendent did.”

Macdonald glanced at the clock. “I ought not to wait any longer now. I will come back after dinner, if I may, and see your son then.”

“Do—and I will do my best, as far as I decently can, to persuade Lewis to speak out.”

When Macdonald left, he was glad to meditate on the fact that one human being cannot read the thoughts of another. When Mrs. Conyers had said, “You don’t take it for granted that Lewis is guilty,” he could have replied with truth, “Neither can I afford to take it for granted that he is innocent.”

He had given no direct reply to Mrs. Conyers’ query “How did Lewis, in one car, kill his father in another, and then drive one car to Dyke’s Corner

and the other to Cherton?" It seemed to Macdonald not at all impossible to give an answer to that question. Father and son could both have driven home to Cherton in their own cars. Morton Conyers could have been locked into his own garage and carbon monoxide pumped into it through a tube connected with the Hillman in the adjoining lock-up. Later, Lewis could have driven the Daimler to Dyke's Corner and returned home on Braid's motor bike which could have been transported on the outward journey in the roomy Daimler. No one save his mother had heard Lewis Conyers come in, though Strake had said that he had heard a motor cycle pass by in the road shortly before two o'clock. Macdonald closed this line of thought with a chuckle, reverting to thoughts of Mrs. Conyers.

"I could also have told her that there's no evidence against her son at this juncture which would justify a charge. All that can be proved is that Lewis Conyers followed his father. The rest is surmise. If the matter came into court at this stage, it could be proved that several other people had motive—and could have arranged means—for the murder quite as easily as Lewis Conyers himself."

When he left Mrs. Conyers, Macdonald made his way to the garages, where he found Braid polishing the metal work on the Hillman. The chauffeur put a hand to his forelock in salute.

"Any news, sir? The folk around here are talking something shocking. Gives me the sick to hear 'em so I can't even go to a pub for a pint."

"Is young Elsom at Rayne's Cross a friend of yours, Braid?"

The chauffeur flushed. "In a manner of speaking. I took one of me batteries in to him for charging, for want of something better to do, so to speak, there being nothing for me to do here. Mrs. Conyers she won't go out, and Mr. Lewis don't like being driven. Elsom—well, he told me his bit of bother. You can't blame him, saying what he did about not seeing the boss that night. Things don't look too good for him, and he's a decent chap. I came near being sorry I ever told you there was only a gallon in that tank."

"A good thing for you you did," replied Macdonald. "Elsom's not the only one who is none too happily situated in this case, and the minute a man's found to have lied, it looks bad for him. I want to have another look at these garages."

Braid looked far from happy as Macdonald went and inspected the old stables which had been converted for garaging. There were three separate lock-ups, in which horses used to be stabled, and it was obvious that any of

them could have been converted into a death trap by the means Macdonald had envisaged—pumping in exhaust gas through a flexible tube from a car in the adjacent lock-up. The only preparation necessary was a gas-proof shutter for the small window, with the tube fitted through it. Macdonald remembered Ingle's report of Shenton's shrewd remarks about gas masks, and A.R.P. Every one nowadays knew all about gas-proofing an aperture.

Braid stood by, watching uneasily, while Macdonald inspected the garages. Concrete floor, brick walls, tiled roof. Apart from the window only a ventilator which could have been blocked. He thought of Morton Conyers running his car in, and the door being secured behind him . . . the atmosphere of the garage might have been impregnated with CO, before he ran the car in, all the air displaced by the deadly gas . . . It was a possibility.

He turned to Braid. "Drive that Hillman down into the main road and then bring it back and garage it."

The chauffeur got into the driver's seat and did as he was bidden, and Macdonald strolled over to the chauffeur's cottage, some hundred yards distant from the garage. The kitchen door stood open, and he went inside and closed it and stood listening. After a few minutes he looked out of the window and saw Braid standing by the garage still with that worried look on his face. He had brought the car up again and run it into the garage, and the engine was running so perfectly that Macdonald had not heard a sound of it through the closed door. With the engines of both Hillman and Daimler in tiptop condition it was quite improbable that any one would have heard them when one—or both—was driven in on Thursday night.

Braid's face was a study when Macdonald went out to join him again, and the impetuous Irishman broke into speech as though he were incapable of containing himself.

"Reckon I know what you're thinking, sir, though may be I'd do better to stow my jaw and keep quiet. It won't work, that won't."

"What won't work?"

"You're thinking the boss could have been shut in that there lock-up and gassed. I've been puzzling my head till it's nearly split, worrying over that same. See here. The door was left open, ready for him to run the Daimler in. He wouldn't have had to get out and open the door. Well, then. He runs the car in. Say someone had shut the doors behind him, straight away. He was in his car. Wouldn't he have put her in reverse and smashed those doors open? If you were locked into a garage, in your car like that, with the whole place

stinking with exhaust gas, may be, would you have just sat and waited to be done in? He wasn't any sort of fool, the boss wasn't. He'd have had those doors down in a jiffy—ramming 'em with his bumpers."

"Seeing you've had the brains to think that out, think a little further," said Macdonald. "You're confusing two lines of thought. You say his garage doors were left open, ready for him to drive in. Then you say the whole place might have been stinking with exhaust gas. You can have one or the other, not both. If the doors had been open, I agree with you as to what would have happened. He'd have had time to ram the doors and smash them down. But if the doors were shut, and he got out of his car to open them, then he might have been shoved from behind—into a poison trap."

"Holy Mary!" groaned the Irishman. "You'll be saying I sat up all night and 'twas meself shut the doors and bundled him in . . ." The man's fierce blue eyes met Macdonald's. "And divil a thing I can say will prove you're wrong."

"Well, it's your suggestion, Braid, not mine. So far as I can tell, you've told the truth so far. Here's another question for you. You saw the Daimler before Mr. Conyers went out on Thursday evening. Was there any single thing about it to distinguish it from any other Daimler?"

"The number. G.B. on the back. Cripes, yes! I remember now. One of them flag day flowers they was selling in Bamsden. A big yellow thing twisted on the radiator cap, same as on poppy day."

"Right. That's the lot for now."

With a nod to the chauffeur Macdonald went back to his own car, and drove patiently back into Strand. The further he probed into this case, the more improbable did it seem that he would ever pin down the guilt.

"Anybody's murder," said Macdonald to himself, "and that Irishman's smart enough to see it."

Another visit to Ryder's Rents brought no result except an interview with a scared Mrs. Wilkes. Darkness had fallen and a bitterly cold wind was blowing, presaging snow, but Albert had not come in to his tea.

"I'm scared he's had an accident, sir. Five o'clock he said he'd be in. He's a rare one for walking, but who'd stay out in the country on an evening like this? I'm worried. It's not like him."

Macdonald went to the Police Station to hear the result of further inquiries concerning Morton Conyers' movements on the Thursday of his

death. It was already established that deceased had driven to Oxford in the morning, had lunched there and driven on to see a business acquaintance—a retired broker at Hanford, a few miles from Strand. From Hanford, he had driven through Strand to Bamsden, and held a short meeting with department managers, and then had driven back to Cherton. Macdonald had wanted to fix the time of Conyers' arrival in Bamsden, as he had apparently not gone straight to John Home's premises, and the local men had unearthed the fact that he had taken one of the Appeal Day Flower Sellers out to tea at a country inn a few miles beyond Bamsden, where Conyers was not known by sight. The name and address of the girl who had had tea with Conyers had just been ascertained, and Macdonald's inquiries about the young woman showed so much interest that Webber was surprised.

"The usual story," said the superintendent disgustedly. "The girl comes of decent people, but Conyers only had to give her the glad eye and ask her out to tea, and she went. She's scared now, in case her people get to know of it. Conyers drove her home afterwards, and they were seen on the road just outside Frayle, a little before six. What good it's going to do dragging that story into court, I don't see."

Macdonald was thinking hard. This last piece of evidence seemed to him to be really important.

"Conyers lunched early in Oxford on Thursday; was at Hanford at two-fifteen, drove through Strand at three, and reached Bamsden at three fifty-five," he repeated.

Webber nodded. "That's it. He spent about forty minutes with his manager at John Home's, picked up the girl at four-forty, arrived at the Green Boar for tea at five o'clock. Left there at five-fifty and drove back to Frayle, where he dropped the girl at six o'clock and drove home. Clear enough. He had the car out all day." Webber was evidently not interested in this 'routine' reconstruction, though it interested Macdonald intensely. The superintendent went on:

"It seems certain that Morton Conyers drove to Wenderby that night. I've pinned down one of the fellows who saw his car—Wilkes, from the chemist's shop for one. Then there's this—I wish I knew where it came from."

Webber produced an envelope and drew a letter out from it, and Macdonald recognised one of the productions of the anonymous letter writer—the same shiny paper, white, and neatly ruled lines. "It came this morning

and I've been checking up on it," went on Webber. He handed the sheet to Macdonald.

The wording ran: "Mr. Lewis Conyers parked his car in Well Walk, near to the Assembly Rooms in Wenderby at ten-fifty on Thursday night. It was there a long time. His father drove down Well Walk just after eleven o'clock."

Webber rubbed his chin with every sign of satisfaction. "This was sent to me, and I thought I'd look into it. I called on a cottager at the end of Well Walk—it's a quiet little turning close to the Assembly Rooms in Wenderby—and the chap told me he'd seen the red Hillman. He didn't know who it belonged to, but he described it quite well."

Macdonald laughed. "We shall soon be able to make a map for the jury, with route and times of the Conyers' progress marked on it. May I have this letter?"

"Of course. If it's fingerprints you want, you'll draw a blank. There's not a print on the sheet."

"Even anonymous letter writers are careful these days," said Macdonald. "The fingerprint has had so much publicity that it's almost defeated. I wasn't thinking of prints, I want to compare the paper with that of some other specimens I've got."

After a visit to the inn where he was staying, where he put the comparison of papers to the test, Macdonald rang through to Cherton Manor. He asked for Mrs. Conyers, and when she came to the phone she immediately told him that Lewis had not come in, and that she was worried about him. She had learnt from Braid that he had not gone out in his car, but had gone on foot, carrying a shot-gun. She could not imagine what had become of him. He had said that he would be out to tea, but lately he had been careful not to stay out for long without telling her where he was going. She had been nervous about his safety simply because she was in a state of nerves about everything. Her voice was breathless and unhappy.

"Can you make any inquiries, Inspector, or is that a silly thing to ask? I don't know where he's gone."

"Of course. I'll do my best," replied Macdonald, promptly. "Will you ring through to the police station at Strand if he comes in? I don't want to raise a hue and cry needlessly. It wouldn't be fair to him."

"Yes. I'll let you know at once. Oh, please, find him for me . . ."

“I’ll do my best,” said Macdonald again.

He hung up the receiver with a frowning face. He was very sorry for Mrs. Conyers, but more than one interpretation could be put on her son’s absence.

Leaving the inn, he went back to the police station and put through the necessary routine calls. Precautions had already been taken to prevent Lewis Conyers leaving England, but Webber’s face was a study when Macdonald gave instructions for notifying the rural constabularies in all districts.

“Ah . . . If we’d detained him to start with . . .” began Webber.

“If you’d detained Lewis Conyers, in fairness you’d have had to detain half a dozen other people as well,” replied Macdonald. “In my experience, a man whose identity is known has a very small chance of getting away or of hiding himself indefinitely. If Lewis Conyers has run away, it’s the strongest piece of evidence we’ve got against him.”

Macdonald had an idea of his own as to where the missing man might have gone and what might have happened to him, but it was one of those brain waves which had very little solid reasoning to support it. Leaving Webber muttering equivalents of “I told you so,” Macdonald drove to Strand Court and asked to see Anne Merryl. The family were at dinner, but Anne appeared immediately, her father beside her. Macdonald’s advice—and that of Sir Giles Pellew—had resulted in Colonel Merryl being told of his daughter’s acquaintance with Lewis Conyers and of the anonymous letters, and his expression now was one of the most acute anxiety.

“I apologise for disturbing you at such an inconvenient time,” began Macdonald equably, “but I thought that Miss Merryl might be able to help us. Mrs. Conyers is very much troubled because her son has not come home when he was expected, and she has asked us to make inquiries.”

Anne met Macdonald’s gaze squarely. “I’m sorry. I can’t help you. I haven’t seen him—or spoken to him—since the Hunt Ball. I did write once—just to say I was sorry about things. That’s all.”

“My daughter has been with her mother all day,” put in Colonel Merryl hastily, but Macdonald replied,

“I didn’t mean that I expected Miss Merryl to have seen Lewis Conyers to-day. My reasoning is this. He went out for a walk, and I thought it possible he might have walked over Chert Common—a locality known to you both”—he added in an aside to Anne. “There’s always a possibility that a man may slip and incapacitate himself with a sprained ankle or even a

broken leg. It will be a lengthy job to search all the commons and woodland around Cherton. I thought that we might make a start in the neighbourhood of those paths which Mr. Conyers frequently followed. Are you used to maps, Miss Merryl? If so, you can show me on this one on which part of the common you have met Lewis Conyers. There's a chance that he may have followed the same route to-day."

Macdonald spread out the big Ordnance Survey map, and Anne Merryl bent over it, while her father expostulated.

"Well, really, Inspector, I think your reasoning is a bit chancy—unless you have some other evidence."

Anne Merryl replied quickly, "I think the inspector's reasoning is very good. Lewis has been miserable. He must have been, with all this horrible gossip and everything. If he went out for a walk he'd have chosen some place to go to which would bring back pleasant recollections."

"That's the idea," said Macdonald, following the pencil with which Anne was tracing out an area on the map.

"We walked along here once or twice," she said, "and sat and talked in the hollow here near the old mill. It's between the quarry and the mill, and there's a path—look, it's marked here—which joins up with the Cherton-Strand road. It's this piece of land Lewis likes best, right on the top of the common. He never walks along the roads more than he can help, always on the common."

"Thanks very much, Miss Merryl. I do think it's worth looking into. Accidents do happen, and that's a lonely stretch of land."

Colonel Merryl looked both sceptical and exasperated, and Anne slipped a hand into his arm.

"Daddy, if you were very miserable and upset, wouldn't you go for a walk—and try to forget everything beastly and remember things—and people—you liked?"

Macdonald smiled at her as he pocketed his map and said good-bye. Foolish, she might have been—but she had a charm which could not be denied. His reasoning might be "chancy," but there was knowledge of human nature behind it. If Lewis Conyers had merely gone for a walk, it seemed most probable that he had walked in the direction associated in his mind with Anne Merryl.

CHAPTER TWELVE

It was a clear bright night on which Macdonald set out on what he admitted to himself was probably a wild-goose chase over Chert Common. He had as assistants a gamekeeper and his son, and a local constable who knew the lie of the land. They drove in Macdonald's car to that point on the common nearest to Cherton Manor, where a well-defined path led through the gorse and brambles and heath. It was Booth, the constable, who said that some gypsies had camped on the common that morning not far away from the path which led to the high ground near the old mill, and Macdonald agreed that it might be worth asking them if they had seen any one walking on the common in the afternoon. When they drew near the spot where the gypsies were encamped, the old gamekeeper, James White, said,

“Stop a minute. What's that?”

In the distance they could hear noises—a man's voice, a horse whinnying, and then the creak of wheels.

“They're moving on. Funny thing that. Them gippoes don't move at nights. They go with the dawn.”

“They're moving at night this time,” said Macdonald, “and they've doubtless got their reasons. Quietly. We don't want them to bolt. Which way are they moving?”

“Coming this way. It's the only path fit for a van,” replied White.

“Then we'll wait for them. Get down in the heather.”

In a moment the four of them had concealed themselves in the thick heath, and lay listening as the sound of horses' hooves, and the creak and rattle of the van became more audible. Macdonald let the vehicle come nearly abreast before he called abruptly.

“Police here. What are you on the move for?”

There was an oath from the driver and the swish of his whip. Booth, the constable, sprang to the horse's head and held it, and Macdonald flashed his torch on the driver.

“Get down. I want to speak to you.”

The man obeyed. He had seen the four figures standing by and realised that resistance was useless.

“Why are you on the move after dark like this?” asked Macdonald again, and the man replied,

“My missis—in there. Taken bad. I’m driving her to hospital.”

“Don’t believe it. You gypsies don’t go to no hospitals,” put in Booth sharply. “Your missis was all right when I saw her s’afternoon. That won’t do.”

Macdonald had seen a rabbit trap hanging from a hook on the wagon. “You’ve been out snaring rabbits for the pot. No harm in that maybe. It’s common land. But something made you pack up in a hurry. You’d better own up while there’s time.”

“I tell you, my missis is took bad. I done nothing. You can’t stop me, taking me missis to hospital. I’ve a right to move on when I like. It’s a crool thing to try and stop me getting her physic.”

“Look here,” said Macdonald. “If you stick to it that your missis is ill, the constable there will go with you to Dr. Plane at Cherton, and he’ll see to your wife and get an ambulance if need be. If she’s not ill, the doctor will know it. In any case, your van must be searched before you leave the district. We didn’t come here to pick blackberries.”

The man was silent. He was a small, weedy-looking fellow, without much stamina, and in the steady gleam of the torch his face looked frightened. Macdonald, trusting to a hunch, went on.

“If the police come out at night to search the common it’s because they’ve a reason for doing so. You’re flitting because you’ve also a good reason for doing so, but you’ve been caught out.”

“I ain’t done nothing,” protested the man, his voice whining and singularly unconvincing, and Macdonald replied.

“Maybe not—but you’ve seen something, when you were out setting traps as likely as not. Are there any rabbit runs up by the old mill, Booth?”

“Yes, sir. There’s a line of sandhills up there. If this fellow’s been up there he’ll have sand in his pockets for sure—along with that bunny he’s got.”

Macdonald turned back to the gypsy.

“We’re going to search up there, among the rabbit runs. Either you can come and help us—or you can be detained in Cherton and answer questions later. If anything’s amiss, you’ll be none the better off for trying to bolt.”

“Happen we’ll find the explanation in that van,” said the old gamekeeper. He was standing at the back of the vehicle and he pulled open the door. “Now then, missis, you come out on’t. Naught the matter with you.”

The light of his torch shone into the van, and showed the gypsy woman crouching in a corner, fully dressed, looking as robust as a sun-tanned slattern can. She screamed as White hauled himself up into the van, and threatened him with her fists.

“None of that,” said White, whose quick eyes had taken in the lack of cover in the poor outfit. He dragged at the bedclothes—a queer assortment of ragged coats and rugs, while the woman screamed, and the man outside kept Macdonald busy. White scrambled out of the van again.

“You’ve got a shot-gun in there you’ve stolen off someone.”

Macdonald spoke again, sharply, still holding the man’s arms behind him in a Jiu-jitsu lock.

“Are you coming to help us search or not? If you’ve done nothing wrong, you’ve nothing to fear—but you know what we’re looking for.”

The gypsy grunted. “All right, boss. I ain’t done nothing. I cleared out because there’d been trouble—but it wasn’t o’ my making. I’ll show you—but I swear I ain’t touched him.”

“Bring that shot-gun with you, White,” said Macdonald. “We’ll leave the van and the missis. If she takes it into her head to drive on, she won’t get away very fast in that outfit, and the roads are patrolled. Now then, father.” He spoke kindly enough to the man squirming under his hand. “Don’t you go leading us astray. You’re in a tight place, and the only thing to do is to play straight.”

The gypsy spat. “Up yonder, on the brow,” he said phlegmatically. “None of my doing, it weren’t.”

The queerly assorted company left the path and set out through the heather—one distinguished representative of Scotland Yard close beside a thieving gypsy; one young constable having the night of his life in his unadventurous area; one old gamekeeper, wise to the wiles of ‘them gippoes’; one country lad, murmuring under his breath, “Golly, what a go!”

The moon was half full, the air still and cold, the heather and bramble rimmed with frost. Old White panted a bit as they went up the slope, making a beeline for the ridge where the old mill had once stood. Macdonald, who

had grasped the features of the Ordnance Survey, and who knew enough about the night sky to tell him his direction accurately, knew they were heading towards the hollow Anne Merryl had marked on his map. Another guess had been justified.

Before they reached the ridge, the gypsy altered his direction and bore southwards, gaining a path or rabbit run where the ground was clear. It curved round a hump of bracken and gorse, and he guided them through a break in the undergrowth to a sheltered hollow. It was sandy here, with a miniature cliff of sand surmounted by brambles curving round it like a shelter. Macdonald and Booth turned their torches on to the sand. Close up against the little cliff lay a body, half-covered with sand that had been pushed over from the ridge above.

“I never touched ’im,” whined the gypsy. “I just saw ’im—and reckoned I’d better get out.”

“And pinched his gun for luck,” put in White. “You’d better stay still, see?—or you’ll get a charge of shot in your legs faster’n you’ll like.”

Macdonald and Booth were carefully moving the sand away. Lewis Conyers’ body lay against the ridge, his face turned towards the little rampart. Only the slightest attempt had been made to conceal him with the loose sand and owing to the manner in which he lay, with his face towards a hollow in the sandhill, his mouth and nose were clear. The sand beneath his head was sodden with blood—sure sign that the blow which had struck him had not killed him outright. Macdonald was busy getting the sand cleared away where it had fallen on to the chest and legs, and he turned the body a little, very gently, his hand slipped inside the coat to see if he could detect any rise and fall of the chest.

“Well, the unexpected does happen,” he said dryly. “He’s still alive.”

Pulling out a roll of bandages and a first-aid outfit, he said to Booth, “Cut along back to the road. There’s an A.A. box a hundred yards beyond the car. Here’s my key. Ring through for a surgeon and the ambulance and stand by until they come, and get a couple more men out from the station.”

Booth set off at a jog-trot down the slope. Young White knelt by Macdonald and did what he could to help the latter in his job of rendering first-aid. Macdonald was very cautious in his ministrations. He put a pad of dressing over the cut forehead and fixed it in place very lightly by a bandage, being careful to exert no pressure from the latter lest the skull was fractured. His own scarf he folded into a pad to keep the injured man’s head

off the ground, and he took off his burberry and wrapped it round the recumbent body. Old White, seeing his action, promptly began to get out of his own coat to offer it for the same purpose. While they were thus occupied the gypsy saw a chance of escape. Silently as a shadow, he slipped through the gap between the brambles and was gone before any of the others perceived his going.

Old White swore with vexation, and caught up the shot-gun he had just put down.

“The murdering varmint! I’ll have him yet,” he cried and took a run towards the edge of the hollow.

“Let him go,” said Macdonald at once. “We shall get him again when we want him. You’ll be asking for trouble if you go tracking a gypsy in the dark with a gun under your arm.”

“Blast him for a cunning varmint. They’re all of a piece, these gippoes. Reckon he came across that poor young chap resting in the hollow here, with his gun beside him, and hit him over the head with the stock and then made off with the gun. You’d better let me and Tim go after him, sir. I’ve been after poachers many a night.”

“You stay here with me, White, in case of need. We came out to find young Conyers, and we’ve found him. He’s alive—but only just alive. We don’t want any more excitement until we’ve got him in the ambulance. I don’t think the gypsy attacked him: I think he found him lying here and stole his gun because thieving’s second nature to him. Have you ever had any crimes of violence from the gypsies who camp hereabouts?”

“No, sir, not that I can call to mind. Stealing and poaching, yes, but nothing worse. Still, with that cunning devil running away like that, giving us the slip an’ all——”

“He was frightened—and he had cause to be. We shall get him all right, but I don’t think he’s responsible for this.”

Macdonald pulled his pouch out of his pocket. “Have a smoke. We’re going to stay here until the stretcher comes. Don’t tramp around. We may learn something from footmarks in the sand up above there. It looks to me as though Conyers sat down to rest with his back against the sandhill and his gun beside him. He went to sleep perhaps, and someone crept along the ridge above him and caught up his gun and knocked him over the head with it. Does he often go out with a gun, do you know?”

“Ay. Fairly often. Cherton Manor’s got some good rough shooting, and Mr. Lewis, he’s a tidy shot. I’m sorry for his poor mother. She’s had enough trouble without this.”

“Well, if we get the boy back alive that’ll be something for her to be thankful for.”

“Ay—though they’re saying hard things about him.”

Macdonald fell silent for a while, until in the distance he heard the note of the ambulance bell.

“They’ll soon be here,” he said. “When we’ve got Conyers away, you and Booth can see if you can get on the track of that gypsy fellow. I doubt if he’ll take to the roads. He’ll be playing hide and seek on the Common somewhere.”

When the stretcher party arrived with the police surgeon the latter made a brief inspection of Macdonald’s bandaging and nodded approval.

“Good enough. Shan’t touch it till we get him to hospital. Given him brandy or anything?”

“Nothing.”

“Good for you. I’ll give him a shot of Coramine if he tries to peter out before we get him in. Not that I expect him to live. Cerebral hæmorrhage probably. Pressure on the brain.”

“Your job, not mine,” replied Macdonald. “He was alive when I handed him over.”

“Thanks for the implication. Now, you fellows, watch your step. If you jolt him, we’re done. Gently, gently . . .”

After they had moved Lewis Conyers on to the stretcher and the bearers had lifted their burden and set off with infinite care, Macdonald waited until the extra men (ordered up by Booth) arrived, and left them on guard by the little hollow in order to ensure that the ground remained undisturbed. Macdonald then hurried back to his car. It was just half an hour before midnight.

It was to Strand that Macdonald drove, not to the police station, but to Ryder’s Rents. In the last house of the row a light was still shining in one of the ground floor windows, and Macdonald, like Mr. Stokes on a previous occasion, went quietly up to the window and glanced in. Albert Wilkes was sitting at the table, his books in front of him, his chin resting on his hands.

Macdonald went round to the front door and considered. He wanted to talk to Wilkes—and to make him talk—and he realised that if he knocked at either door or window he might precipitate an action which would defeat his intention once and for all. Wilkes was a pharmacist—and he had at his disposal the stores of the pharmacy. Macdonald went round to the side of the house farthest from the lighted window and considered one of the windows there. He got out his knife and slipped it between the sashes, pressing back the catch. It gave quietly, being loose and old, and he was able to lift the sash without any difficulty, and climbed quietly inside. It was just as he had got inside that the silence of the night was broken by the very sound that Macdonald had wanted to avoid—a thunderous knocking on the front door, and a shout of “Police there. Police!”

Macdonald rushed to the door of the kitchen (into which he had broken so silently), found the door locked, burst the flimsy thing open with a heave of his shoulders, and was across the little passage and into the lighted room almost in the same spring. Wilkes was lying across the table, his body writhing, his hands clutching dreadfully at the air, and Macdonald felt a sense of horror as he realised the means the neurotic lad had taken to get out of his troubles. The biting noxious smell of Spirits of Salts filled the air—that most horrible of poisons so often found in working class houses. It was not the first suicide from this poison Macdonald had seen, and he knew the uselessness of text book antidotes—chalk or magnesia—even if he could have obtained either in this poor house. No one but a doctor could help the poor writhing victim who had swallowed the deadly acid—and then only by appeasing his suffering.

A quavering voice called to him from the door.

“What’s the matter, Bert? Oh, deary me, whatever has he done?”

It was old Mrs. Wilkes, wringing her hands helplessly.

“The lad’s poisoned himself. I’ll get a doctor as fast as I can. If you’ve any ‘whitening’ in the house, mix it with a little water and try to get him to swallow it.”

“I haven’t got no whitening. Oh, deary me!”

Macdonald left her bending over the unhappy boy. The best thing he himself could do was to get a doctor here as soon as possible. He had been aware, even while he was bending over poor Wilkes, that the banging on the front door—which had precipitated this horror—had been continuing intermittently. He ran to the door and opened it, expecting to find some

stolid-faced constable, intent on investigating a burglary. Instead, he found facing him an excited and red-faced man in a bowler hat—Mr. Shenton, of Market Square.

Suspicion and anger made Macdonald unreasonable for once as Shenton shouted:

“Here, what’s all this? I saw a chap breaking in at a side window as I passed. Burglary, and no mistake about it. It’s a police job, this is.”

“It certainly is,” snapped Macdonald. “It’s also a doctor’s job—thanks to you. I am a C.I.D. Inspector. You’re not wanted here. Go home and stay there.”

“Who d’you think you are, giving orders to me? You can’t take that sort of tone.”

“If you don’t do as you’re told, I’ll arrest you for obstructing the police.”

Macdonald put a hand under the other man’s arm and swung him about with surprising ease.

“Do as you’re told, and do it quickly, or I’ll handcuff you and have you taken to the station.”

Something in the curt voice overcame the other’s truculence. He gave to the compelling hand on his arm and trotted down the roadway. Heads appeared at windows, and an excited voice said:

“It’s Mr. Shenton. Lor! ’E’s taken in charge. ’Ere, Mrs. Tookey, it’s that Shenton, got his self copped.”

Somebody boomed and a voice at another window cried, “Glory! They’ve taken ’im. Told you so. ’E’s for it.”

“I’ll see about putting you where you belong,” shouted the furious Shenton to Macdonald, who was still running him forward at a pace which was surprising. “I’ll break you for this, you tuppenny ha’penny jack in office.”

The appearance of a constable at the street corner settled the argument. Macdonald propelled Shenton forward with a final shove and snapped out.

“Take this man to the station and detain him on my orders.”

He knew the young constable would obey him automatically—discipline was good under Superintendent Webber. Ten seconds later Macdonald was in the call box in the Market Square, giving exchange an urgent police order

to ring up the nearest doctors and get one to Ryder's Rents without delay, to treat a case of hydrochloric acid poisoning. He was out on the pavement again while the constable was still marching the protesting and struggling Shenton across the Square. Had the occasion been less tragic, Macdonald could have laughed. The inhabitants of Ryder's Rents had adumbrated the opinion of the town. "Shenton arrested? Glory!"

When Macdonald got back to Ryder's Rents he found half the neighbours in the row had invaded the Wilkes' cottage and were giving advice to the distracted mother. Macdonald heard one old grey-beard say, "'Twas that Shenton. Bullyin' and threatenin' the pore lad. I 'eard him. 'Twas Shenton made 'im do it."

Macdonald got them all out of the house and tried to comfort the distracted mother. "A doctor will be here any minute. We'll get the boy to hospital and he'll be well looked after."

"I can't think what's been on his mind," she groaned, wringing her hands unhappily. "It's true Shenton's been on to him, and Mr. Stokes and Mr. Boles all bullying him about something, and he sat down and wrote sheets and sheets when he come in and went out and posted it. Deary me, I don't know whatever come over him."

Macdonald busied himself trying to comfort the writhing boy, lifting him up and wiping the twitching face with a kindness as real as it was useless. It was no use trying to question the lad—he was far past reasonable speech.

In response to Macdonald's urgent request to exchange, a doctor did arrive within a few minutes of his own return to the house. Dr. Mainforth (he who had arrived at Dyke's Corner just after the lorry had crashed into Morton Conyers' Daimler) had just brought his car to his own front door half a mile from Strand when exchange rang through.

"I'll take him straight to hospital," he said. "Can't do anything here. Lend me a hand with him."

Young Wilkes, clay-coloured and inert, was now past speaking or even moaning. Macdonald had seen the results of a similar case of poisoning before and knew how horrible it was. Whatever Wilkes might have done in the past, he had sentenced himself to a torture which no other agency would have inflicted on him.

"Not surprised, poor devil," said Dr. Mainforth in an undertone to Macdonald. "The boy's always been neurotic and unbalanced. Beats me why he chose such a hellish potion. He might have known."

“Is he a patient of yours then?”

“Yes—on my panel.”

“Can I come in and see you about him?”

“Yes. I’ll leave him with the house man at hospital. Come along any time you like. I’m used to broken nights.”

Macdonald went back into the house. Mrs. Wilkes was weeping helplessly, and he got a neighbour to take her next door.

Macdonald went back into the bare lamp-lit room where young Wilkes had been sitting. The chief inspector felt bitterness in his heart against Shenton. Whatever Wilkes had done, no man could have wished to drive him to the grim fate he had inflicted on himself.

Opening the window to clear the foul air of the room, Macdonald set to work on the noisome task of clearing the books and papers from the table. Among the notebooks which contained Wilkes’ notes from his evening classes, were some sheets of plain white paper, one of them carefully ruled with pencil lines. The paper was similar to lining paper for domestic use—as Mrs. Conyers had noted. It was also similar to plain white wrapping paper, used by many tradesmen.

The anonymous notes which Anne Meryll had given to Macdonald were on paper of a slightly different quality from that of the last series of letters—that sent to Superintendent Webber. The paper of Anne Meryll’s letters might have had a dozen different origins. It might have come from the stationer’s, from the grocer’s, from the butcher’s, or from the chemist’s. All these tradesmen used plain white paper for certain of their wrappings, but the sheet sent to Webber had been identified by Macdonald. It was exactly similar in size and quality to the paper in which Mr. Boles had wrapped Macdonald’s shaving stick, when the latter had first paid a visit to the chemist’s shop. The packet had been tossed into Macdonald’s suitcase at first, and later the paper had been preserved—together with other samples from the Strand shops. Webber’s letter had provided the proof as to the origin of the paper, it being evident that the chemist had recently had a fresh supply of paper, slightly different in quality from his previous stock, since the earlier letters had been written.

Macdonald had not for a moment suspected Boles himself of writing those anonymous letters. Boles, with his rheumatically legs, would not have gone wandering over Chert Common, neither would he have been interested in Anne Meryll’s meetings with Lewis Conyers. Macdonald was sure that it

was Wilkes who had been responsible. The poor weedy neurotic chemist's assistant had fallen madly in love with Anne, who had always gone out of her way to speak kindly to him. Wilkes, who had a liking for solitary rambles, had seen Anne and Lewis Conyers together on Chert Common, and jealousy and hatred had boiled up in him. He had done his best to make mischief, and once his imagination had let itself play on the possibilities of anonymous letters, he had occupied his time attacking the Conyers family by this means.

Macdonald had had a lot of experience of the activities of anonymous letter writers; he knew that indulgence in the habit begat a sense of power. It was a vice which grew upon the practitioner. Wilkes, once having started the practice, continued with it.

Having identified the writer of Webber's letter—who was obviously the writer of Anne Merryl's letters also—Macdonald had used his own knowledge of human nature to formulate a possible consequence. If Wilkes had written those letters, Wilkes knew where Anne and Lewis Conyers had met on Chert Common and knew, too, in all probability, that Lewis was in the habit of revisiting that spot. There was small doubt in Macdonald's mind that it was Wilkes who had found Lewis Conyers resting in the little hollow, and who had struck him from above in a frenzy of rage.

When he had seen the young man sitting at the table in the lamplight, Macdonald had also had the vision to imagine his state of mind. Wilkes would have had time to realise what he had done; hot rage would have given place to cold fear, as he sat and waited for the sound he dreaded—the summons of the police. That summons had come, not from the police, but from Shenton.

Macdonald collected books and papers together in a large sheet of paper, and left Ryder's Rents, to return to the police station to deal with the man he had so arbitrarily given in charge. It was no use arguing with himself as to whether he would have acted more profitably had he waited for Wilkes to return before he had gone in search of Lewis Conyers. The latter was now safely in hospital. If Shenton had not intervened Wilkes would have been safely in a lock-up. Shenton was the unexpected factor which had made hay of Macdonald's plans.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The townspeople of Strand habitually went early to bed. As a general rule, by eleven o'clock all lights in the Market Square had been extinguished—as the street lights themselves were extinguished by order of the careful-minded Council.

This rule of “early to bed” was occasionally broken by Mr. Ingle or some of his cronies, who met for a rubber of whist, a game which they played very seriously and carefully, occasionally prolonging their sitting to midnight or later. They regarded their game as an exercise suited to masculine skill only, “the ladies” being debarred from joining in such a serious-minded contest.

Mr. Ingle, partnered by Mr. Stokes, had been playing Mr. Boles, partnered by Mr. Green, the draper, on the evening when Macdonald went a-hunting on Chert Common. The four had gone on playing until midnight, and were all enjoying a hot toddy before they went home, when their attention was attracted by the unaccustomed sound of footsteps and voices in the Square below the window.

Mr. Ingle put down his glass in surprise.

“That’s a funny thing, that is,” he observed. “Must be something wrong—this hour of the night.”

The four sat and listened. Mr. Boles, who was an observant man, noticed that his fellow tradesmen all looked nervous. Little Ingle was all of a twitter, Mr. Stokes looked apprehensive, and Mr. Green said:

“I don’t like it. Always something, ever since—”

He did not complete his sentence. They all knew what he meant.

Ingle went to the window, pulled aside the curtain and leaned out.

“What’s the matter?” he asked fearfully.

The others could not hear the answer from below, only Ingle’s stuttering inquiries.

“What . . . what? Who! Hi! Wait a minute there. I’m coming down.”

The barber jumped back from the window and rushed to the door, stammering in his excitement, “It’s Shenton, they’ve taken him, murdering

someone else, oh dear, oh dear . . .”

He ran downstairs, and with common consent the others followed him, into the shop and across to the street door.

“Come in. Come in,” stuttered Ingle.

Mr. Boles, who was not given to showing agitation, had switched on a light at the back of the shop. It shone on the doorway, and he recognised the man who stood there. It was Strake, Mr. Morton Conyers’ valet. Boles knew, as all Strand knew—that Strake had come out of hospital that day, and had taken a room in the town, close to Ryder’s Rents.

In answer to Mr. Ingle’s question Strake was saying excitedly, “Yes. They’ve taken him. I saw it myself. I could hardly believe my own eyes. Mad them police is, mad.”

“Say, if you let him come in and shut that door, Mr. Ingle,” suggested Stokes. “With things going on as they are, I’m not partial to open doors at this time o’ night.”

“Quite right,” said Boles. “Better talk in private. Now what’s all this story?”

Strake broke into a voluble—and very inaccurate—description of events as perceived by the Wilkes’ neighbours in Ryder’s Rents, including an imaginative version of the death of poor Bert Wilkes and the arrest of Shenton. Mr. Boles gave an exclamation of horror.

“Wilkes? Why on earth should he kill Wilkes?”

“Ah . . .” said Mr. Stokes portentously, and Ingle got very red in the face.

“And what may *you* be doing up and about at this hour?” asked Mr. Green suddenly, shooting the question at Strake. “Seems to me you’re always up and about when there’s trouble brewing.”

Strake scowled. “I’m not in the habit of going to bed at sundown like a country bumpkin.”

Suddenly the excitement of what he had seen overcame his resentment at Green’s attitude. “If you’d seen that Shenton being marched along, man-handled by that young bobby, you’d never have believed your eyes. I can’t think what they’re all getting at. They say Shenton killed young Wilkes. Spirits of Salts he gives him. I don’t believe it for a moment. Why should Shenton kill young Wilkes?”

“I must go and see if I can give assistance,” said Boles sadly, but Strake went on with relish:

“You can’t help him, sir. Taken to hospital he is, or the mortuary, more like. I saw him carried out.”

“Not much you miss, my man,” said Green acidly. “Been listening in again like you did before, eh?”

“You go to hell!” said Strake. “I’m damned if I know why I bothered to answer your bloody questions.”

“Now, now. No language of that sort,” put in Stokes. “Fact is, we’re all a bit overwrought with all these awful happenings. How was it you came to hear all this?”

In spite of his indignation, Strake could not help enlarging on his narrative. While he talked, Boles, who always seemed to keep calm, was busy with Mr. Ingle’s telephone, and at length the others stood round him, realising that Mr. Boles was getting authentic information from the police station. As he hung up the receiver, Mr. Boles nodded his domed head lugubriously.

“It’s right about poor Wilkes. Spirits of Salts. Oh, dear, oh, dear. To think of him doing such a thing.”

“And what about Shenton?”

“Being detained for inquiries, young Cox tells me. Nothing against him at all. He’s not arrested.”

“You tell that to the horse marines!” said Strake loudly. “I tell you I saw it.”

“You’ll see too much one of these days,” said Stokes tartly. “If you take my advice, you’ll go home and keep quiet, and not go poking your nose where it’s no business.”

“And who asked me inside here, I’d like to know?” demanded Strake indignantly. “You’re quick enough to ask questions——”

“Just so! Just so!” said Ingle hastily. “It’s only human nature to want to know what’s happened, Mr. Strake. I’m sure we’re all obliged to you, stopping to tell us. Much obliged, I’m sure.”

Ingle had opened the shop door again, and out of pure habit was bowing Strake out as though he had been a customer, evidently anxious to be rid of him. Stokes was murmuring:

“Human nature. We’ve had a bit too much ’uman nature in this town,” and Boles was groaning:

“I can’t get over it! Poor Wilkes! Poor Wilkes!”

Mr. Ingle shut the door and turned to the others excitedly. “If you agree, I’d suggest another glass, gentlemen. It’d do you good, Mr. Boles, after a shock like that, and Mr. Stokes, I’d like a word before we part.”

“Just so,” said Stokes. “One can’t help *thinking*, Mr. Ingle. Makes one think, a thing like this does. Shenton now. Ah . . .”

The four trooped upstairs again to the upper parlour, and Ingle replenished the glasses, rather more liberally than was his wont, for they were all abstemious men. Boles kept on muttering, “But why poor Wilkes?” and Ingle, rather red in the face after his second and more potent whisky, put in:

“That’s just it, Mr. Boles. Why Wilkes? I think there’s an answer to that. You remember our conversation about Shenton? I told you I’d always suspected him. You take it from me, Wilkes *knew* something more’n he’d told. Wilkes was out and about that Thursday night of the murder. Wilkes was dangerous to Shenton—and there you have it.”

Mr. Boles brought his hand down on the table with a bang which set the tumblers rattling—and the nerves of his companions all aquiver.

“It’s tommy rot to talk like that!” he broke out. “Wilkes was the one person who could help Shenton. Didn’t Wilkes see Conyers in Wenderby?”

“Ah,” said Mr. Stokes, with his usual lengthy grunt, “and what if Wilkes saw Shenton, too, and was afraid to say so? Every one’s afraid of Shenton, except us. Shocking great bully, he is. Well, thank you, Mr. Ingle, I’ll not say no.”

Boles glared while Ingle replenished the glasses, and put his own glass on one side, asking angrily:

“And how did Shenton get poor Wilkes to drink hydrochloric acid, I’d like to know? D’you think Wilkes did it to oblige? I tell you, it won’t wash.”

“How he did it, I can’t tell, but I’m quite sure he’s capable of anything. Yes, anything,” said Mr. Ingle, whose speech was becoming a little slurred, between whisky and excitement.

“I’ll tell you this,” he went on recklessly. “I’ve always believed if we could get into that garage of Shenton’s, we’d find out how he murdered poor

Mr. Morton Conyers.”

“Now, now, Mr. Ingle,” protested Boles, “that’s going too far, that is.”

“Not so sure of it myself,” argued Stokes. Whisky agreed with him. He was feeling fine, very strong and self-confident. “We’ve all noticed Shenton’s kept his garage locked these last few days. Very careful he’s been.”

“And what if he has?” demanded Boles. “He doesn’t want people poking their noses into his property.”

“And why don’t he?” demanded Ingle excitedly. “Because he’s got something to hide—and I’d like to know what that something is.”

“I’m with you, Mr. Ingle,” said Green. “I’ve always had me doubts about Shenton. As I said to Mrs. Green, his doings need investigating. Investigation. Yes.”

He stopped, as though considering the sound of his last word, and Boles put in:

“I’d like to know exactly what you all mean. If there’s any investigation to be done, the police’ll do it. Besides, it’s nonsense you’re all talking. If there’s anything in what you’re saying—that Shenton’s had anything incriminating in his garage—he’d have got rid of it before this.”

“Then why did he lock his garage?” demanded Stokes, and Boles countered:

“How do *you* know he’s locked it, anyway?”

Stokes got rather red in the face.

“Well, I do know it.”

“I wonder if it’s locked now,” said Mr. Ingle, and Green said:

“Now, I wonder . . .”

Boles got up. “If you’ll take my advice, gentlemen, you’ll all go home to bed,” but Ingle put in, his voice squeaky and articulation slurred:

“Shenton, he’s safely out of the way. Detained by the police,” and Mr. Stokes said:

“Ah . . .” even more portentously than usual.

“And the police will do any searching they think fit,” said Boles severely.

“I’d like just to see if that garage is locked,” persisted Ingle, and Green put in:

“No harm in looking now, is there?” He added in an aside to Boles. “Not quite himself. Never could stand liquor.”

Ingle had gone to the door, reiterating, “No harm in looking, is there now?”

“Well, I’m blessed!” said Boles helplessly. He glanced at Green, as Ingle opened the door, and the latter said:

“We’d better keep an eye on him, Mr. Boles. Obstinate, he is, when he’s like this.”

The chemist looked as though he thought his companions had gone crazy; Stokes had followed Ingle to the door, and Green added, “One o’ them *knows* something, Mr. Boles. You take it from me.”

“One of them’ll know something they won’t like if Shenton comes home and finds them monkeying with his garage,” said Boles.

“No need for him to make a fuss if he’s got nothing to hide,” said Ingle, who was becoming a little truculent. “With people running about the town at hours like this, it’d be a good thing to see everything’s shipshape in our back premises.”

“That’s it,” agreed Stokes heartily. “Just a look round, Mr. Ingle.”

“You’re asking for trouble,” said Boles heavily.

Ingle was already on his way downstairs, followed by Stokes, and Mr. Green hurried after them, saying:

“Now, we’d better all keep together—just in case——”

Boles shrugged his heavy shoulders; stopped still for a moment as though lost in thought, and then followed the other three, muttering, “They’re drunk. That’s about it. It’s the whisky’s done it.”

To some extent Mr. Boles was right. Ingle very seldom drank more than a modest tot, and this evening he had lowered an unaccustomed amount of White Horse. But there was an additional factor in his excitability. Ingle hated Shenton, and for some days he had been brooding over the likelihood of “bowling him out” as he called it. Ingle and Stokes had been arguing together over Shenton’s possible doings on the Thursday night, and Stokes (prompted by Ingle) had tried to get into Shenton’s garage—and been

observed by the owner. Whereupon Shenton had kept his garage door locked.

Now, the excitement engendered by Strake's narrative—plus the whisky—had determined Ingle and Stokes to try their hand at “investigation.” Mr. Green was only too anxious to see the results (if any) of their detective efforts, and Boles found himself also a prey to curiosity. What was Ingle up to? What *had* he been up to? Boles, perfectly sober, followed the other three downstairs to the shop. He was going to keep an eye on all this.

“Better not to show a light, Mr. Ingle,” advised Stokes. “We don't want to attract attention. You never know, you know.”

Boles, standing just beside Mr. Green at the foot of the stairs, felt the draper nudge him.

“One of 'em *knows* something, Mr. Boles,” he whispered, while Ingle went to the back door of his shop and fumbled with the bolts.

“Looks to me as though Stokes is egging Ingle on,” said Boles, and Green replied close to his ear.

“It's a very funny thing, all this. I can't understand it all. Very glad you're here, Mr. Boles. A cool head's wanted. Very excited, these two are.”

“If the police find them on Shenton's property, it'll mean trouble all round,” grumbled Boles—but he followed close behind Ingle and Stokes as they went outside into the yard which gave on to the roadway at the back of their premises.

It was very dark in the narrow lane and Boles stumbled a little as he followed the others towards Shenton's premises. The garage they were seeking jutted out into the roadway a little—it was built over the old garden space behind the shops—and Green whispered in Boles' ear:

“If there's anything in what they say, I'll admit Shenton's garage is well placed for the job. You remember what he said about gas masks. Struck me as funny . . . I wonder, now . . .”

The two ahead had come to a halt and were whispering together. Then came the sound of a staple being lifted, and the creak of a door. Green said:

“By gum! the door's open after all. Now, what's Ingle up to?”

By feeling rather than by sight, Boles made his way to the open door. Ingle struck a match, and Stokes said:

“None o’ that, Mr. Ingle. Petrol about. I’ve got a torch. We’d better shut the doors before we show a light.”

The four men crowded into the garage, and Stokes switched on his torch, breathing heavily.

“Now what about it, Mr. Ingle?”

“I’m just going to have a look round,” said Ingle obstinately.

Stokes waved his torch round in circles. “Looks ordinary enough to me,” he said doubtfully.

Shenton’s car—a roomy Austin—took up most of the space in the shed. Against the walls were some old wooden cases and a few petrol tins.

“I’m going to have a look inside the car. You never know,” said Ingle, pulling open the door by the driver’s seat.

Green suddenly said, “This is silly, this is. Nothing to see. We’d better go home.”

“What’s he got in those boxes?” asked Stokes.

Ingle was rummaging in the door pockets of the Austin; Stokes was bending over one of the wooden cases by the wall. Green was watching Ingle, and Boles went farther into the building and looked at Stokes, rummaging foolishly among a heap of old books. He had laid his torch on a shelf, and its rays reflected back oddly from the whitewashed walls.

Green said nervously, “Very strong smell of petrol in here. I wonder . . .”

He broke off, and then added, “Who’s that? Somebody outside . . .”

The next second the garage doors were thrown open and another torch light shone on the futile searchers, and a yell of rage filled the place.

“What the . . . hell . . .” shouted a voice, and Green gasped out:

“By jingo, it’s Shenton!”

Shenton it was. He had been man-handled that night by Macdonald. He had been marched across the Market Square by a young constable. He had been detained pending inquiries; he had been questioned at length by Macdonald—and he had been allowed to return home with a “caution.” Now he found four of his fellow tradesmen taking liberties in his garage. He did not wait to ask questions. His temper was up—and he went for the first intruder he saw. Little Ingle had just reappeared from inside the Austin, and he got the benefit of Shenton’s fist full in his face. Stokes lashed out at

Shenton, and the latter stumbled towards him. In that limited space, between the car and the wall, there ensued a wild *mélée*. One torch crashed from its perch on the shelf and was broken on the floor. Shenton, mad with fury, brought his own torch down on Mr. Green's head just as Boles hit out in his turn. In a second three men were struggling on the floor in the dark, their struggles complicated by the petrol tins which got mixed up with their legs. Stokes, describing his experience later, said he knew now what the Black Hole of Calcutta was like. He, Green, and Boles, were all in a heap together, Boles undermost, Shenton on top, hitting and kicking wildly, while the petrol tins added their painful angles to the hurts experienced by the struggling quartet. Stokes said that Shenton had just got to his feet when the final catastrophe occurred. Relieved of the weight of Shenton's body, Stokes was on his knees and Green struggling to get up when there was a splutter and a crackle. A box of vestas had fallen from someone's pocket in the struggle; the friction of a slipping boot ignited the matches and for a second or two the spluttering light flickered harmlessly on the floor. Somebody lunged for the door and Stokes yelled:

“Get out of this, quickly. There's petrol all over the place.”

He staggered forward towards the open doors, just as a flame shot up at the back of the garage. Mr. Green had managed to reach the doorway, and was crying out in agitated helplessness, “Ingle! Boles! Come out of it! He's fired the place. Fire! Help! Police!”

Stokes was made of tougher stuff. With a courage which few men would have possessed, he went into the now blazing garage and found little Ingle, lying fortunately close by the doors. He had been knocked down, rolled upon and trampled on; his wits battered out of him, he was utterly helpless, and Stokes heaved him up like a sack and threw him out of the door, just as the running fire of petrol was reaching him.

“Get him out of the way you blasted blockhead!” roared Stokes, as the frantic—and unheroic—Green continued to yell helplessly:

“There's Boles still in there. Boles, where are you?”

Stokes was about to risk another plunge into the garage when the flames inside suddenly shot up and enveloped the whole place with a roar. Somewhere at the back the petrol cans had spilled their contents and the flames were shooting up to the old wooden roof. Stokes leapt back from the inferno, swearing as he had not sworn since his far-off youth. Horror came over him as he realised his helplessness in the face of those leaping flames.

“Boles!” he cried, his voice cracking to a sob, “Boles, where are you?”

Mr. Green had summoned up the energy to drag Ingle’s still unconscious body away from the running flames. Then the draper collapsed beside the smaller man, his bleeding head in his hands, weeping helplessly from pain and terror.

All along the roadway windows had been opened. Cries of “Fire!” and “Police!” were mingled with terrified screams. Neighbours came rushing out of their back doors, and found Stokes almost dancing with rage and fear.

“Boles is in there at the back, and Shenton’s bolted,” he gasped. “He did it. Go after him! Catch him! He can’t have got far. Poor old Boles! We shouldn’t never have come.”

White, the milkman, and his tall son, had been the first to appear on the spot, and White caught Stokes’ arm and dragged him away from the open doors of the garage which were now belching forth scorching heat and smoke.

“You come away now. Can’t do anything to that. My God! We’ll have the whole town ablaze! Come away, there! Lend a hand with that one, Jim. Ingle, isn’t it. Carry him, boy. Now you—help yourself. We’ll all be cinders if we stay here. Fire’ll be across to the printing works in two twos. Oh, Lord, whoever done this?”

“Shenton, I tell you!” screamed Stokes. “Go after him, some of you! He killed Conyers, he killed Wilkes, now he’s killed Boles!”

“You come along out o’ this,” said White. “I don’t know what you all been doing, but we’ll be dead all the lot of us if we stay here.”

An explosion inside the blazing garage lent further force to his words. White drove the frantic Stokes away from the blazing doors just as another petrol can burst and the fire roared yet more fiercely, high up now, through the blazing roof.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Macdonald's interview with Shenton had been brief. The chief inspector knew quite well that his own action in having Shenton marched to the station had been arbitrary, and in one sense, unjustified, and he had no grounds for detaining him. Macdonald was, however, convinced that it was Shenton's action that had caused Wilkes to commit suicide, and it was by no means certain that Shenton had not counted upon some such effect when he had shouted "Police!" and thundered on the door of the house. Shenton might well have been on the watch, to forestall any chance that Wilkes should be interrogated by the police. Since Macdonald himself had guessed that the neurotic lad might do something desperate were he startled by a peremptory police summons, it was quite within the bounds of possibility that Shenton had guessed the same thing.

Nevertheless, there was no ground here for an arrest; Macdonald had the right to order any member of the public away from the scene of a police investigation, and the right, also, to arrest for "obstruction" any one who failed to comply with his orders. He had been determined not to leave Shenton at liberty to enter Wilkes' house while he (Macdonald) was ordering exchange to get hold of a doctor. The urgency of the case had dictated the treatment meted out to Shenton, and the latter's own truculence had resulted in his final march to the police station.

When questioned as to his presence in Ryder's Rents at that hour, Shenton, who was boiling with rage, retorted that he was merely passing by, and seeing a man breaking into the Wilkes' house, he had very properly knocked on the door to give an alarm and shouted for the police at the same time.

"How could you have been 'passing by' the end house of a cul-de-sac?" demanded Macdonald. "Do you mean you had been to see a neighbour in the row?"

"I mean that I'm damned well not going to stand any more from you," said Shenton. "You're going to see some trouble for this night's work, that I promise you."

Macdonald looked at the man thoughtfully. His rage and bombast were not unnatural in the circumstances, and certainly formed no sufficient reason for detaining him.

“As a matter for your information, any police officer has a right to arrest any person obstructing the police in their duties,” he said quietly. “I told you to go home, and you refused to comply, using abusive language in your refusal. You have similarly refused to account for your presence in Ryder’s Row. On any of those counts you may be summoned later. To put the matter as simply as possible, you got in the way of the police, and were treated as any other obstruction would be treated. Meantime, you are free to go home—as you were free to go home in the first case.”

“By . . .”

Macdonald turned on him sharply.

“If you use any foul language, here, I’ll have you put in the lock-up. That’s enough.”

Shenton glowered, but contented himself by saying, “You wait . . .” as he went—while the going was good.

“Not half abusive, he wasn’t,” said the young constable to whom Macdonald had entrusted the care of Shenton. “Do him good to’ve had a night in the cells, I reckon.”

Macdonald sat and entered some notes in his book, and then looked up. “Has Mr. Boles gone home yet? I’d better have a word with him about Wilkes.”

“Not yet, sir. He’s still at Mr. Ingle’s. Very late they often sits up, when they get together for a game of cards. Mr. Ingle, Mr. Boles, Mr. Stokes and Mr. Green. Always the same party. Very good players, I’m told.”

It was just as Macdonald was crossing the Market Square after leaving the police station (which was in a road off the Square) that the first flames shot up through the roof of Shenton’s garage across the way. Macdonald stared; at first a mere flicker shone on one of the tall chimney stacks and died away. Then a brighter glow caused the same stack to stand out black against the sky for a second or two. It was as though someone were playing tricks with a big flash-lamp. Macdonald blinked at the darkness, uncertain for a moment if his own eyes had deceived him, and then the sky lightened again to a glow which banished uncertainty. Behind the gables of the old buildings across the square a fierce light sprang up which defined the uneven roofs in black silhouette, with a suddenness which no ordinary fire could achieve. Macdonald knew all about the garages and outbuildings behind the old shops, and his mind formulated the word “petrol” before the wind had wafted the first tell-tale fumes across the road.

“The whole block will be alight before the brigade can get here,” was his thought, as he ran to the call-box across the road, common sense checking his first impulse to rush immediately to the scene of the blaze.

The night operator at Strand exchange was having a lively session. Urgent police calls did not often enliven the long dull hours of night duty.

“Yes, sir. I’ll call Bamsden as well, and Farley. At once, sir. Oh, lor, I can see the glare myself.”

Macdonald ran like a hare when he left the box, past the frontage of Green’s, and Ingle’s, and Shenton’s, to a passageway which led to the road at the back. By the time he got there, the occupants of the neighbouring houses had been roused by Mr. Stokes’ outcry, and Macdonald pushed his way past, arriving just as Stokes was shouting maledictions against Shenton.

“He did it! Fired the place with all of us inside, and then bolted.”

“That’s right,” said another voice. “I saw ’im go. Down towards the Wenderby road. Got a sack over ’is ’ead. I saw ’im . . .”

“Out of the way there. Get back into the Square, all of you. Here, lend a hand, man. That roof will be down in a minute. Get back, quickly . . .”

The only possible job for Macdonald at the moment was to deal with the situation caused by the fire. The milkman and his son were the most competent allies at the moment.

“Go into your own houses and get your own folk out,” they counselled. “See that Mrs. Shenton and all of them get out.”

“Now then, buckets, some of you. If you don’t keep your heads you’ll all be burnt out.”

A siren raised its voice from across the Square—the signal for the “fire brigade” to assemble. Macdonald heaved up Mr. Ingle over his shoulder and carried him down the lane, accompanied by the wailing Green. Stokes was hopping about like a dancing bear, shouting out incoherent sentences about Boles. Macdonald could make neither head nor tail of the situation, save the reiteration that Boles was still in the garage and Shenton had bolted. White dragged Stokes away, saying, “It’s no use, it’s no use. If he’s in there, he’s done for. We can’t do nothing for him.”

It was just as the roof of the garage fell in with a crash that the superintendent and Constable Booth came panting on the scene. Macdonald made up his mind quickly.

“Take those three to the station and keep them there—Stokes, Green, and Ingle. Send an all stations call to stop any one on the roads and get them accounted for. They say Shenton’s bolted.”

“Say! I tell you I saw him go, with us in there,” screamed Stokes. “Shenton did it—and that’s my house next door . . .”

Having got the unfortunate trio given into safe custody, Macdonald went to direct the fire-fighting activities, and to ensure that the neighbouring houses were vacated. He knew what the local “fire brigade” would be like; it consisted of the ordinary townsfolk, who had to make their way to the headquarters of the district council, and then to get their antiquated apparatus under weigh. There would be time for the whole side of the square to be ablaze before the brigade got their hose and pump into action.

The flames had already spread across another outbuilding of Shenton’s main block, and fire was running up the ancient timbering of the house. Macdonald saw that someone had organised a water supply and was directing pitiful bucketfuls on to the flames from an upper window.

“We’d better go and get them out,” he said. “It’s hopeless to try and save that house. The fire’s got to the timbering underneath. The only thing to do is to try to prevent it from spreading.”

“If only them sheds weren’t all built higgledy piggledy one against another we might hope to do something.”

White, the milkman, and some of his friends were sensible fellows, who were quick to follow Macdonald’s lead in organising a water supply in the endeavour to save Stokes’ premises on the one side, and Barton’s on the other, but they knew they were fighting a losing battle. The jumble of old buildings, sheds, and lean-tos, all used as store room, simply provided bridge work for the fire to travel along. The flames caught greedily on to the ancient wood of flooring and skirting—centuries old, most of it—and travelled unseen under old floors, consuming the rubbish of ages in its transit.

Pausing in their efforts to give place to a fresh relay of helpers, Macdonald and White went out to the Square where the fire engine had arrived.

“It’s a rum go,” said White, mopping his blackened streaming face. “All along of John Home so to speak. If it hadn’t been for John Home, this’d never have started—and by the time it’s over, I reckon John Home will have his site nicely cleared for him, all ready to start work on.”

“You can’t blame John Home for the fire,” said Macdonald, and White replied:

“What started the fire? Them three fools playing around in Shenton’s garage. Kicked over a petrol can, as likely as not, and dropped a match about. That Ingle’s been going round saying Shenton killed Morton Conyers, and because Ingle believed what he said he must go and poke his nose in Shenton’s garage the minute Shenton was out of the way. It all goes back to John Home—Morton Conyers. That Strake was running round telling every one Shenton was arrested. Told Ingle so. I heard him.”

“Look here,” said Macdonald. “Come along out of this, and tell me what you know about to-night’s doings. You’ve done your best here, and the brigade’s got to settle the rest.”

He pulled White away from the crowd around the engine and said, “Tell me what you know about it—the quicker the better.”

“I only know what I heard and saw—same as other people. I heard the row Shenton kicked up when he was marched off to the station; I watched from my window to see what happened next, and I saw that Strake sneaking along. Then Ingle’s window went up—I knew he’d got Green and Stokes and Boles there, playing cards like they often do. Ingle called Strake inside his shop, after Strake had told him Shenton was arrested. Next thing, just as I’d gone back to bed, I heard something at the back, and Ingle and his party come out. I heard ’em go into Shenton’s garage, and the next thing Shenton himself came down the lane and went to the garage and there was a real old row and no mistake. Went for the lot of ’em with his fists by the sound of it, all of ’em ahollering. Someone else came along the lane—I reckon it was Strake, but I can’t be sure—and then suddenly there was a hell of a lot of shouting and someone bolted up the lane, Wenderby way. That’d’ve been Shenton. Stokes saw him go. Strake—I reckon it was him, but I couldn’t swear to it—he went off the other way, same as he come. It’s a dirty shame the one who’s got himself done in is poor Mr. Boles, and him the only sensible one of the lot. Things happen like that.” The big fellow gave a wheezy cough. “All along of John Home, you see, sir. John Home wanted to buy ’em all up. Better for them if they’d taken his money and put their pride in their pocket. Someone killed John Home—and that’s the result. Murder always gets back on you. By morning, that site’ll be just ready for any one to buy for a song, and Shenton’s run off, God knows where, because Ingle found him out.”

The sound of a gong made both men turn their heads.

“That’ll be the engine from Bamsden. Very up to date that is,” said White. “It’s always the same with Bamsden fire brigade. They turn up when it’s too late to do anything. They’ll never save them houses now. All ready for John Home, them’ll be.”

Tired as he was, Macdonald appreciated the milkman’s sound logic. Strand Market Square was burning as the final result of Morton Conyers’ endeavours to buy that very site for his new store, and as though fate were arranging a logical dénouement, the fire had begun in Shenton’s premises, Shenton having been one of the bitterest opponents of John Home’s scheme.

And where was Shenton now? The fire had provided a wonderful diversion to enable any fugitive to get clear away. Every person in the town was concentrating on one thing, and one thing only, the fire in Market Square. Macdonald himself, and the local police, and the population at large had rushed into the Square, heedful, for the time being, of that one focus point of interest.

A man, once clear of the Square, could have slipped away into the country with the certainty that he would not be immediately pursued by the police, because the police would be concentrating on the fire. Not that Macdonald worried over much as to what had become of Shenton. The whole police organisation of the country would be on the qui vive for any fugitive, and a “get away” in the country was more difficult to achieve than an escape in a big city where a man can merge unnoticed into a crowd.

Leaving the population of Strand watching the efforts of three fire brigades to limit the area of destruction, Macdonald walked back again to the police station—which was fortunately on the farther side of the Square from the fire. The dignity of the law was being upheld by one elderly ex-sergeant, recently retired, all other present personnel of the Force being occupied in the Square.

“They’re sending more men in from Bamsden,” said old Sergeant Nolley. “A fire like this always means trouble—looting and that. Seems to drive folks mad. I’ve locked them three into the charge room, sir, being single-anded, and Stokes carrying on something awful. Can’t hardly blame him. He knows his house is burning. Green’s been sitting crying like a child. Got one over the head from Shenton, he did, and he don’t hardly know what he’s up to. Ingle’s quite quiet. I don’t think he’s that bad, but what with being knocked about and trampled on, he’s just laid out so to speak. I found this in his hand—all crumpled up. Held on to it like a limpet he did.”

The sergeant handed Macdonald a fragment of paper which, when smoothed out, proved to be part of a typewritten sheet; it was crumpled and greasy and soiled, but because the paper had once been good it had withstood the rough treatment to which it had been subjected and the typing was still legible. The upper part of the letter was torn away, and the remaining portion bore the words “. . . may be to your considerable benefit. I shall be glad to discuss the matter with you before making these facts public and will call in to see you on Thursday evening next as you suggest. Truly yours, Morton Conyers.”

“Did either Stokes or Green see this?” inquired Macdonald.

The sergeant shook his head.

“I’d say not, sir. They ran Ingle along on the stretcher, and there he still is, in the charge room. I had a look at ’im, and noticed that in his hand, and took it away. I don’t think he’s hurt, not to bother about, but he ain’t got much backbone, so to speak, and he’s just crumpled up like.”

Macdonald took the keys and went into the charge room. Ingle was lying on the stretcher, apparently asleep. Green was also asleep, sitting on a hard chair, his heavy chin fallen forward on to his waistcoat, his head nodding as he snored heavily in uneasy slumber.

Stokes was the only one who was alert. He sprang up as Macdonald came into the room, saying:

“Now you let me out of this. You’ve no right to keep me here. To think of me being treated like this, and my property burning, and me not there to look after things. What right have you got . . .”

Macdonald broke into the agitated harangue:

“It’s as much your fault as anybody’s that your property is burning, Mr. Stokes. If you break into another man’s garage you ask for trouble. It seems to me that you and your friends here are responsible for starting this disastrous fire. I want to know exactly what happened this evening.”

Mr. Green had awoken from his sleep and put his word in in a voice hoarse and confused:

“It was all along of Ingle. Boles told us not to go interfering. Poor Boles. Good fellow was Boles. Ingle, he would have it he could find something in Shenton’s garage. It was the whisky, I reckon. He’d had a drop too much. Ingle would go poking his nose in, and I just followed, being inquisitive, as

you might say. Stokes, he'd got an idea Ingle knew something. Boles, he said, 'You keep out of it.' Poor old Boles. . . ."

Mr. Green's utterance was thick, and Macdonald began to perceive that whisky might have had a lot to do with initiating this march on Shenton's garage. The draper went on garrulously:

"If we'd listened to Boles it'd never have happened. 'Leave it to the police,' said Boles, but Ingle and Stokes, go they would. 'Shenton's arrested. No one about,' they said. All came of believing Strake."

Macdonald turned to Stokes, who seemed much less fuddled than the draper.

"What did you expect to find in Shenton's garage, Mr. Stokes?"

"Me? Nothing. Not likely. I wanted to keep an eye on Ingle. He was that certain, I thought he knew something."

"So you all went to the garage to see what Ingle knew—and what happened when you got there?"

Stokes rubbed his bruised head tenderly, and grunted in melancholy recollection.

"Ingle, he went in first—it was dark and he struck a match, but I told him to put it out—not safe, in a garage, I said. I'd got a torch in my pocket and I put it on a shelf. Ingle went to the car and started rummaging inside. Green and me, we were looking round at the back among some cases. Seems silly when you think about it afterwards, but there it was. Boles, he was at the back, just watching us. Then Shenton comes in, all of a sudden, hollering with rage. The man's a murderer I tell you! He went for Ingle first, him being nearest, and knocked him right over, and then he came at me. I tell you I landed him one, good and hard—and then all the lights went out. Boles, he was knocked down, under me and Green he was. We were all on the floor, with that maniac lashing at us, and tins of petrol all tumbling about. Shenton was on top of me when I heard a splutter—he'd chucked a box of matches down and stamped on 'em, and I saw him make for the door just as everything flared up. Oh, deary me! I got out somehow, and Green here, and then I dragged Ingle out. It was all ablaze then, and poor Boles at the back. I'd've gone back and tried to get him out, too, but the fire was too fierce. Shenton knew. Left us all there to burn—and you stand here talking to me, and my house on fire. Oh, deary me."

"You're lucky to be alive at all," replied Macdonald sharply. "The three of you are responsible for starting the fire, and for a good deal else besides."

Mr. Green gave an alcoholic sob. "It was poor Ingle. Would have it he could find something. Poor Ingle. . . . Dead, isn't he?"

"He's nothing of the kind. He's drunk too much whisky to be good for him, and he's had a knock over the head," retorted Macdonald.

Stokes burst out hotly.

"And now may I go and look after my property? Mrs. Stokes she'll be frantic, and my house is burning as sure as I stand here. . . ."

"Your house is best part gutted by this time," replied Macdonald. "You'd better sit and think about your fire insurance policy. You can't do anything over there. Here you are, and here you stay—all three of you."

Without another word, he went out of the door and turned the key on the trio of investigators.

"Keep 'em there, sergeant. They've done mischief enough between them. Keep them there till further orders."

"Very good, sir. By Gum, that fire's burning fiercer than ever. You can feel the heat on the wind. They'll be having a time of it over there, and no mistake."

"They certainly will," replied Macdonald, knowing that the man referred to the Force—every member of the Strand constabulary was busy in fire-fighting, in preventing looting, in stopping panic, in seeing to it that no householders rushed back into their homes. Whatever Macdonald intended to do that night he would have to do single-handed. So far as the townsfolk and constabulary were concerned, only one thing mattered—the fire.

As Macdonald came out into the street again, a blaze of flame and sparks and lurid smoke rushed up into the sky. Another old roof had fallen.

"All along of John Home." The milkman had hit the nail on the head.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

When Macdonald left the police station he went to the place where he had parked his car on returning from Chert Common. He had left it in the cul-de-sac which ran behind the shops of the Market Square on the side opposite to Shenton's and Ingle's. Macdonald had been in this cul-de-sac with Mr. Boles, and it suddenly struck him with a feeling akin to the ludicrous that it was only that afternoon—barely twelve hours ago—that he had been pursuing his quiet investigation, while the townsfolk of Strand enjoyed their holiday on early closing day. So much had happened in the interval that the afternoon seemed ages away.

Macdonald remembered well enough where he had left his car, but it took him some time to reach it. The owners of cars on the other side of the Square had got their vehicles out of the danger zone and run them along to the cul-de-sac. This spot was safe enough, for it was divided from the fire by the open space of the Square itself, by the big church yard at the south end of the square, and by the wide Wenderby road to the north. It was not only cars which had been left here. Householders had carried their valuables across, as well, and odd bits of furniture, boxes, china and even bedding had been dumped in the lane. As Macdonald looked at the pathetic collection, a voice challenged him. Old Mr. Griffiths, the clock maker, was on guard here.

“Now then, what are you doing? No one allowed past here.”

“Police officer,” replied Macdonald. “I've left my car up there.”

“Looks as though it'll have to stay there,” replied Griffiths. “We can't move none of this. It was you who ran Shenton in, wasn't it? Pity you didn't keep him in the lock-up. You'd have saved a peck of trouble.”

“It's easy to be wise after the event,” replied Macdonald. “A pity I didn't, but I can't lock a man up without charging him. I'm going up to the end here to see that things are all right this side.”

It took him some time to climb over and between the cars and vans and oddments which had been moved here for safety. When he got to the other side of the obstructions he looked back, meditating that the narrow roadway was barricaded like a street in a besieged city. In the shadow of the houses here it was very dark; overhead the sky still glowered with the light of the flames, and the smell of burning filled the air, but as Macdonald made his

way silently up the lane, keeping close to the houses, he was in intense darkness, shadowed by the old walls and wide eaves.

He had sometimes played a lone hand before when conditions or emergencies rendered it necessary. Being essentially sane, a very rational member of a dogged yet cautious race, he had no opinion of foolhardy heroics, and held that detective work was a matter for co-operation rather than for individual exploit, with all the additional hazard and chances of complete defeat which the detective incurs when he is out of touch with his department. The circumstances of to-night were singular. Macdonald had an idea of his own, and if he were to act upon it, action could not be delayed. He could not ask for co-operation in Strand that night, because his colleagues were all on duty across the Square. If anything were to be done in the way of putting his idea to the test, he had to do it alone.

He walked to the end of the cul-de-sac in the shadows of the walls, his rubber-soled shoes making no sound. There he paused, in the angle made by Boles' garage and the sheds occupied by the ironmonger's stock. Here he stood for a moment and considered his next step. He knew that if his idea amounted to anything, silence was necessary. He could not risk the noise of a shooting lock, though he had keys in his pockets which would have dealt with the old locks on any of these doors. Standing still to reconnoitre, as many a burglar must have done before he "cracked a crib," Macdonald decided to do a little climbing. He was an expert rock climber with a long reach and powerful arms. Taking advantage of the projections in the huddle of roofs above him, he hauled himself up until he was astride the pent roof of the ironmonger's shed, and could work his way along to the windows of Boles' shop. It seemed to Macdonald that any fugitive, anxious for a breathing space before he embarked on final flight, might well have decided that one house at least in Strand that night was empty of occupants. Boles lived alone. If Boles were now a calcined relic in the ashes of Shenton's garage, Boles' house would be empty. There would be food there, and clothes—and doubtless money; those three essentials for any fugitive. Moreover, there would be time to find them. With all the townsfolk intent on helping their neighbours across the way, no one was going to worry about Boles' shop. The police were far too busy to bother about the chemist's shop until they had discovered the owner's remains among the ashes in the spot where the fire originated.

Working his way slowly along the roof—a difficult process to combine with silence—Macdonald reached the sill of the window he had noted from below. It was a casement window, ancient and rickety, with plenty of space

between the warped wooden frame and the wall upright to enable him to get a fine file in and force up the catch. A sash window is often difficult to lift silently, but a casement window, carefully treated, swings without a sound. Macdonald slid over the sill, after putting a hand through to discover that nothing barred his way, and stood at length on an uneven wooden floor, safely in the house.

His difficulties were by no means over. He knew the way in which old floors creak. He might step silently—and he could—but, however carefully he set his feet, there was about twelve stone in weight to be shifted with every step he took, and no craft of footwork could lessen it. He stood still until his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, and then perceived that the room—so far as he could make out—was empty, and he began to make his way round by the walls, where the risk of springing creaky boards was less than if he had walked across their length. His hand found the door handle and the door gave as he drew it towards him. Then he stood and waited again, listening. His hearing was very acute, but he could make out no sound at all in the house; the only noise which met his ears was from the Square beyond.

Beyond the doorway, and above his head, was a faint patch of half-light which puzzled him at first, until he realised that it was a sloping skylight, intermittently illumined by the glow which still quickened the heavens from the fire away across the Square.

As he stood there, straining every faculty to get some realisation of his surroundings, eyes trying to penetrate the shadows, ears attuned to pick out the least sound in the stillness of the old house, Macdonald had an irrational feeling that he was not alone in the place. Some sixth sense, begotten of his detective's training, made him certain that someone was near him. He could neither see nor hear them; but he could have sworn that someone was there, in the darkness below him.

Moving forward, cautiously inch by inch, his outstretched fingers reached a stair rail and he paused again before he continued his slow progress and found the stairs. Close against the wall he began to descend, and then the thing happened which he had been trying to guard against—a stair creaked. In the darkness and silence the sound was absurdly loud, a veritable report it seemed to Macdonald's ears. He knew the ways of old stairs—start one board creaking by pressure on a loose section and the other boards respond—crack, crack, crack, as the centuries old woodwork shifts under a weight. Had he not been aware of this fact, Macdonald would have

believed that he had dropped some small object on the stairs, and that it was bouncing down the uncarpeted treads.

As the series of creaks died away, his straining ears caught another sound—grim and strange in the darkness—the heavy panting breath of someone below him. Again Macdonald stood still. He did not want to fumble his job this time. He had banked on an idea, and he was very near achieving what he had set out for, but the man below him might well be desperate. Macdonald had become conscious of another factor in the situation. The smell of the chemist's shop had its own character and it permeated the house. Disinfectant, the drugs of the none too clean dispensary, herbs of some sort, liquorice—these all lent their essence to the still air, but among them was something alien—the smell of petrol, beginning to rise up and drown the other emanations. Macdonald's mind grasped the implications of that in a flash. A match thrown down could raise a wall of flame between him and the man he sought—a barrier which no human being could pass. "Good lord—not another fire . . ." Better to let his quarry escape, better let himself admit defeat than to start another inferno in the peaceful old town.

"Better have taken Morton Conyers' money . . ." The old milkman's words seemed to hit the mark.

Standing there in the dark, stock still, such thoughts flashed through his mind as he waited, intent on the question, "Has he heard me . . .?"

If only he had known the lay-out of the house, Macdonald would have risked his neck in one leap down the stairs in the hope of bringing the other man down with the impetus of his spring, but he was very much in the dark—there might be a turn in the stairs or there might not. A slight scuffle below made his muscles go taut—and then he realised its meaning. A squeak and a spitting growl told him that one hunter at least had found a quarry that night. A cat had sprung upon a mouse and caught it. Macdonald envied the cat its eyes, even as he realised that he had found an unconscious ally.

"That damned cat . . ." The words were whispered by the panting man below. He was satisfied for the moment that he had found the explanation of the sound which had startled him.

The old boards might imperil Macdonald's scheme, but they cracked under other weights than his own. As the man below moved softly along the passage way, Macdonald heard his transit, not from his footfalls but from the tell-tale creaks, while the cat mewed over his victim as all cats do, and a tiny

squeak from the cornered mouse was an epitome of all the terror in the world.

Macdonald waited a little longer and then continued his descent in the thick gloom. He and the man below were in the same case—neither dared show a light. To use his torch might be the signal for another holocaust and Macdonald knew it.

After the initial creak which had so nearly betrayed him, the stairs gave no further warning of his presence on them. He passed a sharp turn and knew that he must be within a few feet of the bottom. Here must be a lobby of sorts, and the door connecting the house with the shop, which took up the ground floor of the premises. He found the door, open as he had expected. The shop windows were shuttered and the place was utterly dark. Macdonald stood still again, just at the entry to the shop, and then, with a suddenness which had the quality of an unexpected flash of lightning, a torchlight was flashed on, right into his eyes, for one blinding second. Macdonald saw where the light came from—across the counter. In the same second that he realised his inability to close with his man in one spring, his mind leapt at the one possibility of gaining a respite from the thing he dreaded—another outbreak of fire.

“Shenton!” he said; “Shenton, listen to me.”

There was a gasp from the darkness where the man held his torch. He had switched it off after that one brief flash of illumination, and Macdonald’s voice had startled him into listening. He laughed—a hoarse, breathless sound.

“So you guessed, did you. You’re a good guesser. Better than poor old Boles. Old fool. Sticking his nose where it wasn’t wanted. Boles won’t guess any more . . .”

Macdonald had got what he wanted. His ears had had to serve him in lieu of his eyes; the voice had given him the exact direction of the speaker. In the flash of light which had dazzled him he had seen a shelf just beside his hand—a shelf laden with flasks. While the voice was still speaking his hand grasped the neck of a large bottle and he flung it with all his might, not towards a thing seen, but towards a thing heard. Incredibly the missile found its target; a thud broke into the hoarse sound of the boasting voice, a crash of breaking glass and the splash of falling liquid heralded the collapse of a heavy body, and then came a series of minor smashes as Macdonald leapt across the counter, flinging bottles pell-mell in every direction as he threw himself headlong on the struggling man beneath him.

When a man fights for his life he develops a strength out of all proportion to his normal powers. The man who was struggling with Macdonald in the darkness heaved and kicked like a creature possessed. Next second there was another series of crashes as a glass-fronted cupboard came down, upset by the violence of the heaving bodies. Macdonald was uppermost, and the corner of the thing hit him a crashing blow on the head so that he was bemused for a second, and his grasp on the other man slackened. He struggled to retain his hold on the powerful arms, but the other heaved himself free. Macdonald was conscious that his coat sleeve and shirt were wet with a warm sticky moisture, and he thought of the broken glass, without knowing if it were his own blood or his adversary's which was spilt. He felt the other heaving himself up, and Macdonald, still gripping the man's coat, managed to get on his knees, clearing his body of the weight which had fallen on it.

Next minute, both men had struggled erect, and were swaying on their feet. Macdonald had got his adversary's arms pinned again, but a forward heave of the heavy body made him take a step backwards to correct his own balance—and then his foot went down into nothingness where he had expected solid floor. A step down behind him had betrayed him and he jerked backwards, but as he went he dragged his adversary with him, and they crashed back together until their fall was broken by a wall. Macdonald's back and head slammed against the solid upright behind him with a force which drove the breath out of him, as the other man fell against him full tilt in the unexpected dive on to the lower level. A door slammed behind them, the bang echoing loudly in the restricted space where both men were gasping, clutching one another, dizzy from the violence of their final impact. As Macdonald's head cleared his first thought was, "We've lunged into a cupboard—and the door's slammed on us. That dark room of Boles' ..."

"Dark room" was a suitable name for the present milieu. It was utterly and completely dark, the air close with the dusty heaviness of an unventilated space, redolent of the chemicals used in developing photographs; impregnated, too, with another smell—like that of a garage—the fumes of exhaust gas.

As he stood, with his back against the wall, having got a fresh hold on the body which had collided so violently with his own, Macdonald became suddenly aware that his adversary was spent; instead of struggling, the big frame had become inert, and was actually slipping down, slackening, the muscles loose, the knees sagging.

“I’m done . . . done after all . . .”

Quick to suspect a subterfuge, Macdonald did not loosen his grip at once, until realisation of the truth dawned on him. It was not trickery, it was not exhaustion from the struggle, it was loss of blood which had caused a collapse. The broken glass in which the pair had struggled had finished the fight. Macdonald’s hands were busy now in easing his adversary on to the floor. The big man sagged like a sack, leaving Macdonald free to do what he had had no chance to do since the other’s torchlight had flashed in his own face—produce a torch of his own and bring a light to bear on the situation.

The first torch he got out of his pocket clicked uselessly, bulb and reflector smashed in the rough and tumble. In an inner pocket he had a tiny lamp, not much larger than a pencil, which threw its thin white ray around when he fixed the tiny button. He saw at once what had finished that hectic struggle, for his little ray of light fell on the outflung hand and wrist of the man on the floor, and shone on the blood which flowed from it.

Characteristically, Macdonald set on the task of tying up the wound before he gave a thought to anything else. He was in a room no larger than a cupboard, with a heavy door closed upon him, and at his feet a man was bleeding to death. That man came first, and Macdonald, setting his torch on the floor, knelt down, and in the light of that tiny beam set to work with a handkerchief, a minute tin box, and a pencil to twist a tourniquet round the gashed wrist. The man on the floor gasped out a faint chuckle, a grim sound from one in his case.

“I’m done—and so are you. You can’t get out of here . . . Door’s oak . . . Keyhole’s blocked. I saw to that . . . Three walls and a door . . . Cracks all felted over. Gas proof . . . No use banging. He banged . . . Door’s too thick.”

The gasping voice fell silent, and Macdonald went on methodically twisting gently, as intent as though he were giving first-aid after a motor smash. The voice spoke again, weakly.

“Wilkes guessed . . . somehow. Came back that night and saw me come in . . . wet. He got it out of Wilkes. I know. When I saw him lying there on the garage floor I thought . . . a chance, a long chance. Poor old Boles . . . thought the world of Boles . . .”

The voice trailed off, and Macdonald got up, conscious that his head was swimming a little in the close air. There must be an aperture somewhere, apart from the keyhole. He flicked his torch round the walls, and realised that he had not got time for a careful examination of possibilities. The small

battery of the torch was giving out. He trained it on to the door; a very solid, very old oak door. There was no handle. The keyhole was covered with a metal plate, screwed over a washer. The man who had screwed on the plate had done his work well; ten small steel screws had been used in securing it, and they had been turned well home, flush with the plate they secured.

Macdonald switched off his torch. The small battery would not last very much longer, and he dared not waste it. Standing in the dark, he drew out a pocket tool-case, found a screwdriver and fitted the slender shaft into its handle. It was a good tool. It needed to be, he thought, for on the temper of the steel depended his chance of life. The house was empty, the door was a powerful one, and the air supply was limited. It would not serve two men for very long—and the remains of exhaust gas was still hanging about.

His screwdriver ready, Macdonald clipped the torch to his coat; he had to have light to get his tool fairly into the clefts of the screwheads. Destroy those by mishandling and he was done. Once he had turned each screw until it was projecting he could work in the dark.

He found himself counting as he applied his tool and turned it. It took a long time, for the screws had been put in with a powerful twist—but they were new screws, and the heads were sound. One, two, three, four . . . He counted them carefully, conscious that he was beginning to pant, and sweat was running down his face. It seemed to take an eternity until he got the final one eased. Then, deliberately, he put out the failing light. That might be needed later.

Working by touch, he got the screws removed, and the metal plate and the washer came off in his hand. The next thing was to turn the lock with his skeleton keys. This was a far more maddening job than the straightforward effort of withdrawing screws. The lock was a good one, and as he tried one after another of his ingenious picklocks, he was aware that stars were swimming across the darkness, and the blood was throbbing in his temples.

Macdonald held that every man is susceptible to some private fear which may overcome him. His own nightmare was being shut in an enclosed space, and suffocating there—and he knew he was near that very fate. His instinct was to kick, to hit out, to fling himself at that damnable door while he had the strength to do it, and nothing but training, the self-control of years, kept his reason dominant over instinct. With heart labouring and mouth dry he fiddled with the lock. A key gripped at last; half-turned the wards, slipped. “It’s turning,” said Macdonald to himself . . . “turning . . .”

It did turn at last. The wards shot back, the door swung open and Macdonald fell flat on his face, gasping great draughts of air into his lungs, as stars swirled around in the darkness and exhaustion folded him in momentary oblivion.

It was John Croft, the baker's boy, who had been passing Boles' shop when Macdonald's leap had brought half the bottles down in one almighty crash. Croft was on the pavement outside, and he stood still in amazement, listening to the series of crashes while the two men inside, all unknown to him, heaved on the floor in a crazy struggle.

"Lor!" said Croft. "Lor!"

He listened with his close-cropped hair rising all over his bullet head, and then he ran, away back to where he lived in a cottage by the Wenderby road. He found his father just coming out of the house after reassuring his wife as to the safety of their own premises.

"Dad!" yelled the boy. "There's somebody smashing up Boles' shop. Smashing everything, they are. I could hear all the bottles breaking. Reckon the whole place is smashed!"

It took some time to induce Tom Crofts to take any interest in his son's story. The fire was quite enough for one night, and Tom Croft wanted no further excitement. He had had his fill. The son was insistent, however, and after describing the sounds he had heard, John went on.

"Boles is dead, ain't he?—and that Shenton done a bolt. Bet you Shenton's smashing up Boles' shop out of spite."

"By heck!" said Tom Croft slowly. "By heck!"

"Just you come and listen," urged John, and at last Tom agreed, and set off again towards the Market Square. The fire was under control by this time, and townsfolk were beginning to make their way home. Seeing Superintendent Webber cutting across the Square, Tom Croft went up to him.

"My boy, John, says someone have been smashing up Mr. Boles' shop," he declared.

"Oh, rats," said Webber irritably. He was tired, and very cross.

"Smashing every bottle in the place they was, like a bull in a china shop. I heard 'em. Reckon it's that Shenton," put in John Croft boldly.

“You’re too fond of imagining things,” said Webber tartly. “There’s Boles’ shop. What’s the matter with it?”

They stood for a few seconds and looked at the shuttered shop, and then John Croft gasped out, “Look at the step . . . by the door. There’s blood on it.”

“Rot!” said Webber. His own eyes were not of the kind which can see in the dark. Croft’s were. The boy had seen the dark stain on the hearthstone step at the Pharmacy door, John Croft ran towards the shop and Webber followed unwillingly. When he reached the step he had to admit that something strange was afoot. A line of liquid (which might well have been blood in the uncertain light) had trickled under the door and down the step. It was a mixture compounded of the contents of many bottles broken that night—from distilled water to Parrish’s Food—and to Webber’s eyes it was a horrid sight. Blood . . . it looked like it.

The superintendent blew his whistle, and then called to a man who was crossing the Square, a fellow who had a pickaxe in his hand with which he had been assisting the fire brigade.

“Give me that there,” snapped Webber. He had made up his mind. With the leverage of the pickaxe he forced open the shutter which covered the shop door, smashed the glass panels and got his arm through to release lock and bolt. The door gave, and Webber turned his bull’s eye on to the interior.

“My God!” he said.

The floor of the shop shone under a litter of broken glass and crushed boxes; the beam of the bull’s eye glimmered on spilt physic and on the trail of blood from the wounded man. Shelves were cleared, a glass-fronted case thrown down. A movement in a dark corner came to Webber’s ears.

“You’re under arrest . . .” he shouted, too astonished to remember any formula, but as he turned his light in the direction of the sound, words failed him altogether. Macdonald, his face cut and bruised, his collar wrenched off, his shirt stained with blood, was just dragging himself off the floor.

“He’s in there,” said the chief inspector. “Better get a doctor.”

“Who?” gasped Webber. “You mean Shenton?”

“No. Not Shenton. Boles,” replied Macdonald. “Shenton’s dead, in the garage. It was Boles who got away.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“It’s the story from your point of view we should like to hear, Chief Inspector.”

It was Sir Giles Pellew who spoke. He had asked Macdonald if he would dine with him in town when he had leisure to do so, and meet Straynge and Langston, who had been the first witnesses in the case of Morton Conyers’ death.

“It all sounds quite simple and logical when the bald facts are stated, but it’s the detection which fascinates me, not the facts.”

Macdonald laughed. “If I were in the unfortunate position of having to give a lecture on detection to an audience of your calibre, sir, I should not choose the case of Morton Conyers’ death as an illustration. It was a haphazard business, and the climax of it reminds me of nothing so much as an experiment in the chemistry lab. at school. Everything blew up before the experiment was complete, so text books standards were hardly satisfied. The authorities seem gratified because the climax came quickly, and the explosion cleared the air, so to speak, but I’ve nothing to flatter myself about.”

“That’s not Anne Merryl’s opinion,” put in Straynge. “The fact that you found Lewis Conyers in time to save his life is the one thing she cares about. If you’re interested in the opinions of the young, you may like this one. ‘It took somebody really clever to go and look for Lewis in the one obvious place, where he would obviously have gone when he was fed up.’ Anne says if you don’t go to her wedding she’ll be the world’s most disgruntled bride.”

Pellew laughed. “Joking apart, Chief Inspector, the fact that you *did* find Lewis Conyers must give you cause for satisfaction. It was a grand brain wave of yours.”

“Oh, I muddled home, somehow,” replied Macdonald. “I’m certainly glad about Conyers. He always seemed to me a decent fellow—though he deserved running in for his obstinacy in withholding evidence. However, you want me to start at the beginning, and tell you all the mistakes I made en route.”

He lighted his pipe, and sat considering for a moment before he began to speak.

“You all three know how the Daimler was found; its headlights were on, its rear lights out, and it was facing in the direction of Strand. It stood at the narrowest and most dangerous section of the double bend, where it was almost certain to be hit by any vehicle approaching from the Rayne’s Cross direction. It is important to remember that there is a gate close at hand, where Dr. Mainforth turned his car. The importance of the gate is that it made it a simple matter to reverse the Daimler at that spot, so that the direction it was facing after the smash was irrelevant. Of course, nothing could be proved from the ground by the gate, because Dr. Mainforth’s car obliterated any previous wheel marks. But for what it was worth, I thought it not unlikely that the Daimler had been reversed just before it was left—with Morton Conyers’ body aboard—in order to give the impression that it was being driven towards Strand, not away from it.”

Straynge had taken out a pencil. “Am I allowed to take notes?” he inquired, and Macdonald nodded.

“Yes, if you destroy them later. Point one, possibility of turning car. Now as to the obvious factors; deceased was killed by exhaust gas, and Mr. Langston gave evidence that the body of the Daimler was full of gas. I accepted that evidence with a query, arguing thus: It was a fact that death was caused by exhaust gas. Therefore deceased must have been in an enclosed space full of that gas—either a car, a closed garage, or other enclosed space. His clothes would have been permeated by it—and the engine of the Daimler had been running for a long time with the car stationary, and all its windows closed. The hot airlessness, and smell of the gas about the dead man’s clothes, would have been enough to give the impression (to any one fresh from the open air) that the saloon was full of gas. It might have been—but again, not proven. I think those are the main points to start with, coupled, of course, to the fact that the car was drawn in by the hedge at a strategic point, its driver having negotiated one difficult bend and drawn his car up correctly. No signs here of a driver whose judgment was impaired by gas or by anything else.”

“Ergo, the victim was driven to the spot by another person in full possession of his faculties?”

“Some such indication seemed tenable—but purely hypothetical. Next. Deceased’s fists were bruised, and his forehead also, but he was not bruised at all about the body. This seemed to me, not an indication of a fight in which two men used their fists against one another, but of the victim having used his fists to hammer at a door or wall, his forehead being bruised when he collapsed and fell forward.”

“A horrible thought,” put in Sir Giles Pellew, and Macdonald nodded.

“Very horrible—but it would have been quickly over. However, that’s extraneous to the evidence. It did seem to me that the evidence pointed to the probability that deceased had been shut in an enclosed space, had used his fists against a door or wall, and had hit his head when he collapsed forward against the wall. This assumption involved the fact that he was dead when he was driven to Dyke’s Corner. All this was hypothetical, but I was never greatly taken with the theory that he died in the car as a consequence of tampering with the exhaust—partly, I think, because that was what the investigator was obviously expected to believe.”

“Do you always distrust the obvious?” asked Straynge, and Macdonald laughed.

“Not of necessity; only where there is evidence that a mystery has been planned. However, to get on with the facts; suspects were plentiful. Lewis Conyers, Braid, Strake, and later, Elsom, were all in the position where a case could be argued against them in theory. Concerning Lewis Conyers, I will give you my own reactions for what they were worth. I believed in his devotion to his mother, and because I believed that, it went against the grain to believe that he would have done a thing which must have alienated him from her for ever, in mind. Psychologically, it seemed to me, the probabilities were all against it. Apart from that theory, was the fact that if he had planned a very astute murder, he was singularly unastute in having no story ready to account for his own actions that night. His story held nothing to help him at all. It was so lacking in plan, so haphazard, that it made him look guilty at once. Everything he said and everything he did—including his treatment of Strake—made him look guilty. I agreed with the Deputy Chief Constable—an open mind was needed. Now it was clear from the start that a great many people hated Morton Conyers. I couldn’t talk to any one without having that rubbed in. Lewis Conyers was the first person I interrogated. Next came Braid, who gave his opinion of his master very plainly. Braid said a rather remarkable thing in view of the upshot. ‘If anybody hereabouts has got a good word to say for him, ask what they hope to get out of it. Ask the tradesmen of Strand—they’ll tell you.’ My next visit was to Colonel Merryl, who told me a lot about the case for and against the establishment of John Home in Strand. He quoted his daughter—very helpfully. He told me of Anne Merryl’s disgust with some of the tradesmen, of her kindness to the chemist’s assistant, of her scorn of Boles and Shenton for obstructing reform. Colonel Merryl and his daughter were more helpful than they realised. They gave me a bird’s eye view of the whole situation in Strand.

Then I followed up Conyers' dirty little intrigue with Linda Smith, and the manner in which Elsom was involved—or seemed to be. There were plenty of other suspects besides Lewis Conyers—and there was that ever-present hot-bed of resentment fomenting in the Strand Chamber of Commerce. That was a factor it was impossible to ignore.”

Macdonald paused here, and Straynge turned to Langston.

“Try your hand at a precis of all that, my lad—and see what points emerge.”

Langston grinned. “Cause of death CO, probably administered in garage or other enclosed space—see bruises on fists. Son obvious suspect, kept in cold storage by investigator. Car headed towards Strand. Deduction, car been driven *from* Strand. Strand hot-bed of resentment. N.B. Investigate Strand.”

“Covers the ground,” agreed Macdonald. “All roads lead to Strand—which place was undoubtedly included in Lewis Conyers' itinerary on the Thursday night—and I believed, though I had no means of proving it—that Lewis Conyers either knew, or could guess, the place at which his father had been killed. Lewis Conyers drove via Rayne's Cross to Strand, and thence to Wenderby, where the trail petered out. I have given you the first points emphasized by all my witnesses—a general distrust of Morton Conyers, amounting to hatred in many cases. The next item was the matter of anonymous letters. Strake repeated Mrs. Conyers' statement that both she and her son had received anonymous letters (from which I assumed that Strake was not the writer of them) and Anne Merryl sent me the specimens she herself had received. These latter were directed against Lewis Conyers. Those sent to Cherton Manor described the behaviour of Morton Conyers. The series evidenced a hatred on somebody's part for Conyers and his son, and the latest one (sent to Anne Merryl) suggested that Lewis Conyers was his father's murderer. Their main importance was in demonstrating that someone in the locality hated Lewis Conyers as well as his father.”

Sir Giles Pellew put a word in here, as Macdonald paused.

“I always used to think of Strand as the most peaceful little place; one of those ideal spots in which every one was on good terms with his neighbour, and ill feeling did not exist.”

Macdonald chuckled. “If such a utopia exist, I doubt if you will find it in an English market town. Mr. Stokes, the grocer, produced a good description of the state of affairs in Strand when he spoke of ‘human nature with the lid

off.’ Things were far from peaceful in that small town; they were sizzling—and eventually the lid did blow off. My first acquaintance among the tradespeople was the barber, Ingle, a garrulous little man. He told me very much what Colonel Merryl had told me concerning those for and against the John Home scheme. Ingle was for it. He obviously wanted John Home’s money, and he equally obviously hated Shenton—who was a moneylender. The two facts seemed not disconnected. It seemed clear that the backbone of the opposition to John Home came from two men—Shenton and Boles.”

“Now we’re getting down to it,” said Straynge, and Macdonald nodded.

“Yes. Those two provided food for thought. Shenton not only admitted his enmity to John Home—he paraded it. He openly boasted of his satisfaction at Morton Conyers’ death. Boles, on the other hand, had changed his tune. He told me that on second thoughts he found something attractive about the idea of selling his business—despite his obvious pride in the fact that he was carrying on in the tradition of his father and grandfather. It was a curious *volte-face*. Here was one man—Shenton—openly delighted about Conyers’ death; another one, Boles, previously associated with Shenton in active opposition to Conyers, handing out soft soap about the advantages of the large store. On the face of it, Shenton’s attitude was suspicious. He admitted his enmity to the dead man. He could afford to. He had nothing to fear. Boles would not admit his previous enmity to Conyers—because he had everything to fear.”

“A very interesting point,” put in Pellew, but Macdonald replied,

“Interesting—but quite inconclusive. My own opinion, not evidence. Studying Boles, as far as I could, I formed the opinion that he was a man of considerable character, intelligent, also a man of powerful physique. According to Anne Merryl, he had a very bad temper and bullying disposition—points which I was unable to observe for myself, as he was consistently mild and pleasant when I spoke to him. I also noticed that he had an exceedingly bad cold—a trivial point, yet worth noting, because it seemed probable to me that the culprit I was looking for had been out in the pouring rain of Thursday night, and might well have been drenched through. I also considered the fact that Boles, being a pharmaceutical chemist, would have been competent to rig up elementary apparatus, and to safeguard himself from falling into his own booby trap. Of the tradesmen whom I considered, the two most probable murderers seemed to me to be Shenton and Boles. They were both intelligent, purposeful men; both had been in strong opposition to John Home and both were powerful men. Ingle could never have lifted Morton Conyers’ body, neither could Stokes. Stokes has a

weak heart. Green might have done it, but no points emerged against him as they did against Shenton and Boles. As you can see for yourselves, the whole case was a matter of nebulous suspicions. Anybody's murder, so to speak."

"In a case of this kind, do you work on a process of elimination—sifting the case against each suspect in turn?" asked Langston.

"As far as possible. In this case it was difficult to do so. I don't think it was possible to eliminate Lewis Conyers, for instance. It seemed to me quite within the bounds of possibility that he could have used the garages at Cherton Manor as a lethal chamber, and then run the Daimler to Dyke's Corner and returned on a motor bike. Similarly, with Braid. Elsom—who looked very suspicious—was easier to clear. On the night in question, between the hours of ten-thirty and two-thirty, he would not have dared to leave his post at the filling station, on account of the regular all-night traffic which contracts with Smith for petrol and oil."

"That's a fact which one wouldn't have realised," mused Pellew. "These lorries run to schedule, of course, but the man at the filling station must know there's liable to be fluctuation in their times. They may be a bit early, or a bit late. In other words, Elsom could not have counted upon any half-hour being a safe period for him to leave his post."

"Exactly," replied Macdonald. "Now to get back to the beginning. Morton Conyers had run his Daimler into the garage as though he had no intention of going out again in it. Yet he did go out; as I argued, because of the phone call which came through on his private line. Two reasons might have taken him out again—a woman, or business. He made his money by his own exceptional keenness in negotiation. Ingle gave evidence that Morton Conyers had called to see him one evening for a private discussion. It seemed to me that if Shenton, or Stokes, or Boles, had rung him up and said 'I am prepared to make terms with you privately,' Conyers would have gone to see them. I don't think that Braid, or Elsom, or Lewis Conyers, could have invented any reason sufficiently strong to have taken Morton Conyers out again that night. It had to be a telephone call from someone who had actual information, and something material to offer—and spoken in a voice which Morton Conyers would believe. Not his son's, or his chauffeur's, nor yet a garage mechanic's. Now that's cleared the ground of first arguments, so to speak, and we can get on a bit. Routine inquiries established that Morton Conyers drove via Rayne's Cross to Strand, with his son following as far as Strand. Then there was the general rumour that Morton Conyers had been seen in Wenderby. I knew that Lewis Conyers had

been to Wenderby, and that the anonymous letter writer had been there, too. Now the latter was out to attack Lewis Conyers; it seemed to me that it was consistent with the letter writer's mentality to spread the rumour that Morton Conyers had been seen at Wenderby in order to implicate Lewis. The letter received by Anne Merryl was clear evidence that the composer of it wanted Lewis Conyers to hang. It was not until Superintendent Webber got an anonymous letter that the origin of the letters was proved. The paper used was identical with that of the wrapping paper in the chemist's shop. Those letters originated at the Pharmacy—but I was quite certain that Boles himself never wrote them. Similarly, I was certain that Wilkes could not have killed Morton Conyers. He hadn't the physique for lifting him, and he couldn't drive a car. It was a curious situation. Here was Wilkes, an unstable, neurotic lad, attacking Lewis Conyers and his family through the medium of anonymous letters. Wilkes worshipped Anne Merryl, and he had seen her with Lewis Conyers on Cherton Common, and he had realised that young Conyers adored her. Thereafter Wilkes did his uttermost to attack the Conyers family through the only medium he could think of. When the news of Morton Conyers' death became known in Strand, and rumours of foul play were busy, Wilkes added to the rumours. He had seen Lewis Conyers meet Anne Merryl at the side door of the Assembly Rooms in Wenderby, and he thought out the notion of saying that Morton Conyers had also been seen in Wenderby, in the hope that this statement would strengthen suspicion against Lewis."

"Wilkes must have had a streak of the morbid and abnormal in his make-up," said Pellew, and Macdonald nodded.

"A good large streak of it. Well, that was the position early in the inquiry—that Morton Conyers had been seen in Wenderby on the night of his death, and that his son had been seen in Wenderby also. The latter rumour could be proved to be true, thanks to Anne Merryl; the former could be traced back to Wilkes, but apart from him there was no reliable evidence about it. In the end it was Wilkes' statement about having seen Morton Conyers in Wenderby that brought things to a head. Boles, Stokes, and Ingle all put their heads together; Ingle wanted to involve Shenton, and Stokes would have liked to do the same, but Stokes had enough sense to realise that to accuse Shenton was to bring suspicion on himself also, as their premises adjoined. Stokes then had a heart-to-heart talk with Boles, both being anxious to establish as fact the rumour that Morton Conyers had really been seen in Wenderby on the night of his death."

“Get the murder out of the town,” said Straynge, and Macdonald nodded.

“That was the idea. Boles was only too anxious to ‘get the murder out of the town,’ and in his anxiety to establish Morton Conyers’ presence in Wenderby he over-reached himself. Boles knew that Conyers had got one of the yellow flowers from the Bamsden fête on the bonnet of his car—but Boles did not know when Conyers had bought the flower. Boles was held in high respect by his fellow tradesmen, and in mentality he was superior to them. He managed to suggest to Stokes that Stokes himself had seen the yellow flower when the Daimler went through Strand on Thursday afternoon. Boles also palmed the same card on Wilkes, when charging him with deceit in the matter of having played truant at his pharmacy class. Wilkes told Stokes that he had seen the yellow flower on the Daimler in Wenderby because Boles had put the idea into his head.”

“The fact being that Wilkes never did see the Daimler in Wenderby, and snatched at Boles’ suggestion of the yellow flower as supporting evidence,” said Pellew.

“That’s it,” said Macdonald. “The real facts did not emerge until just before the case ‘exploded,’ so to speak. We got hold of Morton Conyers’ itinerary just before I went on the search for Lewis Conyers. Morton Conyers did drive through Strand on Thursday afternoon, and Boles did see his car—but the yellow flower was not bought until Morton Conyers went to Bamsden *after* he had been through Strand.”

“Interesting—the way his evidence about that flower ‘boomeranged’ back on Boles,” said Straynge. “He knew the yellow flower was on the Daimler because he had seen it when Conyers drove the car up to his back door, and Boles either didn’t remember that the flower wasn’t on the car in the afternoon, or he didn’t realise the risk he took in saying that he had seen it—before it was there at all.”

“Yes. Boles failed to think it out clearly. He thought he had established the point about Morton Conyers being seen in Wenderby, when what he really established was the fact that he himself had seen the Daimler after Conyers had returned from Bamsden,” said Macdonald. “As it happened, both Boles and Wilkes wanted to establish the fact that Morton Conyers’ car was seen at Wenderby; Wilkes because of his desire to implicate Lewis Conyers in the murder—Boles because he would feel much safer if it were assumed that Conyers was killed in some other place than Strand. Boles had assumed that Conyers’ death would pass as accident. When he found that

this explanation wasn't accepted, he began to get alarmed, and tried to fabricate evidence. He persuaded Stokes into believing that he (Stokes) had seen the yellow flower himself. Wilkes needed no persuasion. He jumped at the chance of making the statement once Boles suggested it."

"I'd never have believed Boles was such a cunning devil," said Pellew, and Macdonald replied:

"Boles is a very intelligent man. He made very few errors of judgment. He was much too wise to join actively with Ingle in accusing Shenton; Boles knew that a man who tries to pin a crime on to another can look suspicious himself. Ingle did look suspicious, and he had a motive in attacking Shenton, because he was in Shenton's power financially. Incidentally, Ingle's motive in going to Shenton's garage was this: Ingle had a letter from Morton Conyers—from which he had torn the upper part. It was a letter which Morton Conyers wrote to Ingle making an appointment for a Thursday evening a month ago. Ingle tore off the date at the top, and his own name, with the intention of planting the letter in Shenton's garage, and letting Stokes discover it there as evidence against Shenton."

"Sodom and Gomorrhah also ran," murmured Langston, and Pellew almost groaned.

"That peaceful little town, and all those obliging tradesmen . . ." he said sadly.

"At this stage in the case, it looked as though everything might work out quietly along routine lines," said Macdonald. "Given time, I could have got enough evidence to charge Boles on, but the end came with a rush, the impetus being provided by Wilkes. When I heard that Lewis Conyers was missing, I went out to look for him, Wilkes being then still out for his walk. I might have done better if I had waited until Wilkes came back—but there was no certainty he would come back. Wilkes saw Lewis Conyers dozing on Chert Common and knocked him over the head. After wandering about in a distraught way for some hours, Wilkes returned home, convinced that he himself was now a murderer, wrote out his confession, and eventually poisoned himself, poor wretch."

"He must have been completely unbalanced," said Pellew, "but if Shenton hadn't startled him, you would probably have got him quietly under arrest and eventually he might have made a fresh start."

"About Shenton," put in Straynge. "Do you think he meant to terrify Wilkes by shouting 'Police' as he did?"

“That’s a question which can only be answered by surmise, since Shenton himself is dead,” replied Macdonald. “We know from Wilkes’ confession that the boy had guessed that it was Boles who killed Conyers, and that he had told Shenton so. Shenton held Boles no grudge for the murder. Morton Conyers was dead, and Shenton was overjoyed at the fact, but because Shenton was the bullying, overbearing type, he couldn’t resist letting Boles know that he (Shenton) knew the truth. Also Shenton had seen Wilkes wandering about looking half-demented, and was curious to know what was the matter with him. Shenton doubtless went along to Wilkes’ house to try to bully the boy into an admission of his recent activities. Shenton did not want the truth about Morton Conyers’ death to be known, because he hoped that Lewis Conyers would remain under suspicion. When Shenton saw me approach the house, and begin to break in, I think he shouted ‘Police’ to put Wilkes on his guard, rather than with the intention of helping the law. Then the end came in a series of fireworks. After I released Shenton, the latter went along to his own garage and saw Ingle and Stokes and Boles—obviously up to no good from Shenton’s point of view. The sight of Boles must have enraged Shenton particularly. He would have thought that Boles was trying to plant evidence on him. He went for the three of them in a blinding rage. Stokes said that Shenton knocked Boles down just as the fire started. It was the other way about—Boles knocked out Shenton, and it was Boles, with a sack over his head, who escaped, Shenton who perished. Boles knew his case was pretty desperate. He was intelligent enough to realise that the evidence he had given about the yellow flower on the radiator might come back on him eventually. He realised that Shenton knew the real facts, and he made a last desperate effort to get clear. Let it be believed that he—Boles—had died in the fire, and that Shenton had run away, and Boles might escape the penalty of his crime. Boles went back home to get money and food—he had to. That was the end of him. He was caught.”

“So you got him after all—in spite of the case exploding.”

“Yes. But he very nearly finished me first. I tripped backwards into his dark room—as Morton Conyers must have tripped that night. It was perfectly gas-proofed, and back to back with the garage. Boles had made an inlet—since stopped up—and he pumped exhaust gas through it direct from his car. He knew how deadly exhaust gas is. When Conyers was dead, Boles put on a gas mask; not one of the ordinary respirator type issued against poison gas, but one of those used by the fire services with an oxygen supply. The usual gas masks and service respirators are not proof against coal gas or exhaust gas—which brings out a rather interesting point. Shenton had

suggested to his fellow tradesmen that an ordinary gas mask was used by the murderer, and this ingenious idea was considered very suspicious by Ingle and Co., who considered that the suggestion was as good as proof that Shenton had put his idea into practice. ‘Who else would have thought of such a thing?’ asked Ingle. The fact was that, if Shenton had put his simple idea into practice, he would have found himself in the same plight as his victim. If he believed, as many people do believe, that an ordinary gas mask is a protection against carbon monoxide, it was quite evident that he hadn’t been putting his theories into practice. Boles, as a pharmaceutical chemist, was far less likely to make that fatal mistake. Boles got himself the only type of respirator which would protect him (we traced his purchase of it, though he did his best to cover up his tracks). To get on with the story of the actual murder; Boles was able to get his victim clear of the lethal chamber because he himself was protected by his mask and oxygen apparatus. He also disconnected the exhaust pipe from the aperture leading to the dark room, and fixed up an electric fan to clear the gas out through the same aperture. Later, I think it probable that he sprayed an ammoniacal solution of cuprous chloride into the place—this would have neutralised any remnants of the gas which were hanging about, and also accounted for his purchase of cuprous chloride recently.”

“The fact that Boles was a pharmaceutical chemist by training gave him an advantage in this particular murder,” said Langston cheerfully, “because, however rudimentary his knowledge of chemistry proper, he had learnt the essential carefulness necessary in dealing with toxic substances.”

Macdonald nodded. “Yes. That was an important point to bear in mind. Boles realised fully the dangerous nature of the gas he was dealing with, and took proper precautions to safeguard himself. Once he had got Conyers out of the dark room, the rest of his job was simple. He had only to put the body into the Daimler which Conyers himself had left parked at the back of his (Boles’) premises. He then drove to Dyke’s Corner, reversed the car and left it with the engine running, knowing that a smash was almost inevitable as the main road was blocked. He had to walk back home, and got drenched through—and caught cold. He was seen by Wilkes as he went in.”

Pellew nodded his comely head. “Boles fitted the bill, in common with Shenton, Stokes, and Ingle. He could have induced Conyers to come to see him that night by offering to do a private deal. So could the others. Boles knew the main road was up and lorries would use the Dyke’s Corner road. So did the others. Boles was fighting Conyers tooth and nail. So were some

of the others—but Boles was the only one who changed his tune and spoke well of Conyers *after* the murder—that’s really what gave him away.”

“What drew attention to him,” replied Macdonald.

Langston spoke again here; “And what about Lewis Conyers’ doings that night?”

“To understand Lewis Conyers’ behaviour, you must remember that his mind was in a turmoil over two devotions—love of his mother, and love of Anne Merryl. He wanted his mother to get a divorce, and if she had divorced Morton Conyers, Lewis’s position with regard to Anne might have been less difficult. He would not go away and leave his mother alone with his father, but if a divorce had been obtained, and his mother had become free of that unhappy marriage tie, Lewis would have felt free, too. I think I understand his line of thought there. He did follow his father’s car—deliberately—to get evidence of what Morton Conyers was going out for on such a night. Lewis followed him to Rayne’s Cross, and thence to Strand. He saw his father drive into the cul-de-sac behind Boles’ shop—whereupon Lewis lost interest. Business again. He didn’t realise until later what that business must have led to, but he made up his mind. He would tell nothing. If you find it difficult to understand how any man, possibly in danger of a capital charge, could have been so foolishly obstinate, I can only explain it by reference to Lewis’s own character, his hatred of his father, and to the conditions he had grown up under. A lad who has lived with a father of Morton Conyers’ type, isn’t going to be conspicuous for common sense. Lewis, having started with his determination to say nothing which might lead to the apprehension of his father’s murderer, when he saw himself in danger of being charged, said weakly, ‘If I tell them now that I saw him drive into that cul-de-sac, no one’s going to believe me. I can’t prove it. Better stick to it that I won’t say anything.’ His decision on this point was further accentuated because he was determined not to say anything about having met Anne Merryl at the Assembly rooms.”

“He seems to have been totally unreasonable,” said Straynge, and Macdonald nodded. “Yes. He was, but you can’t have a Morton Conyers for a father and not suffer for it. Lewis Conyers is a mass of complexes and mistrust, particularly of himself, although fundamentally I think he’s a decent fellow.”

Sir Giles Pellew had fallen into a brown study. “Old Boles,” he said to himself. “Old Boles—it’s almost unbelievable . . .”

“It’s a queer story,” said Macdonald musingly. “I remember one of Boles’ fellow tradesmen—that inquisitive old chap, Stokes, saying, ‘Human nature with the lid off,’ and the milkman saying, ‘They’d better have taken John Home’s money.’ The end of it all is a rope for Boles, and a cheap site for some other chain store. Murder works by contraries. Well, here’s the story in a nutshell. Boles, having brooded over the fact that Morton Conyers would either buy him out or break him by underselling, had the simple notion of gas-proofing his dark room and pumping exhaust gas into it. He rang up Conyers, offering to come to terms, and asked him to drive up the cul-de-sac so that his car would not be observed by other tradesmen in the Market Square. When Conyers entered the shop by the back door, he was tripped into the dark room, locked in, and the gas pumped in. Actually during this time the farm labourer, Walsh, rang Boles’ door for medicine—and Boles served him, quite coolly, while his victim was being gassed. Later, Boles drove the Daimler to Dyke’s Corner. It must all have seemed very simple when planned in advance.”

“Simple!” groaned Pellew, and Langston put in:

“It was almost a pity that Straynge and I were not done in by the lorry in the smash at Dyke’s Corner. Our corpses would have complicated it a bit more.”

“Thanks,” replied Macdonald. “It was quite complicated enough.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

In the original text, Monday is erroneously mentioned three times in relation to the crime. These have been changed to Thursday to enhance plot continuity.

Some pages of advertising from the publisher were excluded from the ebook edition.

[The end of *Death at Dyke's Corner* by E. C. R. Lorac]