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Briefly

. A Note from the Editors

Welcome to this new issue of *The Edgar Wallace Mystery Magazine*.

You will see from the cover that this issue is devoted entirely to one full-length thriller story, following many requests from our readers for more stories by John Jacey.

However, please note that one-story issue *are* an experiment and we intend to return to our traditional style for the next issue, unless, of course, you, the readers, change our minds for us!

You will see a note on Page One about material, that is, that you should read *our* Note before sending any. This is because we have to point out that we have enough material right here in front of us to fill many future issues with exciting, edge-of-the-seat short stories. So, as we know there are many budding authors amongst our readers, perhaps they will forgive us when we say that we just cannot look at any more material for many months.

In the meantime to all of you, *Good Reading* with this issue of *The Edgar Wallace Mystery Magazine*.

THE EDITORS.

By John Jacey

THE WITCH-KILLERS

One o' these days, Simple Simon's goin'
to see too much!

TH**ERE** was thunder in the air. Ominous black storm-clouds were banked across the summer sky. Crouched at the foot of the Chiltern Hills, the village of Little Bede lay still and stifling hot in the brooding light.

With every passing minute, the sky grew darker. In the smithy by the old churchyard, flames leapt and grotesque shadows scuttled around the walls. A hammer rang. A horse was being shod. "'Nother inch an' she'd ha' bin lamed, Simon," Dan Crane, the smith, grunted as he worked.

"Aye." Simon Harper's voice was bitter. His thin, peaked face was grim. "An' it were all her doin'!" His small eyes glittered malevolently. "T'was her as magicked that ol' bit o' wood for Bess to tread on—there bain't nothin' more sure! You throw that there nai in the fire, Dan'l, to kill the poison!"

Dan Crane raised his sweat-streaked face for a moment, and then quickly lowered it again in awkward silence. The sky beyond the smithy door had grown darker yet, and behind the group of men standing with Simon another man had appeared, drawn by the sound of voices. Old George, the road-mender, unaware of the newcomer, exchanged a nod and a wink with his friends before inquiring artlessly, "You talkin' about the old witch up at the Manor, Simon?"

"Ar——"

"Coor!" said the fat Bert Widger, the postman, lasciviously. "Ol' witch, d'yer say? Lovely as a lily she is!"

Simon eyed him scornfully. "Thass all front. Takes muck ter make the flowers grow."

Then he said broodingly, "Another half-inch and old Bess would likely have been dead—same as Charlie Pringle's pig and Willie Brigg's cows."

His voice lifted.

"I tell yer, somethin' oughter be done about *her* up at the Manor. A right bad one she is."

Bert Widger chuckled: a wet sound in his throat. "I know wot I'd like ter do with 'er! Cooor!"

Behind him, Geoffrey Spencer edged nearer to the group. Nearer and nearer—quietly. And, all the time, Dan

Crane, the smith, was the only man there to be uneasily, unhappily aware of him.

Spencer was tall, lean, and good-looking. A young man in his late twenties, with sleek dark hair and a small moustache, his blue eyes were very direct. Both his good looks and his position as Bailiff at Bede Manor made him an eligible target in the eyes of designing village maidens—and their equally designing mothers.

“I seed her in the bottom wood.” Simon muttered again, broodingly, as if to himself.

Old George, the road-mender, grinned. “Who was she with?”

“She was talkin’ to the rocks.”

“In French?” Old George asked, incredulously.

“You don’t mind me,” said Simon, “but I seed a lot o’ rare things, I ’ave. I seed——”

Geoffrey Spencer took a sudden step forward. There was an angry glint in his eyes. “Perhaps you’d better tell the colonel himself what you saw!”

Startled, Simon gaped at him.

“Do you realise it’s the colonel’s wife you’re talking about? His solicitors might call that slander.”

Simon glowered at him resentfully. “Squire’s wife’s dead.”

“The lady you’ve been slandering,” Spencer said bleakly, “is Colonel Esdale’s second wife, and you know it. If you can’t talk sense you’d better shut up—before you land yourself in trouble.”

Simon sniffed. “You don’t want ter believe all you see, nor all you hear neither, Mr. Spencer.”

The young bailiff made an angry noise in his throat. “I don’t know what that’s supposed to mean!” He swung round on the others. “And you lot—you ought to know better than to encourage him! This stupid talk of witchcraft has already reached the colonel’s ears. Suppose he does put the matter in the hands of his solicitors——?” He

rounded on Simon again. "What would you have to say for yourself then?"

"Ar——" said Simon "—I'd tell 'em what I'd seen. And I seen a powerful lot o' things, Mr. Spencer." He met the young man's angry gaze with an unflinching, truculent stare. Spencer stifled a retort, turned on his heel, and strode out of the smithy.

Simon gazed after him, thinly pleased with himself. "That shut him up!"

Bert Widger, Old George and the others looked a trifle uneasy. They all lived in cottages which belonged to the colonel, and if the young bailiff reported all he'd overheard there was no telling what might happen.

"You'm better go after 'him, Bert," Old George said. "Tell 'im we didn't mean no 'arm. Calm 'un down, like."

Pursued by Simon's scornful stare, Bert went. When the last nail was in place, Simon led his horse away. The others watched him go.

"One o' these days——" Old George ruminated "—Simple Simon's goin' ter land us all in a 'eap o' trouble. Bailiff's right. We oughtn't to encourage 'im."

"One o' these days——" Dan Crane, the smith, answered him, wiping sweat out of his eyes with the back of his hand "—Simple Simon's goin' ter see too much!"

* * *

Thunder muttered angrily on the hills as Simon led Bess the black mare back to Joel Watkins' fiive-acre. The horse swung her head at the sound and snorted. "You'm all right now," Simon soothed her. "'Tis only a Summer storm, lass. Come the rain an' we'll take shelter."

But he was determined to get more of the field ploughed before that happened. Old Watkins had promised him a bonus if he completed the job before nightfall.

“An’ if it weren’t for that ol’ witch up at the Manor the money would be as good as in my pocket now,” Simon muttered. “She put that ol’ bit o’ wood there with that nail fur Bess to tread on. Magicked it there, she did. For some reason she don’t want the five-acre ploughed. But it’s goin’ ter be!”

And he led Bess in through the gate. The field stretched before him.

It had lain idle for years: a tangle of weeds and tares fit only for pigs to root. Watkins’ other fields had been ploughed long since and were showing long spears of corn.

“And come next year this one’ll be the same,” Simon told Bess as he harnessed her to the plough. The work was half done. “Come on, lass. Giddup, there!”

The sky was black. The thunder rolled nearer. The air was as heavy as lead.

Bess pawed the ground and snorted again.

Suddenly lightning sheeted the black, brooding clouds directly overhead. Thunder crashed out. Bess flinched in fear. There was a swirl of wind, and then drenching rain. Half-blinded, cursing in the torrential downpour, Simon worked to free Bess from the plough. She was impatient, and his normally nimble fingers slipped. He swore at her. “Stand still, dang yer!”

But she wouldn’t.

Rain whipping his face, water running in rivulets down his thin, leathery cheeks and off his pointed chin, Simon finally unhitched her. The wind rose. It was biting cold now. Head bent, Bess beside him, Simon scrambled across the unploughed portion of the five-acre field in search of shelter. He found it where the field stopped short on the edge of Colonel Esdale’s spinney. There, knee-deep in docks and stinging nettles, he paused for breath beneath the dripping trees.

And then he saw the well.

He saw it as a ragged circle of bricks rising a couple

of feet above the ground. It was almost overgrown. Two upright posts, with the broken bar of a rotted cross-beam jutting out from one of them, stood on either side of the brickwork. Simon remembered it as a shaft, long dry and disused, which had been there so long that no one recalled why it had been sunk in the first place.

"Danged dangerous!" he grumbled, and bent down. Through the tangled stinging nettles and docks he had just seen something glint dully against the base of the brickwork. He stooped and picked it up.

It was an old button, seemingly brass, but now tarnished to a dirty green. A fragment of blue cloth was attached to it. Simon made to throw it away, and then changed his mind. Polished up it would do for the babby to play with.

He was still standing there, side-on to the well, looking at the button, a frown forming between his small, beady eyes, when Joel Watkins, his employer, saw him and hailed him, and came at a blundering run through the slicing rain which cut across the five-acre field.

"Hi, Simon! Thought I'd better come and see how you were getting on! Will you finish tonight, d'you think?" And then it happened.

It was incredible. Utterly unbelievable. And Joel Watkins himself did not believe it. But it happened. He saw it happen—before his very eyes.

Simon turned sharply. Twenty feet still separated the two men as Simon spat venomously "That ol' witch up at the Manor! If it 'adn't bin for 'er——"

And then he stopped. His voice was chocked off. Impossibly, an invisible "something" seemed to grip him by the throat. He cried out. A strangled sound. His hands jerked up as though to ward off the unseen assailant. His face was contorted with terror.

"Simon——!" Joel Watkins gasped, and lunged forward. Too late.

Lightning flashed and thunder rolled in triumph. And

before Joel Watkins could reach him, Simple Simon Harper had lost his battle with his invisible enemy.

He was thrown backwards.

He was hurled to his death down the disused well.

THE letter from Colonel Esdale and the press report of the coroner's inquest on Simple Simon Harper arrived on Steven Cord's desk at almost the same moment. It was a mid-morning moment with high Summer drenching the plane trees with rich sunlight.

The letter was addressed to Superintendent John Tucker at New Scotland Yard, and it was grey, grizzled Tucker himself who gave it to Cord with a grunted "Read that." Cord accepted the letter. He had no choice. It was dropped on to the tooled-leather blotter in front of him. But he made no immediate effort to carry out his friend's instructions.

Instead, he leaned back in his chair. "And then——?" he demanded suspiciously.

"Just read it."

But Cord shook his head. "Oh, no."

In his experience, whenever Tucker stumped into his office and handed him something to read it never ended there. The Superintendent, on such occasions, always wanted things done. Invariably in a hurry.

Cord said as much, and added "I'm clearing the decks. I've been done out of a proper holiday more years than I can remember. But not this year. Not with this weather. Not if I can help it. Right now I'm winding investigations up—not branching out on new ones."

"But——" Tucker protested "——this is just your cup of tea! I'm doing you a favour. Read the letter. See for yourself!"

"I have all the 'cups of tea' I can cope with until after my holiday."

"But this is right up your alley. It is, really!"

"Sorry."

Tucker sighed exasperatedly. "All right then— if that's the way you want it——" and he reached for the letter. But it was at that precise moment that Fate came down heavily on his side.

A brisk, warning rap on the door heralded Mike Connor, a young man in his early twenties. He let fall the latest wad of press cuttings on to Cord's desk.

"Good morning, Steve. Hello, Super. The morning's bumper bundle, chief. Miss Brown's bringing in the coffee."

Every morning at this time, whenever Cord was in London, both came in together. Coffee and clippings; the one to be digested with the other. Mocha coffee from Arabia—black as the Hob of Hell. Clippings from all over the world, in a multitude of languages, cataloguing crimes and criminals equally diverse and exotic.

Tucker's fingers fastened on to the letter he had pleaded with Cord to read. He made to pick it up. And then Cord stopped him. "*Wait!*"

All in a fleeting second, he had seen three things.

He had seen the arresting headline on the topmost clipping. He had seen the dateline immediately beneath.

Little Bede, Bucks, Wednesday.

He had seen the same place-name repeated as a post-mark on the letter now held in Tucker's hand.

He read the opening paragraph below the headline quickly. Then he said "The letter wouldn't concern some very strange doings in the village of Little Bede——?"

"It would."

"——The Black Arts—and Invisible Entities taking a man by the throat and hurling him to his death down a disused well——?"

"Yes."

"Give," said Cord, snapping his fingers peremptorily. Now it was Tucker who made a show of reluctance. "I

thought you said you were winding up all your current investigations—not branching out on new ones?”

“This,” said Cord, “is different.” And it was.

The headline which had first caught his eye read: **“BLACK MAGIC MURDER” SAY VILLAGERS — BUT CORONER CALLS IT ACCIDENT.**

And, beneath, great stress was laid on the sober probity of Joel Watkins, churchwarden and farmer, who had seen the impossible happen before his very eyes.

* * *

The letter was headed: Bede Manor, Little Bede, Bucks.

“Dear John——” Cord read. *“We’ve known each other a long time—ever since we served together during the war, in fact, and I’ve never once traded on your status as a senior police officer until now—when I must.*

“Frankly, I need your professional advice and assistance. I need both desperately. Things are happening down here which are causing me very grave concern.

“You may have heard of the very strange circumstances which attended the untimely death of Simon Harper, one of the villagers here, a few days ago. Briefly, after making some fantastic allegations about my wife, Harper plunged to his death down a disused well on the edge of my land in a quite incredible way.

“A witness whom I have personally known all my life, and whose veracity is unquestionable, testified at the inquest that immediately before falling to his death Harper seemed to be fighting ‘an invisible something or someone’ which appeared to have him by the throat! The witness went on to say that, in his opinion—which he subsequently maintained throughout the hearing in the face of all kinds of caustic comments from the coroner—Harper was actually thrown to his death by the invisible entity which attacked him!

"Fantastic, isn't it? But that's not all! When I tell you that Harper was of the declared opinion that my wife is a witch, and that, with his last breath, he reviled her in these terms, you'll be able to guess where all this is leading.

"Harper, alive, had the nickname of 'Simple' Simon. But, dead, the villagers seem to be coming more and more to believe that everything he said about my wife Yvonne is Gospel truth!

Since the inquest, my wife has been stoned in the village by some of my own tenants' children! My step-son has been spat upon! My own car had its windows shattered when someone opened fire on me with a shotgun at close range. Luckily, I escaped with only a few scratches. But now——

"Upon reflection, I think I had better leave the rest of my story until I see you. Do, please, try to make it soon. Very sincerely, HENRY ESDALE."

"Blimey!" said Cord.

* * *

Mike moved. "You took the word right out of my mouth."

Cord looked at him.

He said "Find Little Bede on the map, and work out a route. Then get out the Jag."

"You're going down there right away?"

Cord's glance shifted. "That's what the Super would like me to do. Isn't it, John?"

Tucker put his broad back to the window. "Yes," he said. "Of course I'd like to go down there myself and sort out the colonel's troubles. Like he says, we were in the war together. He was my C.O. in fact, at one time—in Intelligence. I owe him a good turn or two. But——" he grimaced "—you know how things are."

"Busy?"

The superintendent sighed. "Very." He grunted. "A few days' sunshine, a little heat, seems to bring criminals out into the open. Like bugs. So I certainly can't get away from the Yard for any length of time. Not for long enough to give this business the attention it obviously deserves."

"So you thought of me?"

"Yes. And I took a chance." He grinned fleetingly—an almost shamefaced grin that took thirty years off his age. "I rang Colonel Esdale as soon as I'd read his letter. I told him that I couldn't get down to Little Bede myself, but that I was certain I could interest you. He was delighted. He does desperately need advice and assistance—that's obvious—though he wouldn't add to what he'd already written in his letter—not on the 'phone. He said that, of course, you could stay at the Manor, and he asked me what your charges would be. I took the liberty of telling him——"

"Oh—you did, eh?"

"—That you and he would have to settle that little matter between yourselves," Tucker went on doggedly, "but that I'd never known you present an unreasonable bill."

"Now——" Cord leaned back "—tell me about the colonel and this 'witch-wife' of his."

Slowly Tucker thumbed tobacco into his charred old briar and obeyed.

"Yvonne's quite unlike any witch I ever heard of," he said. "No toothless old crone she! She's beautiful. Really beautiful. Much younger than the colonel himself, of course."

"How old is he?"

Tucker shrugged. "He must be in his mid-sixties, I suppose, though you'd never think it to look at him. He's one of the spare, stiff, crop-moustached soldiers types—all bone and sinew. And they don't really age at all, as you

know. They just weather.”

“And Yvonne—?”

“She’s a lush thirty. Perhaps thirty-two or thirty-three. She’s the colonel’s second wife, and he’s her second husband. His first wife died about four years ago. Cancer. A rotten end for her——”

Tucker sucked pensively at his pipe.

“—Yvonne’s first husband was killed in Algeria by the rebels. She’s French, and so was he. A settler. I believe he was a farmer. They hadn’t been married all that long. I don’t know exactly when he was killed, but it must have been round about five to six years ago. Yvonne has a little boy, Pierre, and he’s just five. He was born after his father’s death. He’s the step-son the colonel mentioned in his letter.”

Cord nodded, making brief notes. “And has Colonel Esdale any children of his own?”

“By his first marriage, two. A daughter and a son. Fenella and Harry. They’ll both be in their early twenties now.”

“And what are they like?”

Tucker shook his head. “I wouldn’t know.”

He explained “I haven’t been down to Little Bede in years. Not since just after the end of the war, in fact. I’ve kept up some sort of a correspondence with the colonel, of course, and I’ve had dinner with him and Yvonne whenever they’ve been up in Town. But I haven’t seen Fenella and Harry since the colonel invited me down to the Manor for a couple of weeks during my demob leave in nineteen forty-six—and that’s years and years ago. I just haven’t been free to take him up on any of his invitations since. Then Fenella was a leggy, coltish thing with wild blonde hair and a positive hatred of boys, and Harry was a stocky, snub-nosed youth who seemed to spend all his free time with the bailiff’s son shooting down rooks with a catapult. Damn good they were at it, too. But I expect both Fenella and Harry have changed a lot since then.”

"I expect so. So much for them, then. Now—" Cord picked up the Press clipping of the coroner's inquest on Simon Harper—"now tell me what you know about this."

The superintendent read the report slowly. Then he looked up. "There's not much to tell. It's nearly all here. After calling Yvonne Esdale a witch, Harper was apparently taken by the throat and flung down a deep, disused well. By goblins. The fall broke his neck. What more do you want?"

"The coroner called it accidental death," Cord said.

Tucker grunted. "What sort of a verdict do you expect him to bring in? Murder by demon or demons unknown? The law takes a stolidly disbelieving view of the supernatural. So do I."

Cord was thoughtful.

"The verdict of the inquest was that, somehow, Harper must have missed his footing—tripped over something, though he was standing still at the time, and nothing he could have tripped over was found——"

Tucker brooded over his pipe. "And he fell backward—not forward . . . Yes, I know. It's baffling."

"He couldn't have had a heart attack, or stroke, or some kind of fit——? I know what it says in the report of the inquest, but——"

"Ruled out completely," Tucker said briefly. "The post-mortem showed that Harper was as sound as a bell. He could have lived to be a hundred. And there was no evidence of foul play, either. Not on the body or on the ground. No signs of a struggle. No more damage done to the body than you'd expect as a result of a forty foot fall. Less in fact." He sighed.

Cord said: "Then you agree with the coroner's verdict?"

"Accidental death?" Tucker considered the question thoughtfully. "I think I have to." He sounded just a little bit doubtful. "I don't think I can believe in demons and

witches.”

“Is it against Judge’s Rules?”

Tucker smiled faintly, but said nothing.

Cord asked him: “What’s been left out of the press report?”

“I told you. Not one thing that really matters. It emphasises the sober respectability of Joel Watkins, the farmer who saw it all happen, and that, I suppose, is enough.”

“What does that mean?”

“You asked me—” Tucker said slowly “—what’s been left out of the press report, and I’m telling you. What’s been left out is all the work of the Buckinghamshire County Constabulary have put in checking and re-checking on Joel Watkins. They’ve gone through his background and antecedents with a fine-toothed comb. They’ve taken him over his story again and again and again. They’ve really given the poor devil the business. That’s what’s been left out.”

“And they couldn’t shake him?”

“Not one scrap.” The superintendent made a small, abrupt, negative movement. “He can’t be shaken at all. He knows his story is crazy, but he’s sticking to it. That’s what he saw. He’s stuck to his story even though—and I’ll tell you this frankly—the local boys tried every trick they know to trip him up.”

Cord nodded reflectively. “They’d have to. If this wasn’t accidental death—and who can believe it?—and if it wasn’t the Supernatural at work—”

“If it was murder, Mister Watkins is Suspect-Number-One, of course. But how could it be murder? I’ve already told you the police weren’t able to find any evidence of foul play. I’d go so far as to say that no human agency so much as laid a finger on Harper—and yet he ended up at the bottom of the well with his neck broken.”

“Crazy . . .” Cord muttered. “If it *was* murder, and Watkins had no hand in it, it could be the perfect crime...”

For once, he was only *almost* right.

ONCE out of London, with traffic problems behind him, Cord was able to relax. It was very pleasant driving through the sun-dappled countryside. There was even a sense of relief in the fact that he was alone.

He didn't hurry, and he reached Little Bede in the early evening, as the sun was dipping towards the horizon. He drove slowly through the village not only out of consideration for its inhabitants, but also to capture and retain valuable first impressions. There seemed to be nothing in Little Bede to substantiate the anxiety expressed in Colonel Esdale's letter. It was quiet and peaceful. Above all, it was normal. It was a typical English olde-worlde village with all that the description implied.

But when he stopped the car to ask a passing labourer the way to Bede Manor, his first impressions were rudely reversed. The man gaped, turned red, and then spat, with great deliberation and accuracy, at the exact centre of the windscreen. Then he turned without a word and stalked off—not even deigning to give the car or its driver a second glance as they passed him.

The incident furnished Cord with enough to occupy his mind until the gates of the Manor came in sight. They were situated about three miles, and five hurried glances at the road-map, outside the village—in the centre of a veritable web of narrow and winding country lanes. Cord left his car a little distance away from them and walked towards them. They were plainly locked. A great padlocked chain bound them together. Cord lit a cigarette and considered whether to retrace his steps to the car and give a few blasts on the horn to announce his arrival, whether to go through the edge at the side of the gates, or whether merely to look for a tradesman's entrance farther along the lane. He took his time deciding. He was in no hurry.

It was a peaceful moment. Dusk hung over the land like a smoke-grey curtain. The scent of pine and leaf mould enveloped him. He liked the look of the big house beyond

the gates.

It stood, amidst trees, at the end of a straight, gravelled drive. It was surrounded by gently sloping lawns. Built on Georgian lines, with red brickwork accentuating tall windows, and white fluted columns set on either side of a massive front door, it looked a nice house—even a friendly one.

“Stay where you are!”

The command rasped out, without warning, from behind him. And though startled, resisted the impulse to turn his head.

There really was no need.

He could recognise the confidence which came into a man’s voice when he held a gun!

* * *

The man didn’t look like a gunman, but then—Cord thought—neither had Baby Face Nelson. Looks alone meant nothing.

Frankly portly, this man held a sporting rifle as if he were balancing a tray loaded with delicate china. He was grey-haired and smooth-shaven; between fifty and sixty. His eyes were alert, but not over-intelligent. They surveyed Cord from top to toe as he moved around between the detective and the gates.

“And what do you think you’re doing?” he enquired suspiciously.

“I might ask you the same thing.” Cord returned his stare over the threatening gun barrel.

The man grunted. “Foreigner, aren’t you?”

“Do I sound like it?”

“With half of them going to Oxford these days, and the other half going to the London School of Economics, I wouldn’t know. But I’m taking you into——”

Abruptly, and quite involuntarily, he broke off in mid-

sentence. He wasn't taking Cord anywhere. The detective had been threatened by more gunmen than he cared to remember—and had survived to benefit from the experience.

With a rifle as close as this, you dived under it. Cord did so——! The gate at the man's back prevented him from retreating.

The detective jolted him back against the iron. The gun pointed harmlessly into the dusky sky. Cord brought his knee up—painfully. It was all over within split seconds. When Cord pulled himself away again, he was holding the rifle. The other man was holding himself—and groaning.

"You started this," the detective reminded him. "Now—through that hedge and up to the Manor. *Move!*"

* * *

The owner of the rifle hesitated. It was plain he was dwelling on the possibility of rushing Cord. He decided against it.

Wordlessly, he moved, but not towards the thick thorn hedge. Instead he went towards the gates. He produced some keys, unlocked the chain which secured the gates and pushed one of them open.

Now Cord smiled to himself. He thought he knew who the gunman was.

They walked up the drive, the detective in the rear, the rifle tucked under his arm. If he was right about the identity of the gunman, the situation was not without humour, Cord thought. He wondered what Colonel Esdale's reaction would be. Then he thought that one could be quick off the mark without making a burlesque of it.

"Here," he said. "You carry the gun."

The other man turned and took it from him, still as though it were a tray. "Certainly, sir." Needless to say, the weapon was no longer loaded.

A tall, spare man, whom Cord readily identified as Colonel Esdale from Tucker's description of him, was

standing at the open front door of the manor. He had evidently seen them approaching from the library window. Stiffly erect and soldierly, with grey hair and a thing, iron-grey mustache, his eyes, under bushy eyebrows, were sharply black and direct. But they held an oddly nervous flicker. A perpetual apprehension.

The man with the gun said: "I found this person skulking near the gate, sir."

"Standing," Cord corrected equably. "Not skulking. My name's Steven Cord. I believe you're expecting me."

There was surprise and genuine relief in Colonel Esdales eyes as he stepped forward to shake hands. "I'm delighted to see you. Really delighted! You know—I hardly expected you to come at all. Certainly not straight away like this—despite what Tucker said this morning. Please forgive the welcome. Edwards patrols the estate every night around this time. All right Edwards, you may go."

Cord said: "My car's in the lane. Would you mind bringing it round?"

"Certainly, sir." Edwards accepted the ignition key and hurried off down the drive. Then he stopped; came back. "May I have my bullet, sir?"

Gravely Cord took it out of his pocket and handed it over. The colonel watched this with more than a hint of amusement quirking his mouth. It was a picture which told a reassuring story. It did more for Cord than a whole file of credentials.

As Cord followed Esdale into the house he remarked: "Whatever it is you're afraid of, Colonel, I don't think your butler is quite the man to deal with it."

"That—" said the older man gravely "—is why I'm delighted to welcome you."

* * *

In the library, Colonel Esdale said: "While I fix you a drink, Mr. Cord, I'd like you to look at something. It may

help to justify our rather melodramatic introduction.”

He opened a bureau and removed a small object from one of the drawers. He held it gingerly, between the very tips of finger and thumb, as though loath to touch it at all. He offered it with a quick, jerky motion which seemed utterly alien to his normal character. He said: “You can see what it is . . .”

And his voice was grim.

Cord looked at it, and pursed his lips in a silent whistle. The object was made out of some kind of red wax and was carefully, almost delicately, fashioned. It was a tiny, waxen image of a woman.

A coil of raven hair fell from its head, and its voluptuously curved body was sheathed in a scrap of black chiffon. Every feature of its little face was carefully fashioned. Eyes, nose, and sensual lips were all moulded with precise attention to the minutest detail.

And between the high, jutting breasts of the image—stabbing through the place where its heart would have been had it be alive—was thrust a tiny, sharpened blackthorn stake.

“That, sir,” said the colonel throatily, “is a perfect model of my wife. And she found it on her pillow—yes, actually on her pillow, beside her head!—when she woke up yesterday morning!”

STEVEN Cord took the waken image and stared at it for some seconds without speaking. The colonel said tautly: “The fact that one of the villagers obviously managed to get inside the house—and even inside Yvonne’s bedroom—without being seen, scares me silly, and I don’t mind admitting it! That’s why Edwards is patrolling the estate with a loaded rifle. During the past few days I’ve had ample evidence of just how much the villagers have come to hate my wife—and they do! Whoever left that—

that—*thing* on her pillow could just as easily have killed her—murdered her in her bed——”

Cord frowned. His eyes lifted. “You really think that the villagers would go that far?”

The colonel laughed shortly: a sound without humour. “Fantastic, isn’t it! You don’t believe it. And you wouldn’t have caught me believing it either—until a week ago. You wouldn’t think that such things could happen—not in twentieth century, easy-going England. You wouldn’t think that space-age people could still believe in witches. But apparently here in Little Bede they do. *Now* they do.”

“Enough to kill——?”

Esdale said bleakly: “I think so. I think that’s what the wax doll means. It could be a direct threat or an attempt at sympathetic magic—and a reminder of what happened to suspected witches hereabouts in the past. They were never burned, you know. Nor hanged, either. The burnings and hangings which occurred in other parts of the country came at the end of trials for witchcraft, and there were none of those here. In this district the ordinary common people took the law into their own hands. They were their own ‘witch-finders’; their own prosecuting officers and judge and jury. They quietly strangled their suspected witches here without benefit of public trial, and they buried their bodies in quicklime with a blackthorn stake hammered through their hearts.”

“But that couldn’t happen to your wife!” Cord objected. “Not in this day and age! Not even here, in Little Bede.”

“Not all of it,” the colonel agreed grimly, “but the first part of the ‘sentence’ could. The fact that one of the villagers managed to slip in and out unseen has surely demonstrated that. I tell you, they mean business! And whoever dropped that thing on Yvonne’s pillow while she slept could just as easily have strangled her there and then!”

“Yes . . .” Cord said thoughtfully. His frown deepened. There was a brief silence as he studied the waxen effigy

again, doubt tugging at the corners of his mobile mouth. Then he looked up. He said: "I think you're going to have to tell me all there is to tell about this business—right from the beginning."

"All right."

The colonel indicated that Cord should sit, and then crossed to a laden sideboard. "What'll you have to drink? Whisky?"

"Fine."

The colonel came back across the room, handed Cord his drink, and set a siphon on a small table by his elbow. "Help yourself to Soda." He sat down facing the detective, and sighed. "I suppose you could say the trouble began almost on the day I married Yvonne and brought her back here."

"When was that?"

"Three years ago."

"And you 'brought her back' from where? From Algeria?"

"No. That's where she lived with her first husband—until he was killed. Tucker told you that much, did he? Cord nodded.

"I met her in Cannes," the colonel said. "On the Riviera. I'd only known her a little over a month when we were married." He smiled dryly. "I suppose you'd call it a whirlwind courtship. We old 'uns always are impatient."

"And you brought her back here straight away?"

"After a brief honeymoon."

"And, from the first, the villagers didn't take to her?"

The Colonel said slowly, "Well . . . I suppose the reason was that it was all rather sudden. My first wife, Sarah, had been well thought of . . . and she'd only been dead a year. I suppose it did seem a little soon for me to even think of marrying again, but——"

"That's what the villagers thought?"

"Yes. And not only the villagers. My own daughter,

Fenella, too. She wouldn't speak to either of us for weeks. Even now she makes no secret of the fact that she doesn't like Yvonne——” Colonel Esdale's mouth had tightened. He attempted the dry smile again. “I fancy she thinks Yvonne took advantage of my innocence.”

But Cord wasn't smiling.

“Some kind of friction is understandable, I suppose,” he said thoughtfully, “if Fenella really loved her mother.”

The Colonel snorted.

“That's small excuse for damned boorishness,” he retorted, “and, make no mistake, I tell her so. I loved her mother, too. We were terribly happy together. Twenty-five years we were married, and never a cross word——”

His voice was changing subtly.

“——I—I was desolated when she died. I thought I'd never feel the same for any woman ever again. I was determined I'd never re-marry.”

His tone was sombre now.

He said slowly—“But all that changed when I met Yvonne. Almost instantly it changed. She's so—so—exhilarating. She lifted me right out of myself——”

Cord interrupted gently, “But no sooner had you brought her back here than the troubles started.”

“Yes.”

“What kind of trouble?”

The Colonel moved awkwardly in his chair. “I don't like to speak ill of the dead. But it was Simon Harper who started it all. ‘Simple’ Simon they called him—that explains itself. On the surface, he was harmless enough, but underneath, he was an inveterate gossip and mischief-maker. For some reason he took an even more violent dislike to Yvonne than anyone else in the village, and he was always accusing her of ‘magicking’ some damn silly accident, such as his mare going lame——”

“And people listened to him?”

“They had to listen to him,” Colonel Esdale said.

"Harper was a man you could only ignore so long. The venom dripped all the time. Drip, drip, drip—like a leaking tap. No one alive can ignore a leaking tap for ever. It's a small sound, but it's persistent. It wear a hole in your indifference. That was Harper. And, in the end, people listened to him all right."

Cord nodded. It made sense.

"Soon after we came back from Cannes," Esdale said, "Charlie Pringle's pigs died. Harper said Yvonne had laid a curse on them. Then Old Briggs—his farm abuts my land beyond Joel Watkins' place—he lost some valuable heifers——"

"You mean they were stolen?"

"No. They died—like the pigs. Quite unaccountably. The local vet—I won't say he's brilliant, but he does know his job—couldn't find a thing wrong. But Harper knew where to lay the blame, of course."

The Colonel's tone was bitter.

"Witches and the evil eye and assignations made with the devil—you've never heard such a hotch-potch of rubbish! Believe it or not, Yvonne wasn't only held responsible for the death of the pigs and Briggs' cows but also for the fact that two black cockerels were stolen from one of the cottages!"

"To be sacrificed at a Black Mass, I suppose," Cord said.

"That's right. Something like that. And then some headstones were overturned in the churchyard—by some of the local yobs without doubt—but again Harper's evil tongue went to work. Yvonne was blamed."

Colonel Esdale sighed.

"I suppose," he said, "if I could take a detached view of it all, it might even be funny. I can't recall every incident my wife was supposed to be responsible for, but you can take it from me they range from the village inn sign blowing down in a gale last year to the Vicar's wife being

blessed—or cursed—with triplets. And now, of course, there's the mysterious death of Harper himself to add to the score, and it isn't funny at all.

"The villagers are hostile to us, and most of the tradesmen have stopped calling. Every time one or other of us goes into the village there's an 'incident'. You might say we're almost in a state of siege here, and it isn't pleasant. A few days ago, a note was found pinned to the front door of this house. It was full of foul obscenities about my wife, but the gist of it was we'd all better pack our bags and get out—while there was still time."

The Colonel eyed Cord broodingly.

He said, "I can assure you that it isn't at all nice to know that the people you've lived amongst all your life now hate you so much that they're ready, willing, and apparently able to kill your wife and drive you out of your own home!"

The detective nodded gravely. "So what do you want me to do? I take it you're not going to pack your bags and go?"

Colonel Esdale's thin mouth set stubbornly. "Not on your life! My people have lived in Little Bede for close on four hundred years. This house is built on the site of an earlier one first given to an ancestor of mine by the Earl of Essex, the favourite of Queen Elizabeth the First. We're not moving."

"So——?"

"So I want you to find out who is behind this—this persecution of my wife and family. And I want to know their motives. I told you 'Simple' Simon Harper started it all, but he's dead now and someone else is fanning the flames of hatred."

"You don't think it's spontaneous, then?" Cord said, and the Colonel looked at him sharply.

"It didn't begin spontaneously. I told you—Harper started it. Now he's dead someone else is carrying on."

"And when I find out who that is——?"

"Then," the Colonel said grimly, "whoever it is I'll see him in the Assize Court if it's the last thing I do! I held my hand over Harper's part in the business. I could have taken him to court a score of times, and my Bailiff, young Spencer, almost begged me to. I wish I'd listened to him now.

"But I didn't because—well—Simon Harper *was* simple. I thought I'd only make myself look ridiculous if I admitted to taking any notice of what he was saying about Yvonne. I believed that the best thing I could do was to ignore his insane accusations. But Harper's dead now, and those days are past. I'm going to hit back now. And hit back hard!"

"Why——" Cord said "——don't you simply go to the police?"

"I will when I'm good and ready. When you give me some facts to take to them."

"Why not go now—right away——? You've facts enough in all conscience! And, whatever I do, I'm going to have to charge you. The police would do the same work for nothing."

The Colonel flushed.

"When I'm good and ready I'll go to them," he reiterated stubbornly. He stood up. Oddly, Cord's innocent question seemed to have touched him on a nerve. He said, almost brusquely, "Now, is there anything else you'd like to know?"

"Just one thing." Cord stood up, too. He said quietly, "Why—if it's the villagers you're really afraid of—has your butler got instructions to look out for prowling foreigners——?"

* * *

Now the Colonel was visibly shaken.

"That—that's not true! Edwards is a fool! When he

says 'foreigner' he means anybody who isn't a local——"

"That won't do,' Cord said calmly. "Edwards himself isn't a 'local' in that sense. Only the villagers would have used the term 'foreigner'."

Colonel Esdale had the look for a man of honour caught out in a lie. He blustered "Don't you believe what I've been telling you?"

"Yes. But you haven't told me everything, have you?" Cord tossed the little waxen effigy back on the desk. "This scares you—sure. But something else is scaring you, too. Something out of the past, perhaps?"

"That's nonsense! There's nothing in my past—or in Yvonne's— that could threaten us now." The Colonel calmed down a little, with an effort. He said "I think perhaps I've told the story rather badly, Mr. Cord. Shall we talk about it again at dinner—that will give you a chance to meet my family. They'll confirm all I've said, and——"

He wasn't allowed to finish.

There was a sudden blur of movement beyond the tall windows, only glimpsed in the fast-gathering dusk. Even as Cord leapt forward, there was a shattering explosion and something burst through the glass. Colonel Esdale, in the act of swinging around, startled, gave a sudden cry and stumbled forward, his hands going to his head.

The next instant he had crumpled to the carpet, and blood was already forming into a scarlet pool upon the soft grey pile.

CORD jumped to the broken window, jarred it up and open, and leaned out. But there was no-one to be seen.

The long sloping lawns and the drive were empty, and the nearest thick belt of trees was too far away for the Colonel's unknown assailant to have reached cover within it in time.

Cord turned back into the room, jerked at the bellrope at the side of the fireplace, and then crouched down over Colonel Esdale. He was unconscious and bleeding freely from a deep gash across his forehead. By his side lay the missile which had struck him. It was a large and heavy flint about five inches in diameter, all jagged edges and cruel points.

Cord stared at it.

A message had been scratched on it. He could read it without lifting the stone. It read, in roughly formed letters:

"THIS IS YOUR LAST CHANCE TO GET OUT ALIVE!"

* * *

Cord didn't touch the flint with his fingers.

He was careful not to.

He tugged a clean white handkerchief from his breast pocket and quickly wrapped it around the stone.

Then he began to do what he could for Colonel Esdale. He tried to staunch the flow of blood from the deep and jagged wound. As he worked, the door burst open behind him and Edwards, the butler, hurried—white-faced—into the room.

With him was a tall, boldly curved and exquisitely dressed woman with raven hair and a flawless complexion. She was in her thirties, and, Cord thought, Tucker had been right as describing her as "lush". He didn't have to be told her name to know who she was.

Yvonne Esdale.

Briefly, he marvelled at the misdirected skill of whoever it was who had fashioned the tiny waxen effigy of her. It had been created with a warped, but almost loving, attention to detail. This was now more obvious than ever.

It had even, in some indefinable way, managed to capture and convey some of the aura of sexuality which

this woman brought into the room with her—wrapped in it as if in an invisible cloak.

It was there in the way she held herself, and in the way she moved. How had the Colonel described her? Exhilarating? Cord would have used the word "exciting" and meant it in its broadest biological sense. Were she to be shrouded from head to toe in sackcloth, Cord thought, no man could ever be in doubt that this was a female animal—a woman.

"What happened?" she cried.

Cord told her.

He showed her the flint—concealing its message—but he didn't allow her to touch it. Edward said shakily "I heard the noise from the hall, sir. I—I thought it was a shot."

He peered around the detective. "Hadn't I better call the doctor, sir? And the police?"

"No!" Yvonne Esdale answered the butler sharply before Cord himself could speak. "We don't want any publicity," she added quickly.

"I'll attend to your husband," Cord told her. He gave swift instructions and, in a very short space of time, his head expertly bandaged, Colonel Esdale was leaning back in his chair and accepting brandy. He refused his wife's suggestion that he should go to bed and rest.

"How can I rest until this wretched business is cleared up?" he demanded fractiously. He turned to Cord. "Perhaps you'll believe me now!"

"I believed you before this happened," the detective said. "I never doubted that you were telling me the truth—just that you weren't telling me all of it."

"Why——" the Colonel began, blustering, but Cord cut in with a sharp question. "How many servants have you, and where are they?"

Colonel Esdale looked shocked. "You're not suggesting that one of my servants did this! Why, all of them

have been with me for years!"

"Nevertheless, I'd like to question them."

But the questioning got Cord nowhere. From Edwards down to a tearful kitchenmaid not one of the servants could throw any light on the evening's incident, nor on the events preceding it. Only two solid facts emerged from the inquisition: the Colonel's servants were all baffled as their master by everything that had happened—and they were frightened. Only their loyalty kept them in the house.

In spite of Yvonne's protests, Colonel Esdale insisted upon appearing for dinner. It was then Cord met Harry and Fenella—and Pierre. Pierre was five years old: a smaller, darker edition of his mother, and obviously doted on by Yvonne and the Colonel.

Cord wasn't quite prepared for Pierre, despite the fact that he's been aware of his existence. A child in the abstract was one thing, but, somehow, a child in the flesh was hard to reconcile with his conception of Yvonne Esdale.

Pierre was hustled off to bed, and Harry and Fenella came in. Harry Esdale was about twenty-six; a personable young man with a thick thatch of unruly brown hair, rather vivid hazel eyes, and an air of wanting to please everyone. Fenella was quite unlike him.

She was slim, blonde, blue-eyed and determined. She was forceful and outspoken. In spite of the aristocratically hideous English tweeds she wore, it was plain she had an excellent figure. But she seemed oddly contemptuous of the fact.

It was as if she had done her best to hide it and now, almost consciously, she was choosing postures and attitudes which would display it to its disadvantage. Her one concession to her apparently despised femininity was the faintest breath of lavender in the air about her.

Cord didn't have to sit at the dinner table for more than five minutes before he realised that the Colonel had been quite right when he'd said that Fenella didn't like

her step-mother. But he could have said more. Plainly, the dislike was mutual.

Yvonne and her step-daughter never spoke to each other unless they had to, and then their remarks were brief, often barbed, and generally acrimonious.

Harry Esdale, too, didn't appear to be completely at ease with Yvonne. Cord noticed that whenever she cast a glance in his direction his own gaze slid away and his ears reddened.

But all three were united in one respect—in their concern for the Colonel's injury.

Harry said: "It's time someone got to the bottom of this stupid business. Those villager's 'll be killing somebody next."

"Isn't that why Mr. Cord's here—to get to the bottom of it?" Fenella's voice was aggressive. She seemed quite the most aggressive young woman Cord had ever met. She said: "What exactly do you hope to discover, Mr. Cord? Who killed the pigs, and why Mrs. Duckitt's hens stopped laying? Or are you more interested in witches for their own sake? If you are, I know someone who can help you. His name's Ray Boone, and he's tall, dark, and loathsome, and——"

Yvonne interrupted cuttingly: "I'm quite sure Mr. Cord can clear up this whole affair without any stupid suggestions from you, Fenella."

"What kind of suggestions would *you* like to make to Mr. Cord, then?"

Colonel Esdale, sitting next to the detective, seemed to freeze. "What exactly do you mean by that remark, Fenella?"

"Pouf!" said Yvonne, laying a hand on her husband's arm and squeezing gently. "Did you ever know any of Fenella's remarks to mean anything? That would be expecting too much!"

"I'm waiting," the colonel said.

Fenella met her father's stare truculently. "I meant has Yvonne got any suggestions to help Mr. Cord in his investigations. What did you think I meant?"

Colonel Esdale looked as if he were about to answer her shortly. Then he changed his mind and went on with his meal. He didn't appear to relish it, however.

Cord said: "What do any of you know about Simon Harper?"

"That's an easy question," Fenella told him. "Next to nothing—except that hobgoblins threw him down a well."

"Why don't you ask Geoff Spencer about him?" Harry said. "He lives in the village. He knows more about the villagers than we do."

Cord glanced at the Colonel.

"You mentioned this chap Spencer yourself, earlier this evening," he said. "Like to tell me more about him? He's your bailiff, I think you said. How long has he been with you?"

Colonel Esdale cleared his throat, but it was his daughter who spoke first—heatedly. "I suppose you're asking because you suspect anyone and everyone of having a hand in what's happened. But you can put that thought out of your head right away where Geoff Spencer's concerned!"

"You certainly can," her brother agreed, and Cord nodded equably. "All right, I will. Now tell me—" he spoke to the Colonel again "—how long has he been with you?"

Esdale looked irritated. His tone reflected his mood. He said, a trifle testily: "Fenella and Harry are right, you know. Quite right. But—if you must know—Spencer took on the job about six months ago. His father had been my bailiff for years——"

"Geoff and I used to play together as kids," Harry said.

"—Then, when he grew up," the Colonel continued, "he spent most of his time in London. But, when his

father died, he came home for good and agreed to take his father's place. He's an excellent bailiff. Even now—in these present trying circumstances—he seems to handle the villagers very well.”

“And that's not all,” Yvonne said sweetly, if a trifle enigmatically. She added: “If you really want to question Spencer, Mr. Cord, you'll probably find him in the woods somewhere. Tomorrow, I mean. He likes walking in the woods. But cough.”

Fenella intercepted her glance. “Some people find their pleasure in Hunt Balls,” she said.

The Colonel broke across this curious exchange. He sounded angry. “I only wish you'd take this situation seriously, Fenella,” he said. “Don't you realise that Yvonne's life is in danger from these—these superstitious idiots?”

“Pouf!” his wife said again. “If they really believe that I'm a witch, they won't dare to come within a mile of me. They'll be too scared of my bewitching *them*.”

But the Colonel's frown only deepened. “That can hardly be true, can it, my dear?” he said. “Someone came close enough to you to lay that wax figure on your pillow the night before last—didn't they——?”

CORD rose early the next morning, before his host was up, and drove down to the village. A small child directed him to the house of Spencer, the bailiff. It stood facing the village green, and, as he walked up the short path to the front door, Cord saw that the main room had been turned into an office. Geoffrey Spencer came to the door and shook hands warmly when Cord introduced himself.

“It's a pleasure to meet you, sir,” he said. “I suppose you're down here to clear up this crazy witchcraft business.” He gave a scornful laugh. “Witches and warlocks—?”

Twentieth century——? More like Twentieth Century-Fox!”

Cord said: “I understand you’re Colonel Esdale’s bailiff. Isn’t it usual for the bailiff to live on the estate? It must be quite a trek for you, back and forth.”

Geoffrey Spencer smiled.

“I can see, sir, that you don’t know the extent of the estate. This house is part of it. And another fifty houses throughout the village. But I know what you mean, sir. I am a tidy way from the manor. But there’s only one lodge, you see, and the gardener has that. Anyway, I’ve got a car. As a matter of fact I was just leaving to drive up to the manor when you knocked.”

Cord sat down easily on one corner of the desk, and offered Spencer a cigarette. “Have *you* any idea who might be behind this wild talk of witchcraft? I gather Mrs. Esdale isn’t exactly popular with the villagers, but when all’s said and done she’s been married to the Colonel long enough now for them to have accepted her. Has she offended anyone in particular?”

“Not to my knowledge, sir. After all, she’s never come down into the village very often.”

“What about this chap Harper? Apparently the persecution started with him——”

“Oh, Simon was all talk,” Spencer said. “And ‘simple’ though he was, he’d never have done anything as crazy as making wax images and dropping them on Yvonne’s pillow. Anyway, he was dead when that happened. That washes *him* out.”

He hesitated for a moment, then went on: “To tell you the truth, Mr. Cord, I’m rather surprised that you should bother about a silly village scare. It isn’t as though anyone’s been murdered.”

“I’m not so sure. What about Harper?”

Spencer gave a great guffaw of laughter. “Simple Simon? Hang it, sir, you’re not saying his death was any-

thing but accidental? Who'd want to kill Simon?"

Cord said slowly: "But you won't deny that the circumstances of his death were rather odd."

Spencer nodded.

"Odd they may have been, but strange things do happen. Look, you've got to take your choice. If Simple Simon was murdered, then it was either a crime committed at long distance by Mrs. Esdale, employing her 'supernatural' powers, or else it was Joel Watkins who did the old coot in—and just how he did it I can't imagine. There was no evidence of violence upon the body."

Spencer shook his head.

"No, sir. Frankly I can't believe in either theory. Joel Watkins wouldn't harm a fly, and as for Yvonne's much-vaunted supernatural powers——"

"So you think it was accidental death?"

"Of course, sir. What else could it have been? And wasn't that the verdict of the inquest? It all comes back to this, anyway—who *would* want to kill Simon?"

"Possibly the same person who threw a six-inch flint through the library window last night—and hit Colonel Esdale. You didn't know about that?" Cord was watching Spencer closely.

The young man's face showed genuine astonishment. "It's news to me! Was the colonel hurt?"

"Not badly. But it could have been serious."

Geoffrey Spencer grimaced. "My God, this is getting beyond a joke! How far can these stupid villagers go!"

"I don't know yet. Frightened people can be dangerous. But—to get back to Simon Harper—— I understand he was something of a mischief-maker. It could be he said the wrong thing at the wrong time."

Spencer shook his head. "I don't think you'll get very far along those lines, Mr. Cord. I know what you're getting at, right enough. But, let's face it, the one and only person who could really have killed Simple Simon—if he was

killed—is Joel Watkins. Let's forget all airy-fairy talk of the supernatural. If Simon Harper was murdered, Watkins is your man. But is he——?”

Again Spencer shook his head. This time very slowly.

“His character is quite above reproach, Mr. Cord. Simon Harper could have said nothing to hurt him because he could know nothing to hurt him. I tell you, Joel Watkins is about the best-liked, most decent, clean-living man in this village.”

“Still,” Cord said, “I'll have to meet him, of course. I'm here to take a look around.”

“With Joel you're wasting your time.”

“Well, we shall see.” Cord moved towards the door. As he did so, his gaze fell upon something in a glass pen-tray upon the desk: something half-hidden amid a litter of pens and pencils and paper-clips.

Something that stopped him in his track.

It was a small stump of a coloured candle.

A piece of red wax.

* * *

Of course, Cord reflected, it was not unusual to come across an inch or two of candle in an office. Particularly when it lay in close conjunction with a part-used stick of sealing wax, as this piece did.

On the other hand, such candles were rarely an ornamental red. And what else had been fashioned out of wax of a similar colour?

The effigy of Yvonne Esdale.

Was it more than just “a similar” colour? Was it the same colour? The same wax?

Cord thought this wouldn't be very difficult to establish in his laboratory.

“One thing I meant to ask you——” he said, his back to the desk now “——are *you* having any trouble with the

villagers? You yourself? I heard about the colonel's car having its windscreen broken and Mrs. Esdale being stoned by children——”

Geoffrey Spencer smiled a little grimly. “No one's bothering me.”

“Why do you think that is?”

“I know why. Because if they played rough with me I'd play rough right back! And they're well aware of it! The Colonel's soft, you know. Soft and sentimental with them. Even now. But I wouldn't be. I told you, didn't I, that more than fifty houses in this village belong to the estate? I manage them, and there you have your answer. The people who live in those houses can play it as rough as they like with me—but they can't win!”

“I see . . .” Cord nodded. Then he said: “And now would you mind showing me where the village constable lives? I think I'll give him a call while I'm here.”

“Certainly,” said Spencer. He moved towards the door, and Cord followed him. Along the way he deftly removed and pocketed the small stump of red candle.

Geoffrey Spencer pointed across the green. “That's his house. The end one. But I doubt if he'll be able to tell you any more than I have done.”

“Thanks, anyway,” said Cord.

He got into his car and drove around the green towards the policeman's cottage, aware of the fact that Spencer still stood in the doorway behind him, watching him.

He stopped the Jaguar outside the policeman's house and got out. There was nothing about the cottage to distinguish it from its neighbours apart from a weather-beaten noticeboard leaning against the front hedge. He walked up the short front path and knocked on the door. He knocked three times before there was any sign of life or sound of movement from within.

Then heavy steps clumped down the hall, and the door was opened by a portly man in dark blue trousers. His

braces were hooked over his vest.

He eyed Cord suspiciously and when, beyond Cord, he caught sight of the gleaming Jaguar, his suspicion, if anything, seemed to increase.

"Well, and what do *you* want?" he demanded, as though he was besieged day and night by importunate callers."

"My name's Cord," the detective said. "I know your Chief Constable rather well. May I come in?"

The constable's amazement—and discomfiture—was so complete that Cord smiled. The policeman backed away in such haste that he almost fell—the while he waved Cord into the front parlour with one hand and tried to cover his state of dieshabille with the other.

"Yes, sir, I had word that you might be dropping in, like. You'll excuse me, sir, won't you?" he gabbled. "Sort of caught me unawares, you have, sir. 'Fraid I overslept meself—up half the night after poachers. Beggars never give me a minute's peace time there's full moon."

"Don't apologise, constable. I won't keep you more than a few minutes. As a matter of fact I've just come from Colonel Esdale's house——"

Constable Billings interrupted him. "Ah, a stupid business, sir. No matter what folks thinks—though mind you I don't place no credence at all in this jiggery-pokery-witchery rubbish—they ain't got no call to behave like they're doin'. But what can *I* do about it? He won't make an official complaint. And, in any case, you can't knock sense into a mob, however hard you try."

Cord nodded. "There's something else. This man, Simon Harper. I know what the verdict of the inquest was, but are you quite certain in your own mind his death was an accident?"

Was Cord mistaken, or did he glimpse a sudden veiling of the constable's eyes? In the dark little parlour it was difficult to be certain. One thing was sure, however. The

policeman took his time in replying.

"Well, sir, I don't rightly see how it could've bin anything *but* an accident. I mean, 'e was with Joel Watkins, and Joel wouldn't do one no harm. Then there was the state of the ground, like. There hadn't been no struggle around the top of that well, if that's what you're thinkin'. And surely no man—not even Simple Simon—would let himself be pushed down a well without making a fight for it. 'Sides, if Joel had pushed him—which he didn't o' course—the fact would've showed up in his footprints. They'd have been deeper at the toe than they were——"

"I understand all that."

"—Well then, sir—" the constable said, and spread large red hands "—well, I meantersay, there you are—aren't you. It must have been an accident. Anyway, who'd want to harm old Simple Simon?"

"People who make mischief often make enemies."

"Nobody ever took Simon seriously, sir."

"Apparently someone did, or why this persecution of Colonel Esdale and his family? Now they're saying that Mrs. Esdale was responsible for Harper's death."

"Well, whatever they says, I say Simon's death was an accident. I don't know what happened exactly, mind. Nobody does. But I'd say he tripped."

"When he was standing quite still? When there was nothing for him to trip over?"

"Nothing, you say?" the constable laughed shortly. "Our Simon could've tripped over his own shadow standing still or not. No, Mr. Cord, sir, you can take my word for it, Simon Harper's death was an accident, pure and simple. And, if you'll pardon me, sir, I reckon 'simple' was the word for it, and all."

Cord moved towards the door. "Still, I think I'll take a look around there. Somebody may have overlooked something."

At the door he turned. "By the way, constable, have

you such a thing as a red candle?"

"A what, sir?" The man looked surprised. "A red candle, sir? No, sir, 'fraid I haven't. They might have one at the post office, farther along. Old Mrs. Turnbull, that is—keeps groceries and suchlike as well."

"Thanks," said Cord. He nodded and went out. Unlike Spencer, Constable Billings did not stand staring after him. He closed the door rather abruptly and went down the hall much quicker than he had come up. No doubt to put on his shirt.

Cord's next call was at the post-office-cum-general store. Mrs. Turnbull, white-haired, dark-eyed, and curious, spoke to him before he could speak to her. In one quick glance she took in Cord, his clothes, and silver-grey Jaguar.

"You're down from London," she stated rather than asked. "Something to do with the police? I saw you coming out of Billings' house. You won't get much help in *that* direction, if it's help you are after. Billings couldn't find a lost dog if it jumped up and bit him in the seat of his pants! We were better off with the other one—not that he was much good either. Things was always too quiet to suit him. That's why he run off, they reckon."

Cord was suddenly alert. "Who ran off?"

"Why, Constable Frazer, o' course—chap as was here afore Billings. Not that anyone was surprised. He was allus grumbling about nothing ever happening, and wishing he'd joined the Army instead. And his wife was a madam—ooh, a proper nagger she was! Well, one night it seems they had a flaming row and he jumps up and slams out, saying he's had a bellyful of her and the police force and that's the last either of 'em will see of *him*. It was, too. He never came back—not even to pick up his clothes. And she ain't had not even a postcard from him since. Has to go out to work to keep herself and the nipper——"

"How long ago was this?" Cord asked, cutting across the flow of information.

"'Bout six—seven months. Some of your people came down from London, making inquiries like, but it was pretty certain he didn't have no intention of coming back. After a short while they put this chap Billings in his place. Job suits *him* down to the ground. Nothing to do but sit around in his shirt-sleeves all day bending his elbow. He'd be better off if he tried to find out who took my two old cockerels——"

"So they were yours, were they? Are you sure it couldn't have been foxes?"

"If it was foxes, they was two-legged ones. I never heard of any foxes what could unlock a padlocked door."

Cord said suddenly: "What I really called in for was a candle."

"Just one, sir?" Mrs. Turnbull stood on tiptoe to reach for a brown-paper package on a shelf.

"Just one," Cord agreed. "A red one."

Mrs. Turnbull sagged back on her heels. "I don't keep anything like that, sir. I've got tallow and paraffin wax, but——"

"No ornamental candles of any kind?"

"Never have no call for them, sir. Sorry."

Cord thanked her and went out. He would have liked to have asked her a great many more questions, but first he had to digest some of the answers he'd received that morning. The stump of red candle in Spencer's office; the strange circumstances of the death of Simple Simon—which both the village constable and the bailiff seemed anxious to assert had been an accident; the abrupt disappearance of Constable Frazer. Cord had a feeling that there was some definite connection between them.

He got into the car and drove slowly back along the lane. But he didn't return to the manor. Instead, after inquiring the way of another child, he paid a call on Joel Watkins—the man who had witnessed a demonstration of the impossible.

He found the Watkins' farmhouse without much difficulty and turned the Jaguar in the littered yard. A small, plump, apple-cheeked woman in her late forties stood at the open door of the farmhouse as he climbed out of the car.

"Mrs. Watkins——?"

"Yes . . ." Her reply was cautious. She was eyeing the car.

"My name's Cord. I'd like to see your husband, if I may."

She switched her doubtful glance from the car to its owner. "He's in the barn. I'll get him——"

"No need for you to bother. If you'll just tell me the way——"

The small woman said sharply: "You wouldn't be another of them reporters, would you?"

Cord smiled. "No."

"We try to be civil to everybody, but we got proper fed up with reporters driving in and out of here and leaving all the gates open."

Cord, whose knowledge of life in the country was augmented by thoughtfulness for the people who made their living there and a sound common-sense, had not committed the same unpardonable error.

"No, I'm not a reporter," he reiterated, "but I do want to talk to your husband about Simon Harper's death."

A shadow moved behind the small woman's eyes.

"You'll be a policeman, then," she surmised, and cast another quick glance towards the car. Its expensive lines plainly jarred with all she knew about policemen.

"I'm a private detective," Cord said.

"Oh."

"The full name is Steven Cord."

"Oh!"

It was flattering to know, Cord thought, that even here

the full name meant something. It was his further good fortune that it was backed with a solidly-based reputation for honesty, integrity, and success.

It was this which now erased all doubt from the small woman's eyes. Only minutes later it performed the same operation on her husband.

Joel Watkins stood square, and bluff, and heavy-bodied in the barn. His wife brought Cord out to him, made the introduction, and then went away again. The farmer gave a nod to the labourer who'd been working with him, forking hay, and led the way out of the barn, rolling down his shirt-sleeves and slipping on an old tweed jacket. He wiped the sweat out of his eyes. "What do you want to know?"

They stood a little way off from the barn, talking quietly, Cord leading the farmer through all that had happened on that hot, oppressive afternoon a little over a week before when Simon Harper had plunged to his death down the well.

"I don't know how it happened." Joel Watkins was still, plainly, trying to puzzle it out. The fact that he couldn't still worried him. "I never saw anything like it before. Old Simon was going off—as usual—about the colonel's lady, and then it was just as if an invisible hand fastened round his throat and began to choke the life out of him. His own hands came up, like he was trying to fight back, but in an instant it was all over. The well was behind him, and he was thrown backwards—pitched backwards—punched by this invisible thing—that's the way it looked. Then he'd fallen into the well, and that was that. I couldn't get to him in time to save him."

"And you were the only witness?" Cord said. "There was no-one else nearby?"

"Apparently not." The farmer said feelingly "I only wish there had been—to see what I saw. It was a down-right impossible thing to happen, and no-one knows that better than I do. I didn't need the coroner, to tell me so

at the inquest. I knew it right enough. I wish I *could* say that Simon stumbled over something, or tripped and fell, but he didn't." His voice came out doggedly in what was patently an oft-repeated statement. "I can only say what I saw."

He went on, shifting his feet, "Not that anybody really believes me—except the Vicar and my wife, Mary—but there it is. All the rest of the villagers think I must have been suffering from hallucinations that afternoon in the Five-Acre—or happen had a drop too much in *The Bull* at lunch-time. Oh, I know what they're saying. But they're wrong. Accidental death they called it at the inquest, but if that was an ordinary, normal accident then I'm a cock-eyed coot. All the same . . . I suppose I should be grateful . . ."

"What do you mean?" Cord said.

The farmer looked at him.

"You know what I mean, sir, well enough. I was the only one with Simon that afternoon in the Five-Acre. Let's discount all talk of the Devil and demons—though the Vicar assures me they do exist. The Church acknowledges their existence it seems—as real things I mean."

Cord nodded. "I know. But the law doesn't."

"Exactly, sir. And I can't say as how I truly believe in 'em—despite the fact I'm a churchwarden and all—and there you are. If I was the only person with Simon that afternoon, and he died as the result of any foul play, then I'm the obvious culprit, aren't I? It stands to reason."

Cord nodded again. "I'm afraid so."

"So I have got something to be thankful for, haven't I? The police gave me a fair enough going-over as it was before the inquest. But it could've been worse, couldn't it? Particularly as I wouldn't have harmed a hair of Old Simon's head. I think people must fancy I'm as simple as he was, after hearing what I had to say at the inquest, but it was the truth and I'd rather have them think me daft

than accuse me of a murder.”

“I’d agree with you,” Cord said thoughtfully. Then he asked one last, and apparently irrelevant, question. “Were you in the war, Mr. Watkins?”

The farmer looked at him, and frowned. “No, I can’t say as I was. I was busy on my land growing food.”

“And all credit to you. And you weren’t in either war? Neither the Great War nor the last one?”

Joel Watkins grinned.

“I may look pretty ancient—what with losing my youthful figure an’ all—but I’m not really all that old, y’know. I’m fifty-three now. I was eight when the Great War began, and twelve when it ended.”

“Thank you, Mr. Watkins,” said Steven Cord.

* * *

The detective returned to his car, and drove away. But he didn’t drive far. He was looking for the five-acre field Simon Harper had been ploughing on the day that he met his death, and, presently, he found it.

He turned the Jaguar in at the open gate, got out, crossed the field, and began to walk along the edge of Colonel Esdale’s spinney looking for the well. When he came to it, he stood for several long moments studying it and gazing around him.

Then he began to comb through the docks and the stinging nettles. He was plainly hunting for something. At the end of five minutes he had eleven nettle-stings, a shard of broken bottle, and a ball bearing. Frowning, he returned to the well.

Knotted around the base of one of the uprights above the mouth of it was a length of rope. The same rope which had apparently been used by the men who had recovered Simon Harper’s body. Cord peered down the well, but it was too dark inside the shaft for him to see anything—if,

indeed, there was anything there for him to see. He hesitated a moment, and then went back to the Jaguar to get his torch.

Returning to the well once more, he tested the dangling rope, and then swung himself over the low, crumbling, surrounding wall. He went down the rope hand over hand, descending for at least forty feet. Then his feet touched greasy clay and he released the rope and switched on the torch. He stood at the bottom of the well and played the torch-beam over the walls and floor.

Suddenly the light picked up a dull, faint answering gleam. Cord stooped and picked up the small object which had reflected the torch-beam. It was a brass button with a scrap of faded blue cloth attached to it. He was about to let it fall when another thought came into his mind and he did a swift double-take.

It was a uniform button. A police button. It——

There his thoughts jolted to a stand-still. Out of the corner of his eye he had caught the blur of sudden movement. He swung round, his torch-beam slashing the darkness. He followed the light in a wild leap. But he was just a fraction of a second too late.

The rope by which he had descended the well had been jerked viciously upwards by someone on the surface. It was out of reach.

Then the first brick fell.

* * *

It crashed off the walls of the well and hit soft clay with a dull *splat*. Another brick followed it, and then another. There was no mistaking the intent behind them.

Cord, helpless, could only press himself against the wall, one hand raised above his head. A fourth brick sent the torch flying from his hand and he was plunged into abysmal darkness. Another glanced off his shoulder, numb-

ing his arm.

Someone stood at the head of the well, letting the bricks fall one after the other. Cord tried to glimpse the face of his unknown assailant, but he could see nothing save a shadowy half-figure.

And what made the whole thing more deadly was that it was being done in a grim, purposeful silence. Just movement and the reverberating echo of the bricks bounding and cracking from wall to wall. Whether or not Simple Simon Harper's death had been an accident, there was nothing accidental about this. This was attempted murder!

Suddenly the shadowy half-figure vanished from the mouth of the well. There was a minute respite. But only a minute. Above his head—forty feet above, yet as clear as if it had been within a yard of him—Cord heard the sound of something being lifted and dragged. Something heavy. He stared up in an agony of helplessness.

Over the lip of the well appeared a broken baulk of timber—brother to the post round which the rope had been tied. It leaned farther and farther out into the shaft. And then suddenly fell.

As it fell it rang and bounded from side to side, bringing down a shower of dislodged stones and bricks with it. There was no room for Cord to dodge. As he lifted his arms, futilely, to ward off the missiles descending on him, the edge of the post caught him a crashing, crushing blow across the shoulders. He fell headlong. His world dissolved into a giddy whirlpool of pain and kaleidoscopic light.

Then came darkness—the soft, smothering darkness of unconsciousness—to blot out all thought and sensation.

Stones thudded off his inert body.

STEVEN Cord returned to consciousness with the curious impression that someone was calling his name. He shook his head dazedly.

He lay on his face, pinned down by the heavy baulk of timber across his shoulders. Every bone in his body ached. Slowly and painfully he arched his back and felt the heavy post slide away. He sat up dizzily, one hand to his head. His fingers came away wet with blood.

And then the call came again—loudly, urgently.

“Steven! Are you there?”

It was Mike Connor. But he should be in London! Cord scrambled to his feet.

“Here!”

The young man’s head appeared over the rim of the well: a blurred shape against the distant blue of the sky. *“Are you all right? Can you climb out if I throw this rope down?”*

“Try me and see!”

The rope fell, turning and twisting in a spiral. Cord caught it, braced himself against the wall, and began to haul himself upward. Mike threw his weight on the other end of the rope. Within a few minutes Cord, dusty and dishevelled, his clothes torn and one side of his face a wet mask of glistening blood scrambled over the broken brickwork.

“For heaven’s sake, what happened?”

Cord gave him question for question. *“Where on earth did you spring from? I thought you were supposed to be in Town—nice quiet Town!”*

“I’ve got some information for you. About Colonel Esdale. I thought I’d deliver it in person. Lucky I did, if you ask me.”

“Very lucky,” Cord agreed, then added quickly *“But how did you find me? Did you see the character who was dropping bricks on me?”*

Mike stared. *“Dropping bricks on you——?”*

Cord nodded grimly. *“That’s what I said. And a damned heavy baulk of timber as well! So you didn’t see whoever*

it was——? Then how——”

“Did I find you? I saw the Jaguar as I went past on the road. I thought you must be in the spinney——” Mike stopped. He said, “Do you mean to say someone *pushed* you down that well?”

“No, I went down. It was after I got down that things started happening.” Cord told what had happened. When he’d finished, the other exhaled a long, slow breath. “Someone means business!”

“You can say that again!”

Cord went on to tell him of his visit to Geoffrey Spencer’s office and his subsequent conversations with Constable Billings, Mrs. Turnbull, and Joel Watkins. Mike looked more mystified than ever.

“An utterly impossible ‘accident’ . . . witchcraft . . . a missing policeman—it doesn’t make sense. Or does it?”

“I think so . . .” Cord nodded slowly. He said, “I think the witchcraft business started quite fortuitously—the pigs and heifers dying, I mean. But someone, for good reasons of their own, saw a chance to make things unpleasant for the colonel and his family—and promptly began to make the most of it. You know how superstitious some of the villagers are—and superstition can easily be fanned into something approaching mass hysteria. And I don’t think Simon Harper was the real instigator. He merely played along.”

“What’s it all about, anyway? Where’s it leading?”

“Someone——” Cord said thoughtfully “—wants Colonel Esdale and his family out of their house. Who, or why, I don’t know. But I mean to find out.”

Even more thoughtfully, he added: “The man or woman behind all this might not even live in the village. Come to that, they mightn’t even normally live in this country.”

“What gave you that idea?”

“Who—not what,” Cord said. “Edwards, the colonel’s butler gave it to me, all unconsciously. He patrols the

ground with a loaded rifle at night—looking for ‘foreigners’.”

“Uh——?” said Mike dazedly, and Cord explained. He concluded, “When I made that point to the colonel, he lied to me. I know he lied! But why——? And what’s he hiding?”

Mike shook his head, perplexed.

Then he said, “Talking about guns—this is what I came down to tell you about the colonel. Something that happened at the Hunt Ball at Aylesbury last year. Apparently Yvonne Esdale latched on to a young man called Ray Boone at the Ball, and the colonel found them together—in a car in the car-park. There was the father and mother of a row, and the colonel ups with a gun and tries to shoot Boone dead. Luckily he missed—by a narrow margin—but it caused quite a scandal at the time. Apparently there was some talk of making it a police matter—attempted murder—but, somehow, it was all hushed up.”

“So the colonel’s not only an affectionate husband,” Cord mused, “but also a jealous one. I’ll remember that.”

Mike moved abruptly. “Let’s get away from here. The site of that blessed well gives me the creeps. You’re damned lucky to be alive.”

“Luckier than Simon. But then, *he* fell down—or was he pushed?”

Cord also moved. But only to thrust a hand into his pocket. He took out the brass button he had found at the bottom of the well. “What would you say that was?”

“A button, of course. Any idiot—sorry!—anyone can see that!”

“It’s a uniform button—and the fragment of cloth attached to it is from the uniform. It’s a policeman’s button. Remember Constable Frazer? According to Mrs. Turnbull, he just walked out of the house and never came back. True, he’d been threatening to do it for a long time, but it’s usually the people who shout loudest who actually *do* least. And if a policeman decides to run away from his

wife and join the Army he'd hardly put his plan into effect in the middle of the night and still wearing his uniform."

Mike glanced towards the well. You mean—you think——"

"I found this button down there. It mightn't be unreasonable to suppose that it was wrenched off during a struggle. It was lying on the clay floor of the well—where it had fallen, I think."

Mike said uneasily, "You are not going down again? You don't think that this Constable Frazer——"

"Was murdered, and is buried down there?" Cord said. "No."

Mike breathed a sigh of relief. "Well, that's something!"

"I think," Cord said coolly, "he was murdered and is buried up here."

"What——!"

* * *

Cord walked back to the car and unlocked the boot. He took out a spade and came back with it. Mike said, "You're serious——?"

"Of course!"

Cord said, "Simon Harper's death couldn't possibly be accidental. If it wasn't—it was murder. And if somebody killed him, they had to have a reason. I think this is the reason. *This——*" He held the brass button to catch the light. "I think that Harper found it here, and the person who killed Constable Frazer knew he'd found it. I think that they then realized that if Harper was allowed to live—and, perhaps, to show his find—it wouldn't be long before Frazer's body was exhumed. I think that's why Harper himself was killed—to silence him for ever."

"And all this—you've deduced all this—just from one brass button——?"

"A policeman button," Cord said. "With a scrap of

uniform cloth attached to it." He dug the spade into the hard ground beside the top of the well. "Let's see if I'm right, shall we?"

He was.

Five minutes later, it lay there, grinning up at them—the rotten body of Police Constable Frazer. What remained of the helmet was still jammed—incongruously—upon the shattered head. And through the putrefied flesh and yellowed bone of the skull, exactly in the centre of the forehead, was a round bullet-hole.

* * *

As they hurried back to their cars, Cord said "I'll telephone Aylesbury from the Manor. That'll be quicker than going back to Billings in the village. And the sooner we get the C.I.D. on the job the better!"

Mike nodded.

"The future doesn't look too bright for Joel Watkins, does it?" he said.

"Hardly," Cord agreed grimly.

"I think your theory's solid," Mike said. "Harper must have been murdered—and for the reason you deduced. Finding Frazer's body like that proves the theory to the hilt. Joel Watkins is going to have to do some fast talking. After all, he's admitted he was alone with Harper when the oddest of all odd 'accidents' happened."

"Exactly."

"If he doesn't look out, he's going to be charged on two counts of murder, not one," Mike said. "And one of them will be for the murder of a policeman—a capital crime."

"Yes."

"But why should Watkins have wanted to kill Constable Frazer in the first place?" Mike mused. "That's a poser, isn't it? And an even bigger one is how he managed to

kill Simple Simon, without marking him. Of course, we don't believe a word of his story now, but——"

"Oddly enough," Cord said, "I do believe it. Every word of it!"

"Then how——"

"Was Harper killed?" Cord said slowly. "I think I know."

"You *do*——?"

But Cord would say no more. Not then. He got into the car and Mike followed in the car he had driven from London. The cars raced along the winding lanes, and, as Cord swung the wheel hard round to enter the Manor drive he glanced at his wrist-watch.

Less than two hours had elapsed since he'd left the house that morning. Amazing that so much could happen in so short a time.

There was a black car drawn up in front of the Manor,, and the big main door was open.

Cord frowned.

Then, as he braked and swung himself up and out from behind the wheel of the Jaguar he suddenly had a terrible premonition. It set him running towards the house.

But, before he could reach it, Colonel Esdale came out. He stumbled rather than walked. He was a man grown suddenly and terrifyingly old. His face was whiter than the bandage above it.

"It's Yvonne!" he cried brokenly. "She's been murdered! Stabbed!"

ALTHOUGH Cord had been prepared for bad news, the Colonel's words struck him like an actual physical blow. For a moment he was stunned.

"Murdered——!"

With a visible effort, the Colonel recovered himself and stepped to one side for them to enter the house. He

looked at Mike and at Cord's blood-grimed face without seeming to see either. It was plain he didn't really see anything—except the horror in his own mind.

"How did it happen?" Cord asked.

"We don't know. The maid found her—less than an hour ago. She—she likes . . . liked to sleep late, you know. It was taken for granted she was still in her room, but when the maid went into the library to tidy up she found her lying against the fireplace——"

"In the library?" Cord repeated. Was it merely coincidence that Yvonne should have been killed in the same room where the Colonel himself had been hurt the night before? "How long has she been dead?"

"At least six hours, so Doctor Wilson says. She—she's still in her night-clothes. She must have come down to get a book—she was a restless sleeper—and . . ." Colonel Esdale couldn't finish.

At that moment Doctor Wilson emerged from the library. He was a small, bald, sharp-featured man with quick grey eyes which fastened on Cord with professional curiosity as he saw the detective's blood-smearred face and dusty clothes.

"Have you had an accident?"

Cord waved the words away. "A slight one. In the village. I'm all right—but don't you think the Colonel ought to lie down?"

"I was about to take him upstairs." The doctor's voice was testy. "He's had a terrible shock. I think a sedative——"

Colonel Esdale interrupted, protesting, but both Cord and the doctor insisted. They got him up to his room and made him lie down on the bed. Then Wilson, taking a small phial of tablets from his bag, dropped two in a glass of water. The Colonel drank it, and, within a few minutes, was sleeping peacefully.

Cord went into the bathroom, and did a quick repair job on his face. It took him a further five minutes to change

his clothes. He followed the doctor in the library. Mike came in behind them, carefully closing the door.

"A dreadful business!" Wilson grimaced. "Colonel Esdale was devoted to his wife. I can't imagine who could have done such a thing." He gave Cord a quick side-long glance. "You're Steven Cord, the private detective, aren't you? The Colonel asked for you as soon as his wife's body was discovered, but you couldn't be found."

Cord was looking at the body now.

Yvonne Esdale lay on her back against the fireplace, her eyes wide open and staring, a terrible sneering grin twisting her lips. Her arms were flung out, hands tightly clenched, and just below her left breast jutted the carved ivory handle of a knife. From where the blade itself was buried a dark red stain had spread and coagulated.

Cord bent down.

"Nothing has been touched," the doctor said hastily. "She's just as the maid found her."

Cord was looking at the murder-weapon. It wasn't a true knife, or dagger, but an ornamental paperknife which he'd noticed on the library table when he'd been talking to the Colonel the evening before. He nodded towards it, looking at Mike.

"That would seem to suggest the murder wasn't pre-meditated. The knife lived on that table over there. Mrs. Esdale might well have come down for a book during the night, as the Colonel said, and surprised someone. Someone who had no business to be in this room at that time of the night, and who afterwards killed her in a moment of panic."

Mike gave Cord a quick look. "What do you mean, chief, by 'afterwards'? You make it sound as if they had a cosy chat first."

"It could have happened." Cord stood up slowly. He nodded in the direction of the windows. "They were shuttered last night, as you can see, after one of the panes

of glass was broken. You can also see the shutters are still locked in place. And take a look around——

“Nothing’s been disturbed—or, if it was, Mrs. Esdale’s murderer carefully tidied things up before he left—something no ordinary intruder would bother about. And there’s no sign of a struggle. On the contrary, Mrs. Esdale was sufficiently composed to close the book she’d chosen and put it on the mantelpiece——”

He pointed to a French edition of Françoise Sagan’s *A Certain Smile*, which lay neatly between an ormolu clock and a tall gilt candlestick.

“—Also the knife was *thrust* in—not thrown. All of which seems to indicate that she knew the person who killed her, and was standing quite close to him when he stabbed her. Either he took her completely by surprise or, even after she saw him pick up the knife, she couldn’t believe he meant her any harm.”

He turned to the doctor. “I’m staying here, and I didn’t hear any cry or scream in the night—but did anyone else?”

Wilson shook his head. “No-one heard anything. But, of course, there’s nothing strange in that. This is a large house, as you know, and only a small number of the available bedrooms are actually in use. The one above this room is empty. Moreover, Mrs. Esdale was killed around about two o’clock this morning—when most people are sleeping heavily.”

“And where are Harry and Fenella? Are they in the house?”

“No. Fenella went out riding immediately before breakfast, and hasn’t returned yet. Harry went out to a late-night party, and stayed overnight. Neither of them knows yet what has happened.”

“And what about the police? Do they know?”

“I telephoned them myself half an hour ago. I rang through direct to Aylesbury. They should be here soon.”

“Good,” said Cord.

He didn't add that when the police did arrive they'd be faced with not one murder, but two.

* * *

Superintendent Flaxman of the Buckinghamshire County Constabulary arrived within the next thirty minutes accompanied by a sergeant, a photographer, a fingerprint man, and a fresh-faced young constable. The superintendent himself was a big, square, solid and substantial policeman with pale blue eyes and a high, choleric colour which indicated chronic indigestion. He was surrounded by a strong odour of peppermints, which he sucked furiously all the while.

Yvonne Esdale's body was photographed from several angles, and then the murder-knife was wrapped to safeguard any possible fingerprints and was carefully withdrawn. Shutters and doors were also tested for prints, and, with the shutters removed, Flaxman displayed some curiosity over the broken window. Cord told him that a stone had broken it, and left it at that. He didn't mention the threatening message which had been scratched on to the side of the missile, nor did he tell the superintendent about the wax image. That was up to the Colonel.

One by one, the members of the staff were called in and questioned, but none of them could help the police in their enquiries. No-one had heard anything; no-one had seen anything—until Timmins, the parlourmaid, had opened the library door and discovered her mistress dead against the fireplace.

When Cord told Flaxman of the other body which had been discovered that morning, the superintendent turned a hostile blast of peppermint in his direction. "Two murders in the same locality, both discovered this morning, and you slap bang in the middle of both of 'em! It's a lucky thing for you, Mr. Cord, that we know you. Other-

wise you might find yourself being asked some pretty awkward questions! What are you doing down here, anyway? We were dropped a hint by one of your pals at the Yard that you *were* here, but no-one told us why."

"You'd better ask Colonel Esdale," Cord said. "He's my client."

Flaxman grunted and stuffed another peppermint into his mouth. Hurried meals and a wife who couldn't cook had ruined his digestion. When the police ambulance arrived to take away Yvonne's body, Flaxman left the young constable in charge at the Manor with instructions that nobody was to leave. Fenella had not yet returned from riding, but Harry Esdale had been reached by telephone and was already on his way home.

Having left things in order at the Manor, Flaxman and his sergeant, his fingerprint man, and photographer, got into their car and headed for Joel Watkins' Five-Acre. They were followed by the police ambulance and by Cord and Mike in the Jaguar.

Flaxman himself reached the well first. He stood looking down on Constable Frazer's remains, and his expression was sick. Asked how he'd come to find the body, Cord produced the brass button he's picked up at the bottom of the well. He explained what he'd deduced from it, and, without taking his eyes off him, Flaxman grunted to his sergeant "Go get Watkins."

Flaxman asked more questions, which Cord answered, but he didn't volunteer the fact that someone had tried to kill him when he'd been down the well that morning. He had no wish to further confuse the issue. Then, as the sergeant returned with Watkins, Flaxman told them they could go. They passed the farmer as he crossed the Five-Acre. He was looking worried and unhappy. They climbed into their car.

"What do you make of it now?" asked Mike.

"Joel Watkins is going to have a bad time."

"You think he killed Frazer—and Simple Simon Harper——?"

Cord said slowly "If he did, then he must have been involved in Yvonne Esdale's murder, too."

"What does that mean?"

"I think that all the things that have been happening around here are—in some way—linked together."

Cord put the car into gear, and drove.

He said thoughtfully "I don't think whoever killed Yvonne intended to do so. By that I mean that the murder wasn't directly related to the threat embodied in the waxen figure which was left on her pillow. If the person who left the figure there meant to carry out his threat, Yvonne would have been killed in her bedroom, and, as likely as not, she'd have been strangled, not stabbed. No . . . my theory is that Yvonne's murderer was in the library, looking for something, when Yvonne herself surprised him. She immediately associated his presence in the library with everything that's been going on at the Manor, and accused him. He may have tried to bluff his way out, and when he found he couldn't—possibly in the moment Yvonne put down her book and reached for the bellrope beside the fireplace—he lost his head, grabbed up the paperknife and stabbed her."

Mike nodded. "That sound logical. But what do you think the killer was looking for?"

"I think I know," Cord said. They had reached the gates of the Manor. He stopped the car. "These," he said. He took two large envelopes out of the glove compartment in the dashboard. He held them open and Mike peered inside. One contained the small waxen figure, the other the flint which had been hurled through the library window the night before.

Cord said "Take them—but don't touch them. I'm hoping there may be fingerprints on them to help us. I don't doubt that the Colonel and all his family have

handled the figure, but the flint is something different. Only the person who threw it has handled that. I think it might possibly tell us something very interesting. Obviously our two o'clock prowler thought the same. He wasn't to know *I* had them."

He went on "You know something? Everything adds up to this. There's more in this business than just somebody trying to make things uncomfortable for Colonel Esdale and taking advantage of a village scare to do so. I think there's something hidden in that house which someone's determined to recover at all costs. And, in some way, as I've said before, I'm sure is tied up with the killing of Constable Frazer, and Simon Harper, and Yvonne—in spite of the fact that Frazer was killed six months ago, and Yvonne only last night."

"But you still have no idea who the murderer might be?"

"There's only one person I haven't seen during the last few hours," Cord said thoughtfully, "and no one else seems to have noticed his absence."

"And who's that?"

"Edwards."

* * *

As they turned into the drive, Cord said: "You hang on to those two envelopes. Take the figure and the flint back to London and go over them for prints. Let Tucker see photographs of any you find. There's just the faintest chance that our killer might have a record. And analyse this other piece of wax—" he slid a third envelope out of the glove compartment "—this is a piece I found in Spencer's office. I want to know if the image was made from the same stick."

"That'll be easy."

"That isn't all. Get Miss Brown to go through our

clipping file—or do it yourself, it doesn't matter which—and see if you can find any mention of Constable Frazer's disappearance. Also anything on a large-scale robbery which took place around the same time, and where the loot—whatever it was—was never recovered. It could be anything—banknotes, jewellery, or bullion."

Mike looked uncomfortable. "I don't like leaving you on your own down here. Whoever tried to kill you is just as likely to try again."

"Never mind me," Cord said. "Just get me the information!"

In spite of his frequently close association with death in all guises and forms, the brutal murder of Yvonne Esdale had shocked him. There was some dreadful influence at work here in this quiet little village, and it was something far more dangerous than anything contrived by dabblers in Black Magic.

A frightened man had killed Yvonne—but only a desperate man would kill a policeman. What secret had the unfortunate Constable Frazer stumbled on the night he had left home in a fit of temper and walked across the darkening fields? And in what way did his murder, nearly six months before, link up with the impossible "accident" of the death of Simple Simon Harper and the killing of Yvonne?

For the more he thought about it, the more certain he was that the three deaths *were* linked and that behind them was the scheming brain and ruthless hand of someone determined to get what he wanted no matter how long he had to wait or however many lives were sacrificed.

When Mike had left Cord re-entered the house. The colonel was still asleep, but, in the lounge, he found Harry and Fenella. Harry looked pale and shocked. Fenella stalked up and down smoking innumerable cigarettes. It was she who did most of the talking.

"I can't think why anyone in this house should be

handled the figure, but the flint is something different. Only the person who threw it has handled that. I think it might possibly tell us something very interesting. Obviously our two o'clock prowler thought the same. He wasn't to know *I* had them."

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morning?"

"Seems like he wasn't missed until just after you and the super left, though that isn't surprising what with all the hysterics that were going on. Timmins—she's the one who found Mrs. Esdale—has been screaming her head off—off and on like—ever since. Wasn't till the daughter came in—Miss Fenella, isn't it?—that she shut up. And if you ask me, sir, *that* one would shut up a ruddy excavator!"

Cord smiled sympathetically, and went out. He went down to the servants hall where the domestic staff were still huddled together, chattering like scared squirrels. Timmins, having recovered from her hysterics—or, more accurately, having been blasted out of them by the formidable Fenella, was now beginning to realise her importance as a star witness. She was relating, for the tenth time, the story of her discovery of the body and her immediate reactions.

Cord broke across the narrative to address himself to the housekeeper. She was obviously upset, but better able to control herself. In reply to his questions, she told him that she hadn't noticed Edwards' absence until about an hour before. She'd looked in his room, and then hunted him through the house, but without success.

"Could be, of course, that he's just popped down to the village for something," she said. "He'll feel proper bad when he hears about this."

"What terms were he an Mrs. Esdale on? I understand he's been with the colonel for nearly thirteen years. He'll remember the first Mrs. Esdale, of course. What were his reactions to the second?"

The housekeeper looked at Cord wide-eyed. "Lord!—you're not saying that *he* killed her are you? Why, Edwards wouldn't harm a fly! Besides, he liked Mrs. Esdale. We all did. Thoughtful and easy-going, she was, in spite of her Frenchified ways. And she thought the world

of the colonel and her little boy." Her face suddenly crumpled up like a wet cloth. "Poor lamb! How's he going to feel when he finds he won't see his poor pretty mama again?"

Cord went upstairs to the servants' sleeping quarters. He opened several doors before he found Edwards' room. It was not difficult to recognise for Edwards was the only male member of the household staff—apart from the Boots, who slept at home—and his bedroom bore the unmistakable stamp of bachelordom.

His bed had been neatly made, and his clothes—the clothes he wore during his normal duty hours—were gone. None of his other clothes were missing. But there was one thing which was *not* missing which puzzled Cord.

If Edwards had actually left the house—either fleeing in guilty panic from Yvonne Esdale's death, or having slipped down to the village on some innocent errand before the murder had been discovered—why hadn't he taken his teeth?

For his dentures still reposed—incongruously, almost indecently—in the glass of water beside his bed.

* * *

When Superintendent Flaxman returned, some time later, he was accompanied not only by sergeant, fingerprint man and photographer, but also by Constable Billings. That worthy, with the appearance of someone who'd hurriedly washed and dressed and not even had time to shave, looked thoroughly uncomfortable. Two murders, right on his own doorstep, as you might say, and he hadn't even known a thing about either of them until the super had appeared like some misbegotten genie and dragged him away from his elevenses. And, if that wasn't enough, lambasted into him as though he'd personally been responsible for both of the killings!

Flaxman established himself in the library again and questioned Harry and Fenella. But he was as unsuccessful with them as he'd been with the servants. Harry had been away from home; Fenella had seen and heard nothing. She'd gone out riding before anyone else was up, and hadn't known of Yvonne's death until she'd got back. They knew of no reason why anyone should want to kill their step-mother, but there *had* been that unpleasantness in the village . . .

Flaxman listened to the details of this particular unpleasantness with mounting impatience, and, finally, with open disbelief. Witchcraft his foot! He prided himself upon a clear, logical, twentieth-century mind which dealt in facts, not fantasies. Witchcraft hadn't killed Constable Frazer—not unless the witch in question had been toting a gun. Nor had witchcraft killed Yvonne Esdale—that murder had been committed with a paperknife. As for why the constable and the lady of the manor had both come to an untimely end—well—the motive for one of the killings was obvious even if the other wasn't. Mrs. Esdale must have surprised someone who was up to no good in the library. And if it was a fact that Edwards, the butler, had disappeared it might not be necessary to look much further for her murderer.

The colonel made an appearance in the afternoon, still shaken but making a brave effort to disguise the fact. He told Flaxman quite freely why he'd enlisted Cord's help, but although the superintendent's attitude remained respectful throughout it was obvious he placed no credence in the theory than any harm could possibly have been done the colonel and his family by a few hysterical, addlepated villagers. A search was already being instituted for Edwrad, and when he was found it was highly probable that he would provide the answer to this particular murder. Innocent men don't run away.

Cord said: "If, after killing Mrs. Esdale, he was suf-

ficiently composed to go back to his room and made his bed, why did he leave with only the clothes he was wearing—and without his false teeth?”

Flaxman snorted through a miasma of peppermint lozenge. “He probably didn’t go back to his room at all, and if he’d never been to bed he’d have no call to remake it. No, I think he just sat in his room waiting until he fancied the coast was clear to go ahead and pinch whatever he wanted to pinch. No reason at all why he shouldn’t take out his false teeth, either. The damn’ things are never comfortable anyway.”

“Then——?”

“Then he came downstairs—was prowling around the library—and Mrs. Esdale surprised him. He panicked, killed her, and made off. He didn’t take his teeth because he’d left them upstairs, and he wasn’t going back for them. Not after committing murder. All he wanted was to get out—and fast!”

The superintendent made it sound all very reasonable—even elementary.

Later in the day, Flaxman received a phone call from the Ballistic Department to the effect that Constable Frazer had been shot with a .45 calibre automatic, the bullet still being lodged at the base of his skull. The superintendent immediately put into operation a house-to-house inquiry through the village to determine whether anyone owned, or had owned, a weapon of this kind.

“’Fraid I’ll have to check up here, too, sir,” he told Colonel Esdale.

The Colonel waved his hand wearily. “You won’t find any gun of that calibre, Superintendent. The only weapons in the gun-room are rifles and a collection of old swords. And, of course, a shotgun I use to scare away the wood pigeons.”

Cord eyed the colonel as he spoke. Mention of guns had reminded him of what Mike had told him earlier in

the day. The colonel was a jealous man. Was it possible that in a fit of rage, he had killed his own wife? If it was true, as Fenella had hinted, that Yvonne had a lover, it was possible that the colonel had discovered the fact for himself.

And look at what had happened last time . . .

All the same, Cord found it difficult to believe that the colonel would have used a knife. A gun—or his bare hands—possibly. But—no—definitely not a knife. When Colonel Esdale went out of the library into the lounge, Cord followed him.

“I’m sorry to bother you at a time like this, Colonel, but there’s one thing I’ve got to get straight. You were simply afraid of the villagers where your wife was concerned, were you? There was something else. You told Edwards to look out for foreigners and——”

“I’ve already explained that!”

“But not satisfactorily,” Cord said gently. “You really are going to have to tell me, you know..”

The colonel sighed. “Now that she’s dead . . .” He sat down.

He said: “I suppose I might as well tell you the truth. Yvonne’s first husband wasn’t shot by Algerian terrorists. He was shot by—by a man she was very friendly with.”

“A lover?” Cord asked brutally.

Colonel Esdale stirred uneasily in his chair. “The authorities called him that.”

“The eternal triangle, eh?” Cord commented. “Husband, wife, and lover—and the husband ends up dead.”

“But she had no part in it,” the colonel said quickly.

“No——?”

“No. She was acquitted. The man who—who killed her husband was sentenced to death, but it was proved in court that she had no hand in the murder.”

“But although the court believed it, other people did not——” Cord said. “Is that what you’re trying to tell

me?”

“Yes.” The colonel sighed again. “I didn’t know anything at all about this until I’d married her, and then Yvonne told me—told me that this man’s relatives had threatened her. That was why she left Algeria. But they followed her to France—to Cannes——”

“And, ever since,” Cord said, “you’ve been dreading the day they might trace her here——?”

Esdale nodded miserably. “And then when the trouble started in the village, and Yvonne’s life was threatened again—by the wax image—I felt—well—surrounded. I was frightened. I had to have help. That’s why I wrote to Superintendent Tucker.”

“I see . . .”

Then: “Thank you for telling me,” Cord said quietly.

“And now?”

“Now I’ll stay on to find out who did kill your wife, colonel. But I’ll tell you right now that I don’t for one moment believe that it was anyone in any way connected with what happened in Algeria. I believe that your wife’s death, and the death of Simon Harper, *and* the death of Constable Frazer are all links in one particular chain. And when I find the other links, maybe I’ll have the answer.”

The colonel leaned forward, his head buried in his hands. “Whatever you find out now won’t bring her back. Whatever she was, Mr. Cord—and I know better than anyone else *what* she was—I loved her. And if I’d done what I should have done when this . . . this persecution first started and taken her away from here, she’d be alive now.”

There wasn’t anything more Cord could say. He left the colonel sitting hunched forward in his chair and went back to his own room. He couldn’t even feel triumphant in the knowledge that he’d been right: that Yvonne Esdale had had other things to fear than the wrath of the villagers. Whatever she had or had not done, she’d paid for it

now. Paid for it with her life.

His thoughts returned to Edwards. Supposing it *had* been Edwards in the library, would he have waited, fully dressed, in his room until the early hours of the morning before going down to search for the waxen image and the heavy flint? Wouldn't he just have gone to bed in the ordinary way, and then, when he judged the coast was clear, slipped down in a dressing gown and slippers? If he'd then returned to his room after killing Yvonne, after panicking and deciding to run, would he have stopped to make his bed, to put away his dressing gown and slippers, and then left in such haste that he not only forgot his false teeth but his overcoat and a change of clothes?

Cord suddenly got to his feet again, and made his way back to Edwards' room. It was as he'd left it, although there was evidence that someone—presumably Superintendent Flaxman—had subjected it to a quick routine search.

The butler's teeth still reposed in the tumbler of water. Acting on impulse, Cord bent down to examine the surface of the bedside table. A little water had slopped over from the glass which held the teeth, possibly when the superintendent had touched it, and the table itself bore several ringed stains. But they weren't water stains.

One of them was still faintly moist, and when Cord touched it his finger came away sticky. An alert expression entered his eyes. He bent down and sniffed at the table, then touched the mark again, and put his finger to the tip of the tongue.

A faint smile touched his lips.

Edwards might have considered a nightly glass of water sufficient for his teeth, but he'd undoubtedly been in the habit of indulging his palate on a more generous scale. Namely with the colonel's vintage brandy.

A new thought struck him. A possible explanation for the butler's strange disappearance. Supposing he hadn't

left the house after all? Supposing, as soon as he judged the rest of the household safely abed, he'd sneaked down to the cellar to help himself to his nightly tot, to be smuggled back to his room and enjoyed at his leisure?

And supposing he'd met with an accident in the cellar—had fallen down the dark steps, and hurt himself so badly that he couldn't move or make himself heard?

Supposing, hours before Yvonne Esdale had met her death in the library above him, Edwards had met *his* death in the cellar below . . . ?

IN three long strides Cord was out of the room and hurrying down the corridor beyond. He remembered passing what he'd automatically taken for the cellar door on his way to the kitchen. It was a heavy door standing at the end of a small stone-flagged passage, and it wasn't difficult to appreciate that it was thick enough and solid enough to shut off all sounds in the cellar from the rest of the house.

Cord went quickly down the stairs and crossed the hall, meeting nobody. He went towards the rear of the house, and turned into the stone-flagged passage. The cellar door was closed, but not locked, and there was no sign of a key. Either the colonel trusted his staff, or, more likely, Edwards still had the key in his possession.

From the doorway a steep flight of stone stairs led down into the cold darkness below. Cord groped along the wall at the stairhead until he found a light switch. He pressed it, and, instantly, the cellar flooded with light.

To his relief he wasn't faced with the sight of Edwards lying dead in a pool of blood. He went down the stone stairs, calling the man's name in case he was injured and in need of assistance somewhere out of sight. But there was no reply. Standing in the centre of the floor, Cord looked around him.

It was a large cellar, and the light didn't quite reach into its corners. It was lined on three sides by rows of shelves which reached from floor to ceiling and held carefully racked bottles. Along the remaining wall stood a stout platform of six-inch oak, raised two feet above the floor, and side by side on this platform stood several enormous barrels, obviously containing draught beer or cider. Whatever economies the colonel might practise in other directions, Cord thought, it was plain he liked a well-stocked cellar.

There was no sign of Edwards, dead or alive, and Cord was just about to turn away when something caught his attention. He'd already noticed, subconsciously, that the platform supporting the barrels was new and that the floor of the cellar appeared to have been recently concreted. Now he saw that the tap of one of the great barrels was turned on and that the beer was dripping, in long-spaced drops, on to the floor beneath. He reached out automatically to turn the tap off, and then he noticed something else.

A trail of heavy splashes, smudged with dust but still damp, led across the cellar floor from the barrel to a square drainage grating in one corner. Around the grating was a wide rim of wetness, splashed out as though someone had emptied a bucket of water there. Only it hadn't been water; it had been beer. He could smell it.

He stared at the grating reflectively, puzzled without knowing why. The barrel was empty, save for the last seeping drops, and it was logical to suppose that the dregs of the beer in the barrel had been run out into a bucket and emptied away. But . . . when the bucket had been carried from the barrel to the drain it had been so full it had slopped over. And it had been emptied not just once but many times.

Cord walked over to the barrel and tapped it. It echoed hollowly. It had been moved—an inch or so from its present position the oaken platform was heavily scored where

the barrel's full weight had pressed its iron rim into the wood. He swung up on to the platform and examined the top of the barrel. It was immovable.

He searched around the cellar until he found a short steel crowbar lying against an empty packing case, then returned to the platform. He attacked the barrel and, armed with the bar, made short work of prising off the top.

He peered inside.

The great cask was empty, but the wood was still damp to within a foot of the top. Someone had poured away practically a whole barrel of beer, bucket by bucket!

Why?

There seemed to be only one logical answer. They had wanted to move the barrel. In fact, as Cord had already noticed, it had been moved.

He got down.

He secured a grip on the cask, and lowered it to the floor. He had to exert all his strength to stop it crashing down on him. Even empty, the barrel wasn't light or easy to move. He rolled it to one side and stooped to examine the platform beneath.

Now he could see that it had been built in sections, each of which was about four feet long. Each section terminated in countersunk steel plates which linked it to its neighbours on either side. The retaining screws of this particular section had been removed so that it could be lifted up and out.

Cord lifted it.

Below, he could now see the concrete floor all the way back to the cellar wall. He sucked in his breath sharply. Just below the wall was a ragged, jagged hole.

It was half-filled with earth and broken concrete, and beside it lay a small hand-pick. Whatever had been in the hole was now gone, and to remove it someone had laboriously emptied a practically full barrel of beer, lifted down the empty cask, removed the platform beneath, and then

—with heart-breaking as well as back-breaking slowness—chipped through three inches of solid concrete!

Cord gave a long, deep sigh. So his hunch had been right after all! Something *had* been hidden in the house. Something of such value that whoever had hidden it, or had known where it lay, had been prepared to kill not once but three times in order to recover it!

First Constable Frazer had died. Then poor "Simple" Simon Harper. Then Yvonne.

And who else could the killer be but Edwards? Everything pointed to him.

Everything—but one thing.

Why should he have left without his false teeth?

* * *

Cord restored the platform and cask to their original position, although there wasn't any logical reason why he should do so. But somewhere in his mind a nagging, nig-gling doubt still lingered—an impression of a loose end he couldn't quite grasp and tie in with the rest.

He went back up the stone stairs, switching off the cellar lights as he reached the door. He opened it—and came to face with Fenella.

She stared at him in open astonishment. "What on earth have you been doing down there— Did you expect to find the missing butler among the beer bottles?"

"It was an idea. Nobody seemed to have thought of looking for him in the cellar." He added "I noticed the floor's freshly concreted. Any idea of when it was done?"

Fenella laughed. The sound was faintly sardonic. "There are no bodies beneath it, if that's what you are thinking. But if you really want to know, Yvonne had it done about six months ago. She said the cellar was damp."

She moved. "But why this sudden interest in the cellar floor? What possible connection can that have with Ed-

wards killing Yvonne and running away?"

Cord said slowly "I'm not at all sure Edwards did kill your stepmother." And Fenella shrugged her shoulders. "Personally I couldn't care less who killed her. The only thing that puzzles me is why Edwards should have been snooping round in the library. He's been with us long enough to know we don't keep anything of value there."

"He wasn't after money," Cord said. "I think he was trying to recover the waxen image and the stone which was thrown at your father. A little too late he must have woken up to the fact that both of them could be checked for fingerprints."

"I see . . ." Fenella was thoughtful. Then she said "I wonder if he found them."

Cord shook his head abruptly. "No. I had them."

"A pity," Fenella said sardonically. "It will have occurred to you, of course, that if Edwards had been able to find what he was looking for before Yvonne arrived to disturb him my stepmother would still be alive."

With that she turned and walked away, leaving Cord standing there. He thought that Fenella was a very difficult young woman to love.

Young *woman*——? That was another thing. Why did she have such a contempt for her femininity? Why did she drape an excellent figure with such uniformly ugly clothes? Why was her one and only concession to her sex the faintest breath of lavender in the air around her?

He sighed.

He didn't know the answer to any of these questions, and perhaps he shouldn't let them worry him. Maybe he should introduce Fenella to a good psychiatrist and leave it at that. The man would thank him. Sure enough, she'd make an absorbing study.

Shaking his head, he closed the cellar door and went back to the library.

Superintendent Flaxman had gone. A constable still

patrolled the grounds. Edwards' prolonged absence now seemed indisputable evidence of his guilt, and there appeared to be little chance he'd return to the Manor. The test for fingerprints on the handle of the murder-weapon had proved only one thing: there was no prints on it, the handle had been wiped clean.

Dinner was an uncomfortable meal. The Colonel did not appear, and, in spite of Harry Esdale's attempts at conversation, there was a unanimous sense of relief when the meal was over. Cord excused himself and went up to his room where he stayed, deep in an armchair, mulling over all his thoughts and impressions of everything that had happened, until the early dusk set in.

He felt physically as well as mentally tired. The episode at the well had shaken him more than he liked to admit. His arms were stiff and the soreness of his back and shoulders made any kind of movement painful. And his struggle with the heavy barrel in the cellar hadn't helped matters. Bed seemed very desirable.

He yawned, rose, and clicked on the light switch beside the door. To his surprise, nothing happened. Frowning, he crossed the room to test the bedside light, but that wasn't working either. He re-crossed the room again, and this time went out on to the landing. There was nothing wrong with the lights there, so he could only suppose that the fuse in the power line to his room had blown. It was unlikely that both lamp bulbs in his room would become faulty together. An inspection of them by the light of his torch seemed to confirm this.

He sighed.

Still—it hardly seemed worth the trouble to have the fuse attended to at this hour, when all he wanted to do was to sleep. So he undressed by torchlight, donned his pyjamas, and got into bed. He switched off the torch and left it standing upright on the bedside table. He closed his eyes.

He fell asleep almost at once. It was a deep, dreamless sleep of near-exhaustion. Through the darkness, the luminous face of his small travelling clock showed faintly, and the only sounds in the room were the tiny ones made by the clock and the detective's deep and steady breathing.

What woke him two hours later he couldn't have said. Some inner sixth sense which neither slumbered nor slept, perhaps. But, whatever it was, all at once he *was* awake—and instantly alert.

He opened his eyes slowly and carefully but otherwise did not move. Nor did the rhythm of his breathing change. The room was in pitch darkness. He could see nothing, and hear nothing other than the thin high cry of a hunting owl as it scudded over the moonlit land beyond the heavily curtained windows.

But, just the same, he knew something—and knew it with certainty.

There was someone else in the room with him!

* * *

For what seemed like an hour, but what, in reality, could not have been more than three short seconds, nothing happened. Then, stealthily, Cord's hand began to creep through the darkness towards the bedside table and the torch.

In that same short time he knew why the lights in his room weren't working. Someone had deliberately withdrawn the fuse. And that same someone was here now—silent and deadly in the darkened room—waiting to strike. Knowing just where to strike.

Cord touched the torch. In the same instant the unseen killer was upon him! There was a swift intake of breath and a blur of leaping shadow. Cord sensed, rather than saw, the downward lunging arm and flung himself across the bed. Something thudded into the pillow beside

his head. He heard the harsh rip of linen, felt the swift rush of air. He grabbed at the torch—and it swayed and slipped through his fingers.

As it hit the floor, the unseen killer struck again. Cord felt fire flash across his arm, and his pyjama sleeve was pinned to the bed. He wrenched it free and threw himself upon the enemy he couldn't see. His hand closed upon hard flesh, and then the intruder tore loose and darted towards the door. Cord leapt to bar the way, but his foot slipped, and he fell heavily against the bedside table, sending it flying.

In that moment the door was wrenched open.

Cord saw nothing but a blurred shadow against the dark landing, and then the intruder was gone. The door closed sharply. And even as the detective struggled to his feet, groping for his torch, he realised it would be hopeless to attempt pursuit.

There were a dozen places where the would-be killer could hide, and, whoever he was, he was obviously familiar with every detail of the layout of the house. He had not only known which fuse to remove, but also the exact position of his intended victim's bed.

Cord found his torch and pressed the button. Light shaped across the room, illuminating the overturned bedside table, the disordered bed and the rucked carpet. There was a jagged tear in one of the pillows, and some of the feathers spilled out. In spite of himself, Cord suddenly shivered. He'd had some close calls in his time—but this had been of the closest.

He looked at his arm. The sleeve of his pyjama jacket had been sliced through just below the shoulder, and blood oozed from a cut beneath. The wound was deep but not dangerous. Cord attended to it, sitting on the bed and gnawing at his lips. But it wasn't pain from the wound which possessed him to do so.

He was trying to remember something. Some indefin-

able something which—in that brief and vicious encounter—had still managed to impress itself upon his subconscious mind. Something which, if he could remember it, would, he was sure, provide him with a clue to the would-be killer's identity.

Suddenly it came to him. In that moment Cord knew who his murderous assailant was.

And the knowledge left him much more puzzled than before!

WHEN Cord went down to breakfast the following morning he said nothing about what had happened. He had covered up the torn pillow with a fresh pillowcase taken from the linen cupboard in the upper hall, and the thin bandage round his arm was hidden beneath his shirt and jacket.

Harry Esdale was at the breakfast table, but Fenella had gone riding again, apparently having breakfasted on her own at the unearthly hour of six o'clock.

"All she thinks about are horses," Harry grumbled. "Lord knows why. You can't marry a horse."

"Perhaps she doesn't want to marry."

"Don't you believe it. All girls want to get married. Trouble with Fenella is, she doesn't aim high enough. She's a mixed up kid where sex is concerned. I think most men frighten her. The ones that don't—well—they all seem to be rather plebian."

Cord said: "Is there anyone in—er—line at the moment?"

"Not that I know of. If there is she's kept jolly quiet about it. I suppose she takes her repressions out on the horses."

Cord helped himself to marmalade, absently digging out the large chunky bits of rind, which he had a weakness for. "Supposing she married against your father's wishes,

what would happen? Has she any money of her own?"

"Father makes her an allowance. I suppose he'd stop it. Apart from that she's nothing to lose. Neither of us will get a bean until the old man dies. Not from the estate, I mean. It's entailed, of course, but just how much money is involved I don't know. Father's always been rather cagey about family finances."

At that moment, Cord heard a car enter the drive and stop against the front porch. He sat up very straight. He recognised that engine. A moment later the housekeeper came into the breakfast room.

"Excuse me, Mr. Cord, there's someone to see you. Mr. Connor . . ."

Cord excused himself, and got up. Mike was in the hall, looking pleased with himself. Cord drew him into the library and closed the door. "Get anything?" he asked quickly.

Mike took a large envelope from his pocket. "I was at the office till well past midnight," he said. "Tucker's still checking up on those fingerprints. No success there yet, but——"

He up-ended the envelope and shook newspaper cuttings out on the large library table. He picked one up and gave it to Cord. "This one's about Constable Frazer. Gives the date he disappeared. Tenth of October last year. See what it says——?" *... understand Constable Frazer was dissatisfied with the Police Force and had stated on several occasions that he wished he had joined the Regular Army instead. He left home on Thursday evening, after a quarrel with his wife, stating that he did not propose to return. There is no suspicion of foul play . . .*"

Cord took out a small pocked diary and flipped through it. It was one he'd had specially prepared for him, and it contained meteorological reports and records dating back over the past three years. He had found extremely useful on many occasions.

"Thursday, 10th October . . . sharp frost . . . three-quarter moon . . . Hmm." He closed the book and put it away. He began to sort through the other clippings.

"Three large-scale robberies. One—a bank in Golders Green, 1st October, eighty-five thousand pounds in notes stolen. Two—the theft of valuable jewellery and mink furs from a flat in Mayfair on 6th October. Three—a five thousand pounds' pay-roll stolen by masked cosh-and-run bandits on 10th October . . ." Cord raised an eyebrow. "Looks like one or two insurance companies were taking quite a beating round about then!"

Mike agreed, and pointed to the first cutting. "That's the one that's the most interesting. And not only because it involves the most money. One of the raiders got himself killed——"

Cord read the closely-printed type.

£85,000 *BANK ROBBERY—*
BUT ONE RAIDER DIES

Early yesterday morning, thieves broke into the Southern Bank in High Street, Golders Green, and, after blowing open the door of the strong-room escaped with eighty-five thousand pounds in notes.

But, in making their getaway over a wall at the rear of the premises, one of the raiders apparently slipped and fell. He was found dead at the foot of the wall by a passing policeman, the fall having broken his neck.

The policeman immediately sounded the alarm, but there was no sign of the dead man's companion or companions. The dead man has not yet been identified.

In order to reach the strong-room, the thieves scaled a fifteen-foot wall, sawed through iron bars at a window six feet above the ground, and forced a double-locked dividing door. It is estimated that this must have taken at least three hours, during which time the bank's caretaker and his wife remained asleep in their flat above the premises . . .

"There's one couple who'd be looking for another job next day!" Cord said.

Mike grinned.

He said: "The dead man was later identified as a Soho barrow-boy. His name was Slater—Charlie Slater. He had no record, no previous convictions, and apparently, on this job, there was only one other man with him."

"Neither Slater nor this other chap had bothered to wear gloves," Mike said. "Neither of them had a record, you see. So the fingerprint boys were able to size the job up pretty quickly as the work of a twosome."

"And this other fellow——?"

"He got clean away with the money. The police still haven't a clue as to who he was or where he went."

"And none of the stolen notes have been passed?"

"That's the reason why he'll probably never be caught," Mike said. "As long as he doesn't get greedy. Nearly all the stolen notes were old ones. There were only two thousand with new serial numbers. As you know, old notes are untraceable. Our friend, whoever he is, could afford to throw the other kind away."

Curd tugged at his chin thoughtfully. "The dates tie in. Supposing the one who got away was a resident of Little Bede. Supposing he lay low in London for a few days, then came down here with the money. He wouldn't risk keeping it near him—his first instinct would be to hide it until he knew for certain he was safe. And supposing—just supposing—he decided to hide it in that disused well?"

"That's rather a long shot, isn't it?" Mike was dubious.

"The whole thing is rather airy-fairy," Cord told him. "I'm just supposing. But bear with me a while. The well would probably be the safest place in the village to hide anything. It hasn't been used in more than twenty years—"

"Mmm . . ." Mike said thoughtfully.

"All right, then let's take this thing a stage farther.

Our friend has just arrived at the well with his loot when who should he meet but Police Constable Frazer, taking a moonlight walk. Frazer recognised him and challenged him——”

“And our friend shot him?”

“I should imagine they struggled first. That would explain the button torn from Frazer’s uniform. Then the gun went off, and Frazer left dead, and our bandit had to bury him. After that he’d surely change his mind about where he was going to leave the money——”

“So where did he leave it in the end?”

“I’m pretty sure he hid it here. In this house.”

“Then is *was* Edwards.” Mike was puzzled. “But, if that’s the case, why did he wait so long before clearing out with it?”

“Simple,” said Cord. “He hid it in the cellar. He buried it under the cellar floor. And before he’d had a chance to remove it, Yvonne had the floor concreted and some heavy shelving installed. Naturally, she didn’t know any money was buried there. To get it out then meant a major operation—which is why the thief wanted to get the family out of the house.” Cord added: “Of course, all this is the wildest of surmise—nothing more than that. Though it does tie up with what I found—or didn’t find—in the cellar last night.”

He told Mike about the empty barrel and the hole in the cellar floor. Mike grinned.

“So when you arrived down here in answer to the colonel’s clarion call, Edwards got the wind up,” he said. “He figured he’d have to get the loot out right away—and take a chance on being heard doing it. His attempt to frighten the family into leaving had obviously failed. Yes—that makes sense.”

Then he frowned.

“But that leaves us with something I can’t understand at all. Why, having recovered the money, should he waste

time in trying to find that wax image in the library? Why should he care? It could be covered with his fingerprints and it wouldn't matter."

"I think it would," Cord said. "Wouldn't it tie him in with the bank robbery? The police have fingerprints on file for that, remember."

"Of course! Stupid of me! Of course, you're right!"

"All the same," Cord said, "there are one or two things that don't tie up. For instance, it wasn't Edwards who tried to kill me when I was down that well. And it wasn't Edwards who tried to kill me last night."

Mike stared. "Last night——?" he echoed. "Someone tried again last night? Why didn't you tell me——?"

Cord was half-way through rectifying that omission when the telephone rang. As he picked it up, Fenella came round the house on her way back from the stables. She peered in and nodded as she passed the window.

Cord waited a moment to see if she would come into the library, but her footsteps passed the door and went on down the hall.

Miss Brown's voice came over the telephone. She sounded a trifle uncertain. "Can I speak to Mr. Cord, please——"

"Speaking," said Cord.

"Oh—it is you!" Miss Brown's voice exploded in a sudden rush of thankfulness. "After what Mike told us yesterday, I was prepared for anything! You do seem to get into some pretty tight corners——"

Cord grinned. "You can say that again! Now—what about those fingerprints? Anything to report?"

"Yes. It seems there was a big bank robbery in October last year. You remember——? A bank in Gordons Green—eighty-five thousand pounds stolen——?"

"Mike brought the clipping. One of the raiders escaped with the lot. They got his fingerprints but couldn't identify him. Go on. Are you telling me those same prints were

on the wax image I sent you—and on the flint?”

“They weren’t any prints on the flint, and too many on the image——”

Cord frowned. “Well?”

“The same ones which were left in the bank,” Miss Brown said, “were on that piece of red candle you took from Spencer’s office!”

* * *

Cord looked at Mike triumphantly. “Spencer! Now it begins to tie up!”

Suddenly his expression changed. He said quickly: “Okay, I’ll ring you back.” He put the receiver down and waited, apparently listening intently.

“What’s the matter?”

“Someone was listening in on the line. I heard a click as the receiver was lifted. If you listen——”

There came the smallest metallic tinkle from the telephone beneath Cord’s hand. “There,” he said. “She’s put the receiver back now.”

“But who——”

“Fenella. When she passed this door she must have gone straight into the lounge and picked up the extension. She heard the phone ring as she passed the window—remember?”

Mike stared at his partner. Despite their long association he was still never quite prepared for what he would say—or do—next!

“Why on earth should *she* want to listen in?” he asked.

“I was about to tell you when Miss Brown phoned. It was Fenella who came into my room last night and tried to kill me.”

“But you said you couldn’t see who it was—not even when they ran out of the door.”

"I didn't see her." Cord gave a wry smile. "I smelt her. The faintest trace of lavender. It's always there in the air about her. I noticed it the first time I met her, and I noticed it again, last night, in my room. She tried to kill me last night, and, if I'm not very much mistaken, she was the person who killed Yvonne!"

"Good Lord!" Mike pushed his fingers through his rumpled hair. "Then where does Edwards fit into all this?"

"He doesn't. Not as a crook or killer, anyway. I've a strong feeling that Edwards is dead—that he was, in fact, killed either just before or immediately after Yvonne herself was murdered. Somehow, I never could quite fit Edwards into the picture—especially after I knew it was Fenella who'd tried to kill me. I figured that there must be a man in it, somewhere—and Fenella and Edwards didn't seem the right kind of partnership. I know now that it was Spencer who took the money."

"And how does Fenella tie in with him?"

"Possibly she helped him hide it. Adding up the snide remarks Yvonne kept making at dinner the first night I was here, I'd say that Fenella and Spencer are probably lovers. Fenella tried to keep the relationship a secret from her father, because she was afraid of what he might say—or do—if he found out. When I drove down to Spencer's office yesterday, Fenella had already gone riding: in Spencer's direction, I think. I think at the very time I was interviewing him, she was probably there in the house. When I left, she followed me, on horseback. When I reached the well, she wasn't far away. When I went down it, she made the most of her opportunities."

"So you think she's tried to kill you twice!"

Cord nodded grimly. "I think so. I never did suspect Joel Watkins of trying to kill me down the well. He's far too straight a character. Too honest. And there's something else about him which I'll tell you later. As for Spencer

being the one who dropped rocks on me—well—I knew he couldn't have got there on foot in the time, and if he'd driven up I'd have heard, or you'd have seen, the car."

Mike was nodding. He said: "And what happens now? You're not letting her get away with it? Ten to one she's on her way to warn Spencer now. Let's grab her before she leaves the house!"

"Why?" asked Cord calmly. "We can't prove a case against her, you know. Not the kind of proof that would stand up in a court of law. Spencer himself—all right—so we can certainly get him for the bank robbery. But I think the only way we're going to get him for anything more serious than that—and get Fenella, too—is to give them both a little more rope. That way we'll recover the money as well. So—let's give Fenella a chance to get to Spencer and warn him like you said. Any minute now we'll see her going down the drive."

"But she must know you'll try to stop them if they make a break for it! She'll expect you to follow her!"

"Why should she? You forget—Fenella doesn't know I know it was she who tried to kill me. No, let them both get clear, with the money, then we're beginning to get the evidence we need."

"But how are we going to stop them then? We don't even know where they'll make for!"

"We'll call in Tucker. We'll hang everything on the bank robbery. That was committed in the Metropolitan Police area, and gives Tucker a right to act. He can get local co-operation and have road-blocks on every road in next to no time at all. Within fifteen minutes of them leaving the village every police car in the country will be looking for them."

Mike glanced out of the window. "She's a long time getting started," he grumbled. "What's to stop her telephoning him, giving him the tip-off, and arranging to meet him somewhere? Or don't you think she'll risk letting him

and the eighty-five thousand out of her sight?"

"She hasn't rung him yet," Cord said reasonably. "We would have heard a slight tinkle from this bell if she had. Anyway, I've a feeling they'll go together."

They waited—and waited—each minute seeming like an hour. Suddenly Cord, with an impatient grunt, moved towards the door. As he opened it he bumped into the housekeeper who was coming along the hall. He said: "Can you tell me where Miss Fenella is? Is she in her room?"

"Bless you, sir—she left nigh on fifteen minutes ago."

"Left!" Cord echoed. "But we've been here—in the library. We haven't seen her car go down the drive."

"She went the back way. They do, sometimes, though not often because it means getting out to unfasten the gate. But it does cut off a bit of time if you're in a hurry."

"She added, on a note of inquiry: "If you're wanting her for anything in particular, I don't doubt she'll be back shortly. She took the boy with her."

"The boy?"

"Yes—Pierre. I must say I was rather surprised. She's never shown much interest in him before—and him being her stepbrother and all. But I suppose she felt sorry for the poor little motherless lamb——"

Cord looked dismayed.

"My God!" he said. "They've got the child!"

CORD went past the startled housekeeper at a run. Mike followed; together they raced across the yard to the garage. The chauffeur, hatless and in his shirt-sleeves, jerked upright in astonishment at their sudden appearance.

"Quick!" Cord rapped out. "Which car did she take?"

"Miss Fenella——? Why, her own, of course——"

"Which one, man!"

"The Ford Zephyr. Is anything——"

“That’s the blue one, isn’t it? What’s its number?”

“JMB 900——” Bunce, the chauffeur, looked slightly dazed. “Is anything wrong?”

Cord wrenched open the door of the Jaguar and swung his lean length behind the wheel. Mike scrambled in beside him. The engine roared; wheels spun. The big car leapt forward, leaving Bunce open-mouthed in the doorway.

The Jaguar hurtled down the rear drive. Thirty-five seconds saw it bearing down upon the gate. It was open, and the car short through. In another minute it was skirting the woods which bordered the Colonel’s estate. Half a mile further, and it was on the village road and racing like the wind for Little Bede.

It screeched to a halt, spraying gravel, before the estate office. Then Cord was out of it. The gate to the yard at the rear of the office was open, and he darted across to it, Mike following closely. As they reached the back of the house they saw Spencer’s car standing there—a black runabout.

A glance showed them it was empty. Cord leapt up the steps from the yard and kicked open the back door of the house. His mind was wholly occupied with Pierre—a five-year-old child in the hands of two desperate criminals, one of whom had killed his mother.

But they had already gone—as he had known they would. Hadn’t it been his idea to let them go?

The kitchen was empty, and the living-room beyond. On the table, however, was a sheet of paper, weighted down with an old bill-file. Cord picked it up. A hurried message was scrawled upon it.

It said simply—and terribly—

**DON'T TRY TO STOP US—OR
WE'LL KILL THE BOY!**

* * *

Mike dragged in his breath as he read the note over

Cord's shoulder. "What now? If we set the police on them, they'll kill Pierre. If we don't, they'll get clear away."

It was a problem which had to be solved instantly. Cord solved it. He swung round, barged into the estate office, and grabbed the phone. "County Police Headquarters, Aylesbury" — he shot at the operator — "and hurry! This is emergency!" His eyes were harder than Mike remembered having seen them in a long, long time. His mouth was set like a steel trap. "County Police Headquarters——? Superintendent Flaxman, please, as fast as you can! My name's Cord."

A long second passed. Then Flaxman answered. Cord spoke quickly. "I can't give you the chapter and verse of it, Flaxman, there isn't time. You've got to trust me. I want a watch out on all the roads for a blue Ford Zephyr, registration number JMB 900. The car's carrying a man, a woman, and a small boy. Don't stop the car—or you'll endanger the life of the child! Get that? *On no account* stop the car! I'm going after it, but I'll need you to keep me informed of its route. I'll keep in touch. The car left here—Little Bede—approximately fifteen minutes ago, and I think it's heading either for London or the coast."

Then the phone went back on its rest, and Cord and Mike were moving again, back through the living-room and the kitchen and out into the yard. As they passed the black runabout, Mike suddenly stopped. Long training had conditioned his mind to fasten on details, relevant or irrelevant. Now he saw a small heap of mixed ashes and cinders scattered beneath the boot of the black car.

"That's a queer place to throw ashes," he muttered. "Why not the dustbin?"

"Come on!" Cord had reached the Jaguar.

"No—wait! Wait!"

Mike had seen something else now, and his heart turned over. Blood dripping out from under the boot. He wrenched at the handle. "Quick! *There's someone in*

there——!”

And there was.

But it wasn't Pierre—as they both had feared.

Inside the boot, crammed and curled up in the small space, was Edwards—the missing butler!

* * *

“He's still bleeding!”

And so he was. Slowly, and sluggishly the blood oozed out through a blood soaked towel round his head.

“But he's dead!” Cord rasped. And then—— “My God——!”

He had drawn the towel away to disclose a deep and ugly wound which furrowed Edwards' scalp.

Cord's voice broke in horror and loathing and disgust.

“My God! Do you realise what must have happened? Edwards hasn't been dead very long. He must have surprised Fenella and Spencer lifting their loot in the cellar when he crept down for his nightly tittle. So Spencer shot him— but he didn't kill him outright. He just knocked him unconscious—and he bled to death. Bled to death! Here—crammed into this boot! They must have known he was still alive, but they let him bleed to death! What kind of monsters are they?”

Mike's face was pale. “Three murders in six months!” His voice reflected incredulity as well as horror.

“Four, counting Simon Harper,” Cord said sharply, “and I'm sure one or the other of them killed him too.”

He swung round, slamming the boot shut again. “Come on—there's nothing we can do for Edwards now, and they've got Pierre, remember! Four murders already—we've got to stop them making the number five!”

* * *

“We'll take the main road. It's my hunch they'll head south-east, by-pass London, and cut through to the coast

somewhere.”

Cord's finger came down almost viciously upon the self-starter. The Jaguar shot forward into the road, skidding as Cord pulled it round, then roared rapidly through the village.

As they went past the war memorial, the thought flickered through Cord's mind that, in spite of all that had happened in the past two days, nothing in the village itself had changed. Little Bede looked as it had always looked—sleepy and peaceful and as far removed from murder as the Elysian Fields . . .

Running into High Wycombe, Cord brought the car to an abrupt halt before a telephone kiosk. He jumped from the car, jerked open the door of the booth, and made a rapid call. He was back behind the wheel again in under three minutes. He told Mike: “They've just gone through Harrow. That means they're fifteen miles ahead of us. The Yard's taken over the job of keeping tabs on their position. Let's go!”

The Jaguar's speed rocketed up to fifty miles an hour in under a hundred yards.

“I think they're making for the North Circular Road,” Cord said tersely. “Once on that, they can by-pass most of London's heavier traffic and get out to the Essex coast. That's the way I think they're going. Maybe we can head them off!”

The car streaked through Pinner, travelling well over the speed limit. At Harrow, Cord again contacted the police. “A couple of miles ahead,” he told Mike, “we'll have company. Tucker's laid on a plain car with two-way radio. All we have to do is keep on its tail!”

“Good old Tucker!”

They met the plain car at the appointed rendezvous.

* * *

Thirty minutes later, as the Jaguar charged over the

Middlesex boarder into Essex, Mike said: "Well, they are making for the coast. You were right. But if you are not going to have them stopped before they get there, what *are* you going to do? If we catch up with them, they'll kill the boy."

"They must have been watching for police traps all the way," Cord told him. "And they must be congratulating themselves now. They haven't been stopped, and they don't know we are behind them. They must think I've done as they said, and called off the chase. They won't take the boy any farther than they have to. As soon as they feel safely near their destination, they'll dump him. And once we've picked him up, and know he is safe, I shan't have any scruples about using this——" He tapped his coat pocket, which showed the outline of his Luger.

"Spencer's probably armed, too," said Mike. "Do you think he shot Edwards with the same gun he used on Frazer? If he did, he's cooked—and Fenella along with him!"

"It can't be too soon," Cord retorted grimly.

The car roared on.

And then, suddenly, the plain car ahead began to slow. It braked. A C.I.D. man jumped out into the road, and flagged the Jaguar down.

"Now what's happened?" Mike wanted to know.

They had their answer.

"They've left the main road somewhere," the C.I.D. man said. "I just got it over the radio from Control. At this moment we don't know where they are!"

His mouth twisted bitterly.

"We've lost 'em!"

* * *

Cord jerked open the glove compartment in the dashboard; grabbed at a road-map. His finger stabbed along

the Essex coastline.

“Harwich—Clacton—Southend: and a dozen other smaller places in between! We’ve got to take a chance on one of them!”

“How about Southend?” Mike suggested. “They could catch a flight on the Channel Air-Bridge from there. Twenty minutes and they’d be in France—car and all.”

“It’s a possibility,” Cord agreed frowning, “but I fancy, only a remote one.”

From the open window of the car, the C.I.D. man who had flagged them down put in: “This time of year flights on that Air Bridge are always booked pretty solidly in advance. They might have to wait two or three hours before they actually got space on the aircraft. Would they be prepared to wait that long, d’you think, sir?” He was asking Cord. “You know them, I don’t.”

Cord said: “I think they are jumpy. I don’t think they would wait for that long. Besides—and this, I think, is the most important point of all—if they try to leave the country on any regular route they’ll have to pass through Customs. How can they—when they’re carrying eighty-five thousand pounds in notes with them?”

The C.I.D. man whistled. “I knew nothing about that. Of course, they wouldn’t get through, sir. Not with that lot. So——?”

“So,” Cord said, “they’re going to try to get out by motor-launch. It’s the only way for them. They’ll charter a craft and no questions asked.”

“But where from?” Mike asked.

Cord looked at the road-map again. “They have left the main road. That cuts out Southend, I think. Harwich or Clacton it is.”

“What about the other places—the smaller places—?” Mike ran his hands through his hair again, giving it the appearance of an electrified hay-stack.

“Not so much chance of picking up a fast motor-launch

that can stay the distance," Cord said briefly. He looked at the C.I.D. man. "You take Harwich. It's farther away, but you are in radio contact with the Yard, we're not. We'll take Clacton. Right——?"

"Right you are, sir!"

The C.I.D. man swung away, and Cord crumpled up the map and stuffed it back into the glove compartment in the dashboard. "Now let's get moving!" he said. And move they did.

Just forty minutes later—averaging something better than a mile a minute—they streaked into the outskirts of Clacton.

"Now for it!" said Cord.

The first and second boathouses were closed. The third could tell them nothing. No launches had been hired out; no private launches had been seen going out. "Sea's pretty choppy today," the boatman pointed out, "that's why some of the chaps closed up."

They drove along the coast, and with every negative reply they received Cord felt his heart sink further. Supposing he'd been entirely wrong in all his deductions? Supposing Spencer and Fenella hadn't headed for the coast at all? They might well be planning to lie low somewhere in the country for a few days while they made cast-iron, water-tight arrangements to get out. That, everything considered, would be their best course. With eighty-five thousand pounds in notes at their disposal, they could arrange anything—given time. They might never be caught. They——

"Let's try here," Cord said.

They left the car and walked down to the boathouse. A man in a peaked cap and dirty blue reefer coat was sitting at the far end of the mooring stage, and there were three boats—one of them a launch—bobbing at anchor.

When the man saw them coming, he looked up with an expression of mild surprise. "Well, well! Business is

boomin'. You after a boat, too?"

Cord said quickly: "You've already hired out a boat today? How long ago? Who took it? A young couple with a small boy?"

The boatman fumbled in his pockets and took out a charred-looking pipe and a tin of tobacco. He stuffed some of the tobacco into the bowl of the pipe, tamping it down with maddening deliberation. "Now—if it ain't too personal a question, mister—what's it got to do with you? Ain't no law agin hirin' out boats, is there? I got me licence——"

Cord said: "I'm a detective." His voice was suddenly rough. "I'm after a young man and a young woman who may have a little boy with them." He gave the description. "We've reason to believe that they're trying to sneak across the Channel. Now—did they, or did they not, take one of your boats?"

With each word of Cord's description of the fugitives the boatman's face had become more and more alarmed. Now he put pipe and tobacco away—rapidly. He said defensively: "I don't want no trouble with the police, or nothin'. I didn't know you boys was after them, did I? Though, I must say, now as you mention is, they was actin' a bit peculiar. They was very anxious to get a boat. Never made a fuss about signin' the insurance forms or nothin'—not counting what they gave me as a deposit——Look!"

He pushed his hand into a capacious pocket and withdrew a wad of crumpled notes.

"Enough to pay for the ruddy boat twice over!"

"How long have they been gone?" Cord demanded.

"Ah—close on half an hour, maybe. Maybe longer. If you was thinkin' of catchin' up with them, mister——"

"Did they have a little boy with them?" Cord interrupted.

"None that I seed."

Cord and Mike exchanged glances. "Either they dumped him somewhere en route—could be any place after they turned off the Southend road—or he's still in the car." He swung round on the boatman again. "Did they have a car?"

"Nope. They just came hurryin' along that stage." The boatman added, a trifle uneasily: "What are you after 'em for—kidnappin' or something?"

"Murder."

The man drew in a sharp breath.

"'Ere—you won't get me mixed up in this—assessor after the facts or whatever you calls it? Blow me down, guv, how was I to know?"

"You must have wondered why the devil they were so anxious to get a boat that they paid you more than what it was worth!"

An expression of mingled complacency and anxiety crossed the man's thick featured, weather-beaten face. "Tell you the truth, I did 'ave a sort of notion that they wasn't plannin' to bring the boat back. That's the reason I give them ol' Betsy. Her engine's due for renewal. It won't last the season out, and that's for sure. And treated rough, she's liable to cut out on 'em. Not permanent," he added hurriedly, "not so's they'd be stranded like. But she'll need a lot of coaxin'."

Mike said, on a note of relief: "Then they mightn't be so far ahead, after all, chief——"

"The sea's a big place," Cord reminded him. "We could run the whole Channel without finding them."

"Then they've beaten us?"

Cord turned away abruptly. "Not yet they haven't!" he said.

* * *

There was a phone in the boathouse. Cord used it. A quick call to Tucker at the Yard switched the hunt from a

fugitive, fleeing blue Ford Zephyr to an abandoned one.

"And let's hope Pierre's inside it —alive!" Cord said grimly.

With Mike at his heels he returned to the Jaguar.

"Tucker's going to alert Interpol," he said. "They'll be watching all the French ports."

"And what do we do? Let Interpol pick them up—if they can find them?"

Cord said: "I'd like to see this thing through myself. I have a personal score to settle with that young woman." He moved his shoulders and sore arm reminiscently. "Also I don't like matricides—even step-matricides—nor people who leave wounded men to bleed to death."

The car gathered speed along the road to Colchester.

Mike looked at Cord with a hint of exasperated affection in his eyes. "You haven't told me yet where we're going," he said. "I'm in this, too, don't forget. I'd like to see it through as well."

WITHIN seven minutes of Cord's entering the office of the Group-Captain commanding 102 Wing Air Sea Rescue, he and Mike were walking across the tarmac towards a helicopter. Beside them strode the pilot, a baby-faced youngster with a string of freckles across his nose and a tuft of ginger hair escaping from under his helmet.

Cord glanced at him a little dubiously. "I ought to warn you, this couple is dangerous, and the man's likely to be armed. You're risking the chance of a bullet."

The pilot grinned. "I was in the Korean War—and those Mig fighters were good. They carry more than one gun in their armament. Don't worry, sir, I don't scare easily."

Cord didn't say any more. This was one time, he felt, when he had misjudged his man. They climbed into the cabin, Mike in the centre, and the pilot—after quick

juggling with the controls—set the engine throbbing and the great blades whirring overhead. Instantly the helicopter lifted itself up into space, hovering like a giant dragonfly for a minute before it swooped seaward.

Mike gazed down. They swung out over the sea, and, in a few minutes, the coastline had dwindled into the distance. There was now nothing above or beneath them but a vast expanse of blue. Cord's gaze raked across the water, noting the choppy rise and fall of the waves, and the snatches of white foam. The helicopter swung back and forth in great spiralling circles, but there was no sign of the launch.

"If the engine didn't fold up they're probably in Dunkirk or Ostend by now," Mike said despondently.

On and on, round and round, with the great blades whirring and whistling overhead. Five minutes . . . ten . . . fifteen . . . and even Cord's optimism began to fail him.

Then, all at once, appearing suddenly out of a deep trough of the sea, they saw the launch. It was stationary.

Mike had field-glasses up to his eyes. "There they are!"

The pilot looked at Cord. "What do you want me to do now, sir?"

"Lower the ladder. I'm going to try to board her."

The pilot was already setting the winch in motion which sent the rope ladder spiralling down. It looked flimsy and inadequate against the surging power of the sea below. Cord unstrapped himself, and swung out of the cabin and down over the first rungs.

"If you are going, I'm coming too!" yelled Mike.

Cord waved him back. "You stay there. Someone's got to be around to explain things to Tucker if anything goes wrong!"

It was a queer sensation, swinging out in space with nothing solid and substantial above or below. But Cord felt quite detached from fear. His thoughts were concen-

trated on the couple in the boat below. Killers—both of them! He could see them quite plainly now, their faces upturned towards him. Then Spencer dived down into the cabin. To tackle the engine again—or to get his gun——?

Suddenly, with a violent lurch, the launch shot forward again. The helicopter swung to follow it with such swiftness that Cord almost lost his hold on the ladder. As it followed, the aircraft lost height, so that every passing second brought Cord nearer to the launch. His feet were now on the bottom rung of the ladder. His arm was hooked around the side. His free hand was in his pocket, gripping the butt of his gun.

Geoffrey Spencer's voice screamed up at him. "Go back! Back—or I'll shoot!"

His arm came up, rigid and level, and it ended in a gun. A shot smashed past Cord's head. A second spanged against a rung of the ladder before whining away into space. Cord jerked out his gun and fired, but the rise and fall of the launch made accurate aim impossible.

His shot ripped into the side of the launch. In the same instant, Spencer fired again. This time, Cord felt the bullet tug his trouser-leg. In the same moment, Fenella swooped forward and grabbed up the boat-hook.

It was a vicious weapon. At such close quarters, it was an extremely dangerous one. She swung with it—lunging. And Cord dropped.

He jumped for the boat. He flew through the air like a trapeze artist. And he knew that a violent death awaited him if he bungled this last trick.

A fourth shot tore past him. The great iron hook in Fenella's hands missed his body by a fraction of an inch. And then Cord was down, cat-like, on all fours, almost overbalanced by the sway of the launch. As he landed, Spencer leapt at him. Fenella swung the boat-hook again, but in the limited space available to her now she was handicapped. Spencer flung back over his shoulder: "Steer,

damn you! Steer! I'll take care of him!"

The two men closed. Spencer still gripped his gun, but with Cord's iron hand locked around his wrist he couldn't use it. The launch rocked with the violence of their conflict. Above them, the helicopter hovered. Then Spencer slipped and went down, pulling Cord on top of him, and they rolled over and over again across the wet planking. Although slight, Spencer was surprisingly strong, and made desperate by fear.

Suddenly the gun slipped from his grasp and skittered across the deck. Fenella dived for it—but she daren't use it for fear of hitting the wrong man.

Cord lurched to his feet, dragging Spencer up with him. In the rocking, swaying boat, it was almost as much as they could do to retain their balance. Spencer lashed out wildly, his knuckles scoring the side of Cord's head. The detective struck back: a savage, explosive punch which had Spencer reeling.

Both men were off balance. The boat heaved beneath them. Spencer staggered back—back—fighting for control over legs turned to rubber. He cannoned into Fenella, and brought her down. Cord grabbed for a stanchion to steady himself—and missed. In the next instant, a wave struck the launch broadside on—and all three of them were pitched into the water.

As Cord surfaced, spluttering, he saw Spencer struggling wildly a few feet away. The man's face was white with terror. "Help me! I can't swim!" he cried.

Cord grabbed him by the shoulder, but Spencer locked in a grip of mad fear, struggled frantically, trying to wind his arms and legs around the detective's body. "*Help me! Help me!*" He threshed and floundered. He had the strength and tenacity of an octopus. He fastened on to Cord and clung and jerked, threatening to drag the detective down with him. In desperation Cord wrenched one hand free, balled it, and clubbed him with it. Spencer gave a gasp, and

went limp.

Cord turned him on to his back, thrust an arm around his neck, and swam with him towards the launch. Suddenly he heard a shout and a splash. Mike was beside him, helping him. Cord spat out seawater and gasped: "Fenella! Where is she? Have you seen her?"

He relinquished his hold upon Spencer, and dived beneath the boat. He searched through the murky depths. He dived twice before he found her. She danced a ghostly minuet with herself far below the waves. Her limbs were limp on the water, carried whichever way the sea willed. Her mouth was square in the scream unconsciousness had choked off before it was born. The side of her head was bloody where she had struck it on the gunwale of the launch as she was thrown into the water.

Cord brought her back to the surface, and, with Mike's help, got her into the boat again. For a long time he worked on her—sweating over her—trying to pump the sea out of her water-logged lungs and make them work again.

But it was useless.

The blow on the side of the head had rendered her insensible, and she had drowned. She was dead, and nothing that Cord could do would bring her back to life.

Overhead, the helicopter hovered.

Slowly, Cord straightened up. At his feet, Geoffrey Spencer moaned softly, and stirred. Mike held up a bulging, sea-soaked canvas hold-all.

There were wads of bank-notes inside it.

It was money which, beginning with Charlie Slater and ending with Fenella Esdale, had already cost the lives of six people.

IN the bare-walled, echoing Charge Room of Aylesbury Central Police Station, five men bleakly regarded a sixth.

Superintendents Flaxman and Tucker were there with Cord and Mike. A police shorthand-writer prepared to take notes. The sixth man was Geoffrey Spencer, now apparently recovered from his abject, floundering terror in the waters of the English Channel. Recovered and, after humanely being given dry clothes and hot food and drink by the police, even arrogant in his confidence. "You won't convict me!"

The others eyed him grimly.

"You can't prove that I killed anyone," Spencer went on, almost jauntily. "And, in this country, you have to prove it, you know. All I did was to help steal the money."

Flaxman, the odour of peppermint stronger than ever as it sought to cope with his outraged gastric juices, growled deep in his throat. "Come off it, Spencer! We've got you taped! We're wise to you. You might just as well confess."

"Oh, no." Spencer grinned. It was not a nice grin. "I'm confessing to nothing except my part in the theft of the eighty-five thousand."

"But we've got you cold, Spancer!" Flaxman persisted. "So why not make things easy for yourself, eh? Constable Frazer and Edwards, the butler, were both killed by bullets fired from the same gun, and Edwards' body was found in the boot of your car——"

"But you still can't prove that *I* killed either of them." Spencer's grin broadened. "In fact—I'll tell you now—Fenella did it. And the gun that killed them both—that gun there—was hers. That can be checked."

It already had been checked, and it was true.

"You'll even find it recorded that she bought the bullets for it—not me," Spencer continued. "I tell you, I didn't kill anybody. It was Fenella. She killed Yvonne Esdale, too."

"How very convenient for you that Fenella Esdale drowned," Tucker said.

"What——? You think I'm making it up? Superin-

tendent, how *could* you think such a thing! I'm telling you the truth." Spencer added with a look of sickening piety—"I did my best to stop her, but I couldn't. She even threatened me. I was afraid of her. I think she must have been mad. All I did to help her was done under duress."

"A likely story!" Flaxman snorted.

"But just you try to prove different," Spencer said softly. "You're not going to find it easy. I'll admit to my part in the robbery, and that's all I will admit to. As for the rest—it was all Fenella's doing. That's my story, and I'm sticking to it."

"Suppose——" Cord put in quietly "——you tell us your story—right from the beginning."

"So that you could try to trip me up, eh?" Spencer said jeeringly. "You'd be lucky!"

"If you think so," Cord returned equably, "what are you afraid of?"

"Who says I'm afraid?"

"Go ahead, then," Cord invited.

"All right—if you want to play the Great Detective," Spencer sneered. And began.

The story he told sounded convincing enough—and could even have been made to convince a jury, Cord realised that. Spencer confessed to everything except murder. While living in London, prior to his father's death, he had met Charlie Slater, small-time crook and barrow-boy, and, after returning to Little Bede as Colonel Esdale's new Bailiff, he had kept in touch with him. It was Charlie who had produced the plan for the bank robbery.

"I thought it was easy money," Spencer said. "Charlie'd got everything worked out—right down to the last detail. He provided the gelignite, too. And it all worked like a charm. Too bad Charlie had to go and fall off that wall and break his neck on the way out——"

Spencer dismissed the incident with a careless shrug, as if it might have happened to anybody. "And then——?"

Cord prompted.

"Then I brought the loot back to Little Bede. Obvious, isn't it?"

Equally obvious to Spencer himself had been the fact that he'd be wise to hide the stolen money for a while. There was always a chance that the police might be able to trace a connection between himself and Charlie Slater. He didn't think it was likely, but it was possible, and so the loot had to be hidden. He couldn't hide it in his own cottage, for if the police did trace him the cottage would be the first place they'd search. So what to do with it——?

Then he'd thought of the old well.

It was just bad luck, he suggested, that, prior to this, Fenella Esdale should have interested herself in him, and thrown herself at him.

"She was easy!" he said contemptuously. "I don't know what was the matter with her—maybe she was love-starved or something. There was *something* the matter with her, sure enough. She did whatever I wanted her to do. I got very tired of her very quickly.

"The first time she showed any fondness for me was an event. After all, I hadn't had anything to do with her in years, and even then—when we were children—she'd never been particularly friendly. Harry was. But Fenella was always very much the Squire's daughter—*Miss Fenella*. Serfs had to keep the distance. So . . . the first time was something.

"But the next time we met, she was just a bore," he went on. "And one night when we met in the spinney I told her we were finished. There was no future in it. That was when she produced the gun and threatened suicide. Of course, I didn't take her seriously."

"Nor take the gun away from her either?" Cord said.

"Of course not. It was her gun. It was her life."

"Go on."

"Well——" Spencer said "——that was a couple of

nights before the bank robbery. Then came the big night itself. The night I got back to Little Bede with a paper fortune in a hold-all and had to start thinking of somewhere to hide it. I decided on the old well. I'd known about its existence for years, of course, and half-forgotten about it, but it was near where I'd been with Fenella. I'd seen it recently, and that probably is why it was the very first place I thought of. So I went there.

"Unfortunately for me, both Frazer and Fenella were heading that way, too!!"

Frazer, taking his angry walk across the fields, had seen Spencer about to lower something into the old well, and had challenged him. At that moment, unknown to either of them according to Spener, Fenella had come silently through the spinney.

"Frazer and I struggled together," he said. "I just meant to knock him out and run—if I could. But he was bigger and heavier than I was. He damn near knocked me out, and he grabbed the hold-all. Wads of notes tumbled out over the ground. And then—then there was a shot. Frazer fell. Fenella had shot him—killed him. I—I was aghast at what she'd done!"

Cord looked at him. "Don't overplay it," he advised him drily. "Keep it simple."

"It's my story," Spencer said complacently.

"I'm sure you could do better. Bit of a coincidence, wasn't it, Fenella just appearing like that——? At that place—at that time?"

"Our previous meetings had been at that place and time," Spencer said.

"And Fenella, I suppose, had been going there nightly in the hope that you'd change your mind about having nothing more to do with her," Cord said.

"Of course," Spencer agreed airily. Then he added, "And you can't prove differently."

"Go on," Cord said. "Don't let me put you off. What

do you claim happened next?"

"Why—Fenella threatened me, of course. She could see the wads of notes on the ground. She knew I couldn't possibly have come by all that money honestly. Which gave me a motive for killing Frazer—which gave *her* a motive for killing him."

Superintendent Flaxman, listening to all this, blinked dazedly. "Come again."

Spencer regarded him superciliously. "It's so simple I should have thought even you could have understood it. Fenella had killed Frazer herself, but she swore she'd say that I'd done it unless I was nice to her."

Tucker put it "But it was her gun."

"She told me she'd swear I'd taken it off her when she threatened suicide," Spencer said.

"And that, of course, must be exactly what you had done," Cord said, "if we're to believe even that much of this story. But do go on."

The young man grinned at him. "Well, that's how it all began. After that, Fenella took over. We buried Frazer where he'd fallen, but, obviously, it would have been madness to have hidden the money down the well after that. So Fenella took the hold-all with her back to the house, and hid it there, in the cellar. That was what she wanted to do and that was what I had to agree to. She held the whip hand."

Flaxman grunted: "I don't believe a word of this!"

Spencer's grin broadened. He said: "You don't have to. As long as a jury believes it that's all that matters. And a jury *will* believe it. They can be made to believe it!"

"Suppose you just carry on with the story," Cord said, interrupting. "Now—what about Yvonne and Edwards?"

Fenella, Spencer said, had always disliked her step-mother, right from the very first. And the dislike had been mutual. The two women were constantly sniping at each other—and even watching each other in the hope of wit-

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Meanwhile, the young man went on, he had come to the conclusion that the only way to neutralise Fenella, and to get his hands on the eighty-five thousand pounds again, was to give her exactly what she wanted.

"She wanted me to be nice to her, and I was," he said grinning. "I was so nice to her she didn't know what day of the week it was. I even pretended to fall in love with her. 'Let's run away and get married,' I said. 'To the devil with whether your father consents or not! We've got the money! We can go anywhere we like—do anything——!' She bought that line. She bought it so thoroughly, so completely, that she told me what she'd done with the money—where she thought it was."

Fenella still hadn't suspected that her step-mother had long since removed the hold-all from its hiding place in the cellar. "And so—" Spencer said "we were faced with the problem of getting it out. We had to remove a barrel, remove part of the platform, and chip through six inches of concrete to do that—we thought. And we didn't fancy attempting it while the house was occupied. So we hit on the idea of frightening the whole family out. All that witchcraft nonsense—the villagers started it, and we cashed in on it."

Cord said: "Then it was you who were responsible for those idiotic threats—the image, the stone through the window, the note on the door?"

For the first time a note of doubt sounded in Spencer's voice. "Those . . . yes. Fenella made the image. But the things that led up to it—the animals dying and all the rest—we didn't know anything about that. But when you came on the scene we knew we had to get the money out quickly—before you found out too much."

"And that was when you killed Yvonne?"

"When Fenella killed her," Spencer corrected quickly. "That was the night we went to work in the cellar—really slaved our guts out—and found nothing at the end of all

that labour. Then Yvonne appeared—to laugh at us and taunt us. A quarrel developed. It ended in the library. We knew now that Yvonne had the money—but she wouldn't say where it was. Fenella threatened to kill her if she didn't tell. 'Go ahead——' said Yvonne, baiting her '—you wouldn't dare!' But Fenella did dare. That was when she did it."

"And Edwards——?"

"He came into the library just at that precise moment. He must have been attracted by the sound of voices. He was a witness to Yvonne's murder. Fenella shot him."

"Fantastic girl, this Fenella," Cord mused, "a knife in one hand, a gun in the other . . ."

"That was the way she was," Spencer said. "You can't prove otherwise!"

"So what happened then——?"

"Fenella took charge," Spencer said. "I was frightened of her. I admit it. Who wouldn't have been? I'd just seen her kill twice in as many seconds. And she was armed. I obeyed her when she told me to get Edwards' body out to my car. Meanwhile, she searched Yvonne's room and found the money, and that was that."

"All very pat," Cord said.

"All very unbelievable," Tucker growled.

"But just think what a good defence counsel could make of a story like that, eh?" Spencer said. "And I'll have a good defence counsel. I'm going to get the benefit of the doubt. You can't prove I killed any one of the people who died!"

His voice was confident. Over-confident.

Cord said quietly: "What about 'Simple' Simon Harper?"

* * *

Spencer remained sure of himself. "That was an accident," he said glibly. "The coroner's inquest said so. Don't you ever read the papers?"

"And you had nothing to do with it?"

Spencer laughed at him. "Of course not. I grant you it was a crazy accident, but—" he shrugged "—that's just one of those things."

"It was murder!" Cord said, and his hand moved quickly. "Catch!"

Something silver flashed in the light. Spencer reacted to it involuntarily. He gazed stupidly at the ball-bearing he had taken out of the air with his hand.

"And now," Cord told him pleasantly, "it has your finger-prints on it. That's all we need. Accident, eh? You'll hang for 'Simple' Simon's murder——"

Spencer suddenly came to life—screaming. "It's a frame-up! You all saw it!"

"Don't see a thing," said Flaxman.

"Lousy coppers! A frame!" Spencer shouted. He hurled the ball-bearing at Cord's head, and missed. It jarred through a window with a sound of breaking glass. He leapt forward—hands diving for the detective's throat. "*Swine!*" He was almost beserk. He grappled with Mike who had leapt quickly into action to subdue him. Tucker held him fast. He spat at Cord: "All right! So you were clever! So you got my prints on the lousy thing! But I'll deny it—see! I'll tell everyone what happened! And you still can't prove anything! I burned the catapult! I——"

He stopped.

He had said too much in his raging anger, and now he knew it.

"So you burned the catapult, eh . . .?" Cord echoed softly. He had produced an envelope. Another ball-bearing was inside it. ". . . And this—not the one I tossed at you—is the one you used. And I didn't need to get your fingerprints on it. It already has them on it. I checked."

Light dawned in Tucker's eyes as Spencer blustered "You won't be able to prove it!"

But they did.

* * *

"What made you suspect that Harper's death wasn't an accident?" Superintendent Tucker asked Cord later on, when they were alone together.

Cord shrugged. "Right from the first I knew there was nothing accidental about it," he said. "There couldn't possibly be. Accidents like that just don't happen. And I thought we could also discount witchcraft and the idea of hobgoblins pitching Harper down the well. So what was there left? Only murder."

"You might have thought that Joel Watkins did it."

"Oh, I did suspect Watkins at first—" Cord agreed—"until I met him. Then I saw how transparently honest he was, and I couldn't suspect him any more. He was so honest he even gave me a lead as to how the murder had been committed—all unconsciously, of course. But the real killer would never have done a thing like that."

"He gave you a lead? What lead?"

"He was describing how it looked to him when Harper fell down the well," Cord said. "He told me it seemed almost as if Simple Simon were struck back—punched back——"

"So?"

"I asked him if he'd been in the war: he hadn't been in either of them, so what he'd just described had no significance for him. But it had no immediate significance for me. A man is punched back—hurled back—when he's just been shot. And he throws up his hands, too, exactly as Harper did. Now do you see? In that moment I guessed that Harper had been struck in the throat with *something*—but he couldn't have been shot with a bullet, there was no wound and Joel Watkins hadn't heard a sound. So it had to be some other kind of missile. Something round, I thought—so it wouldn't break the skin—but also something heavy enough, and fired with force enough, to punch

Harper off his balance and send him reeling backwards down the well. When I found the ball-bearing, a little while later, everything came together. A catapult, I thought. A slingshot—and this——”

“And you were right.”

“I was right. But Spencer himself helped me to *prove* it. And he was so sure we couldn't prove anything! And, as you heard at the trial, why he killed Harper was easy to reconstruct once we'd decided *how*.”

Tucker said “It's pretty plain he followed Harper from the forge. He'd been made a little bit uneasy by some of the things ‘Simple’ Simon had been saying there. Then he saw him find Frazer's button.”

“That's when he knew he had to silence him,” Cord agreed, “but, at the same moment, Joel Watkins started blundering across the Five-Acre through the rain, so he couldn't actually use physical violence. He carried a catapult. He'd use it for hunting ever since he was a boy. He was a first-class shot with it——”

He shrugged again.

On his desk lay a ball-bearing—that same silver, shining sphere he had tossed at Spencer in the charge-room of Aylesbury Police Station, and which the killer had hurled back at him. Now he picked it up. He weighed it in his palm. Tucker remarked “That served us well.”

“Yes.” He looked at his partner. “Put it in the museum, Mike.”

“I must see this famous museum,” Tucker said.

They went out together into the outhouse office.

There they watched Mike place the ball-bearing in a glass case alongside a bullet, a knife, a bottle of poison, and a photograph of the exotic high priestess Vali Nata Vali. It was an odd assortment of exhibits, yet they all had something in common. Tucker sought for and found the connecting link.

They had all missed.

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