



The Derek Smith Omnibus

Whistle Up the Devil
Come to Paddington Fair
Model for Murder

Derek Howe
Smith

THE DEREK SMITH OMNIBUS

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This book is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents, and dialogue are drawn from the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Introduction

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Whistle Up the Devil

First published in 1953 by John Gifford, Ltd.

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Come to Paddington Fair

First published in 1997 in Japan by Murder by the Press

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Model for Murder

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INTRODUCTION

John Dickson Carr is generally acknowledged to be the maestro of the locked room mystery, indeed of the whole sub genre of impossible crime. His first book, the intriguingly titled “It Walks by Night”, appeared in 1930, and was followed over the next forty years or so by a catalogue of his further works, many of them among the finest, most cunning, most atmospheric mysteries ever penned.

He didn’t have the field all to himself of course: there were many other excellent writers around including a few who, like Carr, specialised in the impossible crime sub genre. Authors such as Clayton Rawson, Hake Talbot, Joseph Commings and later Ed Hoch and Bill Pronzini contributed much that was also first rate.

But Carr’s interest in the impossible crime didn’t stop at his own books; he was also fascinated at the development of the form from the earliest examples by Poe and LeFanu, through Zangwill, Leroux and Futrelle right up to those books appearing at the time of his death in 1972. The variety of solutions dreamt up for this most mouth watering of problems was also something that very much occupied his mind. And being John Dickson Carr he didn’t address the subject by publishing a dry analysis of it in the manner of a university dissertation; he put the words into the mouth of one of his two most famous detectives, Doctor Gideon Fell.

In “The Hollow Man” (American title “The Three Coffins”) published in 1935, acknowledged to be one of Carr’s masterpieces, the problems involving two murders in which “the murderer must not only have been invisible, but lighter than air” taxed his detective and his policeman colleague to such an extent that Fell decided to expound at length and explore all the possible ways in which:

An apparently hermetically sealed room could be breached (he listed seven in all), or doors and windows of the locked room could

be gimmicked so that a criminal could escape from it (Fell listed five)

Carr was not the first author when tackling an impossible crime to suggest a variety of different solutions, with only one of them the real answer. As early as 1892, in “The Big Bow Mystery”, in scenes set not only at the Coroner’s Court, but also in the local press, author Israel Zangwill (whose brother Louis wrote an even more inventive impossible crime novel, “A Nineteenth Century Miracle” (1897)) advanced several different theories to explain how the locked room murder with which he faced his detectives had been perpetrated. This was a formula used by many later novelists right up to present day, including early detective fiction guru Carolyn Wells in her 1932 Fleming Stone mystery, “The Broken O”, and never more delightfully limned than in Leo Bruce’s “Case for Three Detectives” (1936) where a trio of thinly disguised big name detectives each offered a different explanation—and every one of them wrong! Carr himself, writing as Carter Dickson, had his other famous detective, Sir Henry Merrivale, expound on the subject in “The White Priory Murders” a year before Fell in 1934.

But very seldom did writers who followed Carr take the more analytical approach that Dr Fell had employed in “The Hollow Man”. Foremost amongst them were Clayton Rawson (writing sometimes as Stuart Towne) and Anthony Boucher (writing sometimes as H.H. Holmes), both of whom were to become doyens of the impossible crime detective story and in Boucher’s case one of the most knowledgeable and perceptive critics of many forms of genre fiction.

In Rawson’s wonderful debut novel, “Death from a Top Hat” (1938), his detective the Great Merlini, like his creator a professional magician, and his cohorts in discussing a locked room problem with which they were faced, not only paid tribute to Fell’s lecture but provided a detailed alternative of their own with overall more variations of method than those described by the good doctor, and as a bonus describing a further category which had not previously been covered.

Then in 1940 Boucher presented his detective, Sister Ursula, with a lovely meaty locked room murder in “Nine Times Nine” wherein, inter alia, her police confederate, Lieutenant Marshall, and reporter Matt Duncan, discussed Fell’s lecture in some detail and reorganised the categories by

reference to the timing of the various crimes, but otherwise added nothing new.

To this stellar list of detective novelists one final entry must now be made, someone whose work, though much less in quantity than those previously referred to, is not nearly as well known as it should be. In 1953 the publishing house of John Gifford (then the main publishing arm of the Foyle family's literary network) issued "Whistle up the Devil" a mystery novel in which a brace of sealed room murders occurred and a fascinating debate took place between detective Algy Lawrence and his friends on the subject of apparently impossible killings, and the earlier analyses to which they had been subjected by Carr and company. The book contained lots of locked room lore and was clearly written by a student of the form. His name was Derek Smith.

The first piece I ever wrote about my own addiction to locked room murders appeared in Ethel Lindsay's idiosyncratic little fanzine, *The Mystery Trader*. Entitled "Lockedroomania" it pinned my colours firmly to the mast and generated a pleasing amount of interest and comment. However for me the most important knock on effect was that I received my first letter from Derek Smith himself. Starting with the more formal "Dear Mr Adey" but rapidly escalating to "Dear Bob" it began a correspondence which continued for more than two decades and was only interrupted for a couple of years in the early seventies when my wife Sue and I lived near Kingston upon Thames and Derek became a regular visitor, obviating the need for letters.

In his very first letter Derek provided details of more than twenty locked room mysteries which I had not included in the list I had made within my *Mystery Trader* article and I knew right away that I had come into contact with perhaps the most knowledgeable student of this form of detective fiction. When he visited it was invariably with books or copies of short stories to which my attention needed to be drawn, and after we moved out of the London area in 1972 the Royal Mail took over the job of seeing that I was kept up to date with Derek's latest information, often with accompanying tomes.

It wasn't quite all one way traffic. I was able to point Derek in the direction of a few items of which he was unaware and able to pick up for him when Sue and I visited America copies of books, particularly those by one of his favourite authors, Carolyn Wells, which he couldn't locate for

love nor money in England. But the breadth of his knowledge on detective fiction in general and the locked room problem in particular was nothing short of phenomenal. Only when preparing this introduction and looking through my file of Derek's letters, the last of which was dated 7th August 1992, did I realise just how all embracing was the scope of his knowledge, seemingly overlooking virtually nothing. He had apparently inherited his love of books from his parents (he complained tongue in cheek in one letter about how his father had snaffled a recently acquired Gerald Verner from him before he had had time to read it himself!) and was a regular visitor to such institutions as The National Film Theatre, the British Library and Westminster's Central Reference Library; in fact anywhere he might investigate some new angle of mystery fiction.

Obscure stories from even obscurer magazines, volumes published by forgotten vanity press outfits, and loads of tips as to where the screen, large or small variety, might reveal more impossibilities, these were just some of the items and information that Derek passed on to me. Who else would have spotted miraculous crimes in such diverse films, both in date and style, as Conrad Veidt's 1929 "The Last Performance"; Peter Cheyney's "Alphaville"; "The Mackintosh Man"; "Death is a Woman"; the Czech made "Nick Carter in Prague" (now there's a title to conjure with); "Transatlantic"; "Blind Spot" (based on Barry Perowne's famous story); the humorous "The Fuller Brush Man" (Roy Huggins wrote the story on which it was based) and, undoubtedly the most unlikely source of all, at least from an impossible crime perspective, the 1956 German film, "Lianne, Jungle Goddess"?

On television he had noted episodes of MacMillan and Wife, and of McCloud (both of which I enjoyed myself), the whole Banacek series starring George Peppard, but outdid himself yet again by remembering a clever gimmick which he had seen in an episode, written by Jack Roffey, of the courtroom drama series, Boyd Q.C. (played by Michael Denison). While with radio, where Derek was very much a buff of many years standing, he drooled over the forgotten plays by Allingham and Christie, wrote at some length about his memories of Carr's wartime work and recalled with great fondness Philip Levene's locked room play, "Murder Beyond". Does a recording of that still exist somewhere I wonder?

He was also a devoted theatre goer and on one occasion sent me a playbill of the comedy thriller "Dead Easy" which he'd travelled out to the

Wimbledon Theatre to see. On the back of it (typical Derek) he sketched out the lock trick the author had used but said not to read it if I thought that the play might come to one of our local theatres! Incidentally it never did. He even stumbled across a John Sladek impossible crime short story in a theatre programme for a Debbie Reynolds show for which he was actually queuing!

And he didn't confine his interest simply to texts in English, mentioning various French-language authors like Pierre Boileau and Jean Rey, the early German locked room mystery "Nena Sahib" (by Sir John Retcliffe (*sic*)) and even sending me a copy of "Qui a Tué Madame Skrof?", a French translation of a 1939 Finnish mystery by Mika Waltari, an author perhaps better known in England for the historical novel, "The Egyptian". He was very excited to read in the revised version of my locked room bibliography (1991) of the emergence of the young French locked room specialist Paul Halter and was positively salivating at the prospect of their translation into English.

He was also a long time collector of Old Boys' fiction and was able to identify for me miraculous crime examples from the very long running Sexton Blake Library, the Union Jack and the Magnet. He had large accumulations of magazines like The Thriller which contained stories by Verner, Gwyn Evans, Charteris and many other of his favourite authors. He even spotted a locked room problem in an ITV Pink Panther Special comic and bemoaned the fact that a Paul Temple strip from the Evening News containing a very neat sealed tower problem had never been reprinted.

Criminal cases from real life were another of his enthusiasms, not least where the method by which the crime was carried out defied logical explanation. He was especially taken with a murder which took place in France in 1830. The victim was Parisienne Rose Delacourt, whose locked room murder, possibly the earliest on record, had never been satisfactorily solved. Derek was eventually delighted to find a reasonably full description of the case in C.L. McCluer Stevens' "From Clue to Dock" (Stanley Paul 1927).

Derek's compass was so wide that in his letters he rarely found time to comment on his own personal favourites in mystery fiction. However he did say that two of the scenarios he most enjoyed were murder committed during a séance or where the crime took place on stage in full view of the audience. He also confessed that he found Harry Stephen Keeler difficult to

read though admired his ingenuity; struggled, as I did myself, with Dillard's "The Book of Changes", but rated Melville Davisson Post, Jacques Futrelle and Thomas Hanshew very highly indeed. Perhaps surprisingly he liked the slightly comic Pat Rossiter (in his only outing, "Poison in Jest") even more than Carr's other detectives. Droodiana and Ripperology were not outside his purview either though he described himself here as a mere dabbler. Yet another minor passion of his was collecting jigsaw mysteries, all types and from all periods.

About his own writing he was extremely modest, almost to the point of self deprecation. When the publishers accepted "Whistle up the Devil" he was of course, like any author hoping to publish his first book, absolutely delighted though he commented ruefully that he wished that he had given it a thorough revision before it was published. He called his own locked room lecture in chapter 5 of that book "a semi parody of Carr's", a harsh judgement in my view. It's rather better than that.

The contract that John Gifford had drawn up with Derek was fairly typical of the treatment so often dished out to new authors. He wasn't paid all that much for the first edition and it had a relatively small print run (which explains why it is such an elusive book), and only nominal sums were paid for the second edition, which was issued under the Thriller Book Club banner, and for the foreign rights. Indeed although he eventually managed to get from Gifford a copy of an Italian translation, it was more than forty years before he received confirmation, and then from the noted French anthologist and impossible crime specialist Roland Lacourbe, that a French translation, "Appelez Le Diable!" had been published in the Le Masque series in 1953, and eventually obtained a copy for his own collection.

Derek had mentioned to me back in the early seventies that he had written two further impossible crime detective novels, one a second case for his detective Algy Lawrence, the other a Sexton Blake adventure. However they were both turned down, by Gifford and Amalgamated Press respectively, leaving Derek in many ways more disappointed about the failure of the Blake than the Lawrence, because as a devoted long time reader and fan of the Baker Street detective he felt that he knew exactly how to pen a tale for this series. For reasons he could never fathom AP did not agree.

The Sexton Blake novel has remained unpublished to this very day, but in 1997 Derek's Japanese friend Hidetoshi Mori and his partner S. Kobayashi published, in the original English, and with a very limited print run, Algy Lawrence's second investigation, "Come to Paddington Fair". But now when the matter of locating a copy of this very scarce paperback is mentioned, the term "hens' teeth" springs rapidly to mind. The book itself is longer and more complex in plot than "Whistle up the Devil" but Lawrence is on excellent form, and the impossible conundrum is a very good one with a really clever solution.

Sadly Derek is no longer with us, but I have no doubt whatsoever that, if he were, he would be drooling over the television series "Jonathan Creek" and "Monk", devouring the at last translated Paul Halter novels and chasing up other tales of the impossible with just as much enthusiasm as ever. He would have been delighted to see new authors emerging such as Christophe Fowler and his London based Peculiar Crimes Unit, Siobhan Dowd who set her mystery on the London Eye, and most recently of all Irishman Adrian McKinty with his top notch "In the Morning I'll Be Gone". He would have loved the suave Anthony Hopkins in "Fracture." And he would have been as proud as punch to see all three of his books finally appearing together in one sumptuous omnibus volume.

Bob Adey

COME TO PADDINGTON FAIR

A Detective Story

Derek Howe Smith

Dedicated to the memory of
John Dickson Carr
Lord of the Sorcerers

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PART ONE
THE CURTAIN RISES

CHAPTER ONE

Richard Mervan went through the wide portals of the bank into the street outside. He was a soberly dressed man in his thirties with a thin, intelligent face and vaguely anxious eyes.

A taxi was waiting. Mervan turned towards it, taking a firmer grip on the leather case in his hand. He never enjoyed these trips to Head Office. Leaving the branch might have its advantages when the work was more than usually boring, but returning with the money invariably disturbed his peace of mind.

“It’s only a few hundred pounds,” the Accountant had told him airily. “You won’t need an escort.”

Mervan had disagreed— silently. He had gone into Head Office with a hollow sense of apprehension. It was becoming a premonition of disaster. Mervan swallowed nervously. He started towards the waiting taxi. The driver was watching him. Mervan saw alarm wash the ruddiness from the man’s face and swivelled round instinctively. Through fear-blurred eyes, he glimpsed a distorted face. Something metallic gleamed in an upraised hand.

The cosh swept down viciously.

Mervan’s mouth contorted in a ghastly grin. He dropped the case and brought up his arm to ward off the blow. His forearm crashed against the other’s raised arm. The ugly weapon clenched in the threatening fist was arrested in mid-air. Pivoting quickly, Mervan swung his body under the stranger’s armpit immediately after grabbing his arm with both hands. With one hand on the man’s wrist and the other above his elbow, Mervan held on firmly. He heard a sobbing gasp of alarm and laughed hysterically. He leaned forward. Helpless in the young clerk’s grip, the would-be robber felt the world spin round him dizzily. His own weight brought him over the young man’s shoulder. He crashed on the pavement with a cry of pain.

Almost bewildered by the success of the manoeuvre, Richard Mervan made his first mistake. He should have pressed with his leg and pulled the other’s wrist. It was a ruthless hold which could have broken the man’s arm. Perhaps Mervan was too squeamish. Perhaps he was too concerned about

the safety of the money in his charge. He loosed his grip and stepped back, looking for the leather case.

Racked with pain, the bandit made a desperate bid for freedom. Spitting like a cat, he hurled the cosh at the bank clerk's head. Mervan dodged instinctively. He heard somebody shout, then realised with surprise that the noise came from his own throat. Something crashed against his neck and he went down, huddling over the case he had just retrieved. The world was a breathless muddle. He was dimly aware of shouts and the thud of feet against the pavement. He closed his eyes wearily....

Somebody was supporting his shoulders. "Are you all right, guv'nor?"

Mervan opened his eyes again. A ruddy face was very close to his own. "Eh? Oh. Yes, I'm all right." He winced. "My neck..."

"It's bleeding, guv." The taxi-man sounded anxious. "I'd better get you to a doctor."

Mervan shook his head. Pain flared through his neck and he gasped. He felt the torn skin cautiously, then stared at his fingers. They were sticky and red. He looked up. "That man... Where is he?"

"He got away, guv. Down that side turning."

Mervan glanced into the expectant, slightly foolish faces of the passers-by who had formed a half-circle round him on the pavement. "Didn't anyone follow him?"

The driver shrugged. "Things happened too fast, guv'nor. And I was more worried about you than 'im."

Somebody shouldered his way roughly through the crowd. It was a bank messenger, uniformed and important. Mervan stilled the question on the messenger's lips with a slightly sardonic grin. "It's all right. The money's safe."

The taxi-man said again:

"I'd better get you to a doctor."

Mervan refused obstinately. He added dully:

"Take me back to the branch."

The driver and the messenger spoke together in protest.

"The police—."

"They'll want a statement—."

Mervan said stubbornly:

“They can follow me to the branch. I must deliver this.” He clutched the leather case.

The messenger nodded. “I’ll explain, then.” He picked up the cosh and examined it with interest.

The taxi-man said: “Fingerprints—“ and Mervan said: “He was wearing gloves,” at the same time.

Then they both lost interest in the sawn-off piping in the messenger’s hand and the driver helped the young clerk up from the pavement.

Giddy and breathless, Mervan bundled himself into the taxi and leaned back against the cushions. As the cab moved off, he mopped his neck with a handkerchief. His fingers were trembling and his heart was thudding painfully. With sudden revulsion, he pushed the case away from him along the seat.

The journey to the branch office seemed all too short. Struggling for composure, Mervan carried the leather case into the bank and handed the money to the head cashier. His arrival created something of a sensation.

The Accountant came forward to meet him. He said with mild distaste: “Mervan, you look a wreck.”

The clerk struggled with an insane desire to laugh. He replied weakly:

“I suppose I do.” He shaded his eyes wearily. “I feel rather tired. Do you mind if I sit down?”

His chief unbent. “Come this way.” He led the young man into his own cubby-hole behind the counter. The junior hurried forward with a chair. The Accountant perched himself on a seat behind the desk. He was a short, ill favoured man with wiry hair. His brusque manner made him unpopular with the staff, but he was hard working and efficient. Speaking with unusual affability, he jerked:

“Well, Mervan. It seems you’re quite a hero.”

The clerk smiled weakly. He could feel the blood oozing down his neck, soaking his collar.

The Accountant continued:

“Head Office ‘phoned—told us to expect you. Understand you refused to wait for the police.” He frowned. “Don’t know I approve— they’ll follow you here. Still, never mind that. No harm done. The money’s safe. That’s the main thing.”

Mervan said:

“Yes, Mr. Spurling. That’s the main thing.”

Spurling coughed. After an awkward pause, he went on:

“I hope you’re not hurt. Your behaviour was commendable. Most commendable. You were courageous and quick-witted. The Manager”—he spoke in capital letters—“wishes to thank you personally.”

Mervan nodded. There was a sour taste in his mouth.

Spurling regarded him with closer attention. Mervan looked very bedraggled. Unable to keep a tinge of disapproval from his voice, the Accountant said rather severely:

“You’d better not see him like that. You can clean yourself first.” He broke off, then said abruptly:

“That wound on your neck is a messy affair.”

Mervan replied:

“It isn’t so bad as it looks.” He felt strangely indifferent. He wondered if he would be given the rest of the day off.

Spurling said gruffly:

“Well, well. We’ve sent for a doctor. Meanwhile, bathe your neck downstairs.”

Mervan nodded again. He stood up wearily. He made his way to the stairs leading down to the basement, walking uncertainly.

The clatter of typewriters stopped abruptly as he went past the girls’ corner. The younger of the two typists looked up with a sudden, friendly smile. Mervan’s gait slackened. He returned her smile immediately. She dropped her head in pretty confusion. Mervan moved on with a springy step.

When she left the bank that evening, Richard Mervan was waiting for her. He had been loitering by the shops opposite for half an hour, waiting for her to appear. When he saw her at last descending the steps, he strolled across with a casual air. He raised his hat. “Good evening, Miss Barre.”

Her blue eyes widened with surprise. “Mr. Mervan! I thought you’d gone home.”

“The Manager gave me the rest of the day off,” he admitted. “But it was hardly a holiday. I had to make a statement to the police. And then I had to look through the pictures in the rogues’ gallery at the Yard.”

“At Scotland Yard?” The girl’s eyebrows arched.

“Yes. They hoped I could identify the man who attacked me.” Mervan was speaking mechanically. He was regarding the girl with admiration. She

was very lovely.

“Oh.” Keenly aware of his gaze, she dimpled becomingly. “And did you?”

Studying the delicate planes of her face, he almost missed the question. Then he responded hastily:

“No. No, I couldn’t find him in the gallery. I’m not sure I could recognize him anyway.” He added doubtfully: “He had a stubbly chin and greying hair... That’s all I can remember.” He looked rather glum.

The girl laughed sympathetically. “You were too busy defending yourself to notice his face.”

Mervan said: “Yes,” rather lamely; there was an awkward pause.

The girl adjusted the long strap which looped her handbag over her shoulder. “Well, I must be getting along.”

Mervan said desperately:

“Don’t go. I— .” He broke off. He felt ridiculously shy. It was the first time he had struck up a conversation with her.

“Yes?” Miss Barre waited with an expression of demure enquiry.

Mervan took his courage in both hands. “Will you have tea with me?”

There was a faint flicker of mischief at the back of the girl’s blue eyes. She asked directly:

“Why?”

Mervan swallowed. Then he said baldly:

“I like you.”

Her lips quivered, then curved in a roguish smile. She said sweetly:

“I like you too. Let’s have some tea.”

Almost dizzy with elation, Richard Mervan made a confession. “I was too nervous to speak to you before.”

They were sitting at a table in a crowded tea-shop. The girl’s cheeks indented. “Were you?”

“Yes. I’m rather shy.”

The girl said seriously:

“I know.” She added sympathetically: “It’s an unusual quality. But it does you credit.”

Mervan’s face lightened. “Thank you, Miss Barre.”

“Lesley,” she corrected gravely.

“Lesley,” he repeated with pleasure. “It’s a lovely name.”

“I think so,” agreed the girl with an odd kind of pride. She laughed. “That sounds conceited. But I am rather fond of my name.” She gestured prettily. “Well, sir. What’s *your* Christian name?”

“Richard.”

Lesley said with decision:

“I shall call you Dick.”

Mervan looked at her happily. He said suddenly:

“You’re very beautiful.”

Lesley was a girl who never blushed. She thanked him demurely. “Now *that’s* established,” she continued with a hint of laughter, “what happens next?”

The clerk replied eagerly:

“I’m going to take you to the pictures.”

She smiled. “You make that sound like a declaration of eternal fidelity.”

Mervan said quietly:

“Don’t laugh at me, please.”

Briefly she dropped her hand on his. “I won’t, Dick. I promise.”

He felt absurdly pleased. He asked: “Where shall we go?”

“You choose.”

“There’s *You Only Live Once* at the London Pavilion—.”

“The Fritz Lang movie? Yes, I’d enjoy that.”

Mervan smiled. He had suggested the film rather doubtfully, wondering if its finer points might be lost to Lesley. But her reference to the director had pleased and reassured him.

Lesley waited by the entrance while he paid the bill. When he rejoined her, she linked her arm through his.

As they walked through the city streets, she began:

“Dick, you didn’t tell me—.” She hesitated.

He prompted her. “Yes?”

Lesley began again. “We’ve been working together at the bank since you were demobbed—.”

Mervan nodded. He had been released from the Army at the beginning of 1946 and had at once returned to his old employers.

Lesley’s voice was soft, almost tremulous. “That was months ago. But you’ve never approached me as a friend before. What made you speak to me today?”

Mervan replied:

“What gave me the courage, you mean?” He mocked himself with a dry laugh. “The answer’s simple, Lesley. You gave me a friendly smile.”

The reply seemed to please her. She stared for a moment at the wide bandage around his neck. Then she murmured:

“You were quite a hero. I thought you deserved— a smile....”

They strolled through the dark streets holding hands like children.

They were silent. It was as if they felt that this new intimacy which they shared was a precious, brittle thing that might be broken by speaking.

The girl sighed. She said at last.:

“It’s getting late.”

“Yes.”

Their steps rang on the pavement. Lesley murmured:

“It’s been a lovely evening.”

He didn’t reply. Instead, he turned his head and brushed his lips against her soft hair.

She laughed a protest. They walked on in silence. When they reached her home, she turned to face him. She was a tall girl— five feet seven— and their eyes were level. Mervan felt a pulse throbbing hard in his throat. She was very near to him.

Lesley whispered. “Goodnight, Dick.”

Her mouth found his in a fleeting caress. Then she was gone.

It began with a kiss. It ended with murder.

CHAPTER TWO

Two men came through the well-guarded doorway into the great hall of the prison. Their footsteps rang on the metal stairway as they climbed up to the first gallery which stretched along the side of the hall. They spoke in low tones.

The Chief Officer said:

“Oh, yes. He’s a good prisoner. He doesn’t complain, he’s obedient, and he doesn’t make trouble. And yet—- .” He paused.

His companion finished shrewdly:

“And yet he worries you.”

“Yes.” The Chief Officer nodded. “It’s nothing he does and nothing he says. It’s rather what he doesn’t do, what he doesn’t say....” He broke off. He snapped:

“I don’t like first offenders! Give me the old lags. You know where you are with them.”

Detective Inspector Castle chuckled. He was a large man, urbane and shrewd of eye. He was wearing a battered old raincoat and a bowler hat. He said:

“That’s prejudice.”

The Chief Officer grunted. “Maybe. Maybe not. Laugh if you like, but I’ll tell you this. Young Mervan scares me.”

Castle made a noise which was politely incredulous.

The Chief Officer said grimly:

“He’s a man with an obsession. He’s polite and reserved. And he’s ruthless.”

Castle stared. “You’re describing a different man.”

His escort returned dryly:

“He’s been here for several months.”

Castle said mildly:

“I see what you mean.”

They continued on their way.

The Chief Officer nodded curtly to the landing warder and came to a halt outside one of the cells. He twisted a key in the lock and thrust open the door. The room beyond was as wide as it was high and four strides deep. The discoloured walls were slightly damp, and uncertain light filtered through the tiny panes of opaque glass set in the heavily barred window. The air in the cell was cold and stale and permeated with the animal smells of prison. Castle shivered involuntarily.

The man who rose from the truckle bed in the corner was dressed in grey. His face was almost the same colour as his ill-fitting uniform. He did not speak.

Castle tapped his escort on the shoulder and murmured in his ear. The Chief Officer hesitated, then turned and went out on the landing. He closed the heavy door carefully.

Castle grunted:

“Sit down, Mervan. I want a word with you alone.”

Richard Mervan spoke with an odd suggestion of mockery beneath the servile flatness of his voice. “You’re forgetting the regulations. A police officer when interviewing a prisoner—.”

“Should do so under the supervision of a member of the prison staff. I know.” Castle looked tired. He took off his bowler hat and thumped it absently. He said:

“This isn’t an official visit.”

A flicker of curiosity showed on the thin, intelligent face. The ex-clerk sat down on the truckle bed, spreading his hands on the coarse blankets covering the hard mattress. “You should have seen me in the Visiting Room. This ‘peter’ isn’t very comfortable.” He gazed sombrely round the cell.

The Inspector regarded him with a gleam of sympathy. He commented obliquely:

“You’re picking up prison slang.”

“By degrees.” Mervan added bitterly:

“I have plenty of time to learn.”

“Ah, yes. The sentence was—.”

“For long enough.” Mervan’s mouth was hard. “I must wait for my freedom for many years.”

“You can’t complain. You robbed the bank.”

Mervan bit his lip. “I’ve never denied it.”

“No,” said Castle. “You haven’t. But you’ve told us nothing of value. And we’ve yet to recover the money you took from the strong-room.”

Mervan shrugged. He made no reply.

Castle rubbed his jowl. He mused:

“You were caught and convicted. But you worry me still.”

Mervan’s fingers crooked. “Forget me.”

“I can’t.” Castle shoved aside an enamel bowl and jug and perched himself on the edge of a table which had been built into the wall. He began to speak in level, confiding tones. “The case intrigued me from the first. As you probably know, I handled most of the preliminary investigations.”

He paused, as though inviting comment. Mervan nodded, but said nothing.

Castle continued:

“The first report was a simple one. You were found in the street one Saturday in the late afternoon. You seemed to have been the victim of an attack. You were taken to hospital and were found to be suffering from concussion. There was a bad wound in your scalp.” He smiled grimly as Mervan winced and fondled the back of his head reminiscently. “Obviously, you had been coshed.” He pronounced the word with distaste. “That was clear enough. But the motive for the attack was obscure. You didn’t appear to have been robbed.”

Mervan grinned wryly.

Castle squinted at him thoughtfully. “You were carrying your identity card, so we knew who you were, and we soon discovered where you worked. You were also carrying a bunch of keys which apparently belonged to the bank. You were still unconscious, so we couldn’t question you. But we contacted your employers. They weren’t particularly alarmed, even when we mentioned the keys. They explained their system.

“The strong-room was always secured under two sets of keys. The Accountant or another senior official held the first bunch, while one of the clerks held the other. The duty went by rota. That week-end, it was your turn to hold the keys. But your set was useless without the other. Nevertheless—” Castle gestured vaguely. “We persuaded your employers to check the safes in the vaults. We had to wait for the Accountant— a fellow named— .” Castle snapped his fingers.

“Spurling,” said Mervan tonelessly.

“That’s right. Spurling. We needed his keys, besides yours, to open the strong-room. And when we did— .”

“All hell broke loose.”

“Yes. The safes had been raided. Bank notes, treasury notes, negotiable securities—you had taken the lot. The examiners put the loss in thousands of pounds.”

Mervan asked curiously:

“Did you ever doubt my complicity?”

Castle blew out the negative with a short laugh. “Not once. It was obviously an inside job. Nothing had been forced except some tin boxes on the cashiers’ trolley. Everything else had been opened with keys. You were obviously responsible for the robbery. We found your fingerprints everywhere. You had even left us the hammer and chisel you had used to break open the boxes. Yours was the work of a rank amateur.”

Mervan bit his lip hard. “So I made your task an easy one.”

Castle frowned. “It wasn’t that easy. There were several questions I couldn’t answer. You had never had access to the Accountant’s keys— yet you must have used them to effect the robbery. At first I thought Spurling might have been your accomplice— .”

Mervan laughed involuntarily.

Castle continued equably:

“But he had an air-tight alibi, so I soon dismissed him from my mind. The keys in his possession had not been used that afternoon—so you must have had duplicates.”

Mervan’s silence was an admission.

Castle shot out a question. “Where did you get ‘em? And how?”

Mervan’s face was a mask. “I have nothing to say.”

Castle drummed stubby fingers on the brim of his bowler hat. “You have nothing to say.” He mimicked the prisoner’s voice without derision. “That’s what you said when we arrested you.”

“You gave me the usual warning.”

“Yes. Sometimes,” sighed Castle, “I wish I could ignore Judges’ Rules. If I could have had a confidential talk with you... Ah, well.” He rubbed his jowls. He continued briskly:

“My theory was this. You must have had an accomplice—and this person was the probable source of the duplicate keys. With these—and those officially in your charge—you were able to return to the deserted bank in

the afternoon to open the strong-room and raid the safes. It was Saturday, the bank had closed at twelve o'clock, you had a clear field. You filled a suitcase with money and left. It was as simple as that."

Castle scowled. "What happened then? I can only guess... You rejoined your accomplice. You thought you were leaving together— fleeing the country, perhaps. But—." He gestured vaguely. He said grimly:

"You were double-crossed. You were knocked on the head and abandoned. Your accomplice escaped with the loot. And you were left with nothing."

Mervan grinned savagely. His fingers crooked.

Castle said:

"It's not an uncommon story. But your reactions were unusual. You knew you couldn't escape conviction; but you might have got off with a lighter sentence. You could have co-operated with the police. I expected you to name your accomplice and make a full confession. But you didn't make a statement of any kind. You pleaded guilty— and left the rest to us."

The muscles of Mervan's face had frozen around his last savage smile. He rubbed his hand across his mouth.

Castle grunted: "And now you've nothing more to lose. You might as well tell me everything."

Mervan repeated dully. "I have nothing to say."

"No?" Castle paused imperceptibly. Then he said gruffly:

"You could tell me about— Lesley."

The name mushroomed across the chamber like an exploding shell. Then there was a deadening silence in which the Inspector became gradually aware of the sound of the watch ticking against his wrist.

Mervan's cheeks had hollowed. His eyes were fever-bright.

Castle sighed. "I can see I shall have to soliloquize. Ah. well!" He scratched his chin. "Let's go back to the beginning. You were unconscious for some time. You were also delirious. You talked."

Mervan's eyes were fixed in painful concentration.

Castle went on:

"You kept mumbling a name. The name of the person who had double-crossed you—."

Mervan made a sudden, involuntary movement.

Castle smiled grimly. “Don’t worry. You weren’t very explicit. We had placed a detective in the hospital to watch you. He reported little more than the name ‘Leslie’—which we took to be a man’s. You seemed to think this person had betrayed you.”

When Mervan spoke, his voice was low. “Is that all?”

“That’s all,” agreed the Inspector. “It was a slender clue. You had been speaking in a delirium—it might have meant nothing. But I checked, of course.”

Mervan muttered. “Well?”

“Well!” Castle blew out his cheeks. “I found that a girl named Lesley Barre had been employed for a while in the bank as a typist.”

The prisoner said tonelessly:

“I knew her slightly. She left some time before the robbery.”

“A few months before,” agreed the Inspector. He paused, then said mildly:

“I discovered the location of her flat.” He regarded Mervan owlshly. “Oddly enough,”—an ironic note crept into his voice—“it wasn’t far from the street where you were found suffering from concussion.”

Mervan’s jaw muscles tightened.

Castle said dryly:

“I had a look around that flat. It was deserted. Miss Barre, it seems, had left without supplying a forwarding address. I wasn’t able to make contact with her.”

“So?” The word wasn’t much more than a breath.

The Inspector grunted. “That’s all, I’m afraid. Miss Barre had disappeared. It can happen, you know, even in these days of national registration.”

“You didn’t,”—Mervan had difficulty in phrasing the question— “you didn’t succeed in tracing her?”

“No. I could hardly ask my superiors to institute a nation wide search. After all, I was only following a hunch. We had no real reason to look for Miss Barre. Had we?” The question was a challenge.

Mervan reacted violently. He snapped:

“I think you’d better go.”

Castle grunted. “Not so fast, young man. Hear me out.”

“You’re just wasting your time.”

The Inspector growled. “Maybe. But I don’t like unfinished business. When I handle a case, I like to tie up all the loose ends neatly.”

He banged his hat against his knee. “That’s why I’m here. Officially, the case is closed—unless you give me an excuse to open it again. Understand? I need new evidence.”

“I have nothing to tell you.”

Castle said without heat:

“I think you’re a fool. Yet I’m sorry for you. And, believe me, I rarely feel sympathy for criminals.”

Mervan shrugged. He seemed indifferent.

Castle said softly:

“I’d like to know what changed you from the decent young man who fought a robber in the street to the reckless crook who raided his employers’ strong-room. The change is too violent, too sudden, too strange...”

Mervan muttered: “A man in love—.” He broke off.

Castle pounced. “Then it was a woman. Lesley—.”

Mervan said stubbornly:

“I’ve told you nothing.”

Castle regarded him with puzzled eyes. “I can’t understand you, Mervan. You gain nothing by protecting this girl. You can’t want her to go unpunished. Unless—.”

He caught his breath. He stared at the man in prison grey. In the uncertain light which filtered through the heavy glass behind him, Mervan’s face seemed scarred with hate.

Castle murmured:

“You were safe and secure and respectable. But that’s all finished now. You’ll never return to the life you knew... You’re a broken man. Thank Lesley for that.”

Anger lit the prisoner’s eyes. He choked:

“You can taunt me now. But one day—.”

“You’ll be free.” The Inspector tensed. “And then?”

Mervan’s pupils contracted. Sanity came back to his eyes. “You needn’t worry. I have nothing against you.”

“No,” rumbled Castle. “But you frighten me... Men go sour in prison. Maybe they go mad—I don’t know. But I do know this...” He hesitated, then said bluntly:

“You’re a man with an obsession. And you’re dangerous.”

Mervan forced a laugh. "You're mistaken."

Castle shook his head. "No. I understand you now. You won't betray this girl—"

"There's nothing to betray."

"Don't lie." Castle was brusque. "You won't implicate this girl. Why? Because you don't trust us. You mean to take your own revenge..." The Inspector paused. He had played his hand. He could do no more until Mervan responded.

A tiny smile drifted over the prisoner's lips. "Good-bye, Inspector."

Castle scowled. He clapped his hat on his head and smacked the crown angrily. He turned and hammered on the heavy door with the flat of his hand.

Then, as footsteps sounded along the gallery outside the cell, the burly man made his last appeal.

"Forget revenge. Leave the girl to us."

The flicker in Mervan's eyes was an unspoken question.

Castle answered it quietly. "You're a decent young man. I don't want you to destroy yourself." For a moment, Castle thought he had succeeded.

Mervan's face had changed: he looked like a hurt child. Then he took refuge in his bitter pride. He said again:

"Good-bye."

Castle lifted his hand and dropped it in a gesture of defeat. The door opened. He went out of the cell.

Richard Mervan stood listening as the sound of footsteps died away in the distance. Then he spoke aloud.

He said, as though making a vow:

"Lesley, my love, we'll meet again. I'll look for you and find you." He finished in a whisper:

"And then I shall kill you...."

PART TWO
THE STAGE IS SET

CHAPTER THREE

Algy Lawrence said bitterly:

“God damn and blast all telephones!”

He was just settling himself in his morning bath when the persistent ringing began in the bedroom. He cursed again wearily, then raised his slimly built, athletic young body from the warmly inviting water and scrambled out of the bath. Kicking wet feet into shabbily comfortable slippers, he draped a towel round his dripping thighs and tramped unhappily through the adjoining doorway to his bedroom.

He grabbed the telephone with a damp hand and snarled rather than spoke into the receiver. “Hallo!”

“Hallo, Algy.”

“Steve!” Most of the young man’s irritation disappeared. “You old son of a gun. How’s crime?”

“It doesn’t pay. Or so they tell me.” Chief Inspector Castle cleared his throat. “I’m not offering you a case, Algy. This is a social call.”

“Uh huh.”

Castle said, rather too casually:

“Let’s go to a theatre this afternoon.”

“Well, now.” Lawrence rocked gently on his heels. “What’s the show? If it’s Revudeville at the Windmill, then I’m your man. There’s a lovely young lady named Carole Logan—.”

“No, no, no.” Castle was irritable. “I have tickets for the atinee at the Janus.”

“The Janus? Oh, yes. It’s a mystery play there, isn’t it? Well, I don’t know, Steve....”

Castle said quietly:

“I’d like your company.”

An odd note in the older man’s pleasant baritone caught Lawrence’s attention. He made up his mind at once. “Right, then. I accept your invitation.”

“Good.” The Inspector seemed pleased. “Shall we meet for lunch?”

“Yes, of course . How about—?” He named a pub in Kensington.

Castle growled approval. “Fine. Now, let me see.” Lawrence heard the faint rustle of papers as his old friend thumbed through them quickly. “I have a fair amount of routine work, but— Oh well, the Yard can do without me for once.”

“Yes.”

“Dammit,” chuckled Steve, “you needn’t agree so readily...I can be at that pub by one o’clock. Will that suit you?”

“Certainly. I’ll order you a good meal.”

“That’ll make a change. I usually have to make do with sandwiches on the desk. But you wouldn’t know about things like that, you lucky young idler.”

They exchanged a few pleasantries, then broke the connection. Lawrence let his hand linger for a moment on the telephone and murmured sleepily:

“Steve, you old fraud, there’s something on your mind. I wonder what?”

He went back to the bathroom with a questioning gleam at the back of his lazy blue eyes.

Chief Inspector Castle—six years after the final interview with Richard Mervan, but still wearing the same battered raincoat and bowler hat—threaded his way through the cluster of tables.

Algy Lawrence rose to greet him. “Hi, Steve! Over here.”

Castle grunted. His young friend had secured a table for two in the corner. A glint of approval showed in the policeman’s shrewd grey eyes. “Hallo, Algy.” They shook hands.

“I’ve already ordered,” smiled Lawrence. He signalled to the waitress. “Roast beef and baked potatoes. Right?”

The burly man was conservative in his tastes. He growled contentedly.

Lawrence sat down again and stretched his long legs under the table. He eyed the Inspector quizzically.

Castle wrenched his hat from his grizzled head and banged it on a clothes-rack in the corner. Almost as an after-thought, he stripped off his raincoat and suspended it from the peg beneath his bowler.

Algy grinned. He knew the Inspector’s affection for the disreputable old coat was a standing joke at Scotland Yard. He said:

“I bet you’re glad we’re going to a atinee. You might have had to wear evening dress in the orchestra stalls at the eight o’clock performance.”

“Evening dress be damned,” grunted Castle. “I—Wait a minute! How did you know I have tickets for seats in the front stalls?”

“I didn’t,” confessed Algy. “But I thought this little outing might be in the nature of a reward for the occasional—uh—assistance I render Scotland Yard from time to time. And knowing your kind heart and generous—.”

“All right,” said Castle gruffly. “Don’t labour the point... I’m disappointed in you, young Algy. I thought for a moment you’d done something clever.”

“Intuition,” returned Lawrence comfortably, “is better than deduction. It’s easier, too. Ask Mr. Fortune.”

“Anyway,” said Steve, “you’re right. We’ll be sitting in the front row. The most expensive seats in the house. And,” he finished abruptly, “they didn’t cost me a penny.”

Lawrence angled an eyebrow. “Complimentary tickets?”

“Yes,” said the Inspector carefully. “And no.”

Algy grinned lazily. He said:

“Let’s not play games, Steve. Tear off the false whiskers. Tell me the real reason for our trip to the Janus.”

Castle dragged out a chair and sat down heavily. “What makes you think I have an ulterior motive?”

“A *atinee à deux*,” smiled Algy, “is a purely feminine habit. It’s not your idea of the ideal way of passing a Saturday afternoon. Besides,”—laughter wrinkles deepened at the corners of his sleepy blue eyes— “you’ve been drooping hints with all the delicacy of a man hurling bricks through a plate glass window.”

The two friends grinned at each other.

Then Castle flung up his hands in a comic gesture of surrender. “All right, then. Take a look at this.”

He took an envelope from his pocket and tossed it across the table.

Lawrence glanced at the typewritten address. “New Scotland Yard, London, S.W.1 Hallo! You’ve been demoted, Detective Inspector Stephen Castle.”

“My correspondent,” growled Steve, “is a few years behind the times. I was made a Chief Inspector in 1948. While you,” he added irrelevantly, “were fooling around Europe in Intelligence.”

Lawrence rubbed his cheek. “The letter was delivered this morning?”

“Yes. It seems to have caught the last collection yesterday evening... Look at the post-mark again.”

“London, S.E. 1.”

“Does that suggest anything to you?”

Lawrence’s finger traced idle patterns on the table-cloth. “It’s a large area, Steve. It contains two hospitals, two main line stations, a cathedral, the Imperial War Museum, and County Hall... But only one theatre. The Old Vic.”

“Exactly. The Janus is on the other side of the river in the heart of theatre-land.”

“Uh huh.” Lawrence opened the envelope and took out a folded piece of paper. The young man examined it carefully. It had been printed for a famous ticket agency, and was a form of admission for two persons to that afternoon’s atinee at the Janus. The relevant details had been scrawled across the face of the ticket in indelible pencil.

Lawrence murmured: “That settles it. These seats aren’t a gift from the management.”

“No. Free tickets sent from a theatre are always issued at the box office and stamped COMPLIMENTARY.”

Lawrence replaced the slip in its envelope. He said brightly:

“The conclusion is obvious. You have a benefactor who prefers to remain unknown.”

Castle scowled.

He said unexpectedly:

“*Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes.*”

“Don’t quote Virgil, Steve,” grinned Algy. “It confuses me... So you fear the Greeks and the gifts they bring.” His fingers strayed towards the envelope. “What makes you think this is a Trojan Horse?”

“I’m damned if I know,” admitted Castle frankly. “Maybe I’m just a soured old policeman. But in my experience,”—he hesitated—“you rarely get something for nothing. Besides... there was something else.”

“In the envelope?”

“Yes.” Castle took a thin strip of pasteboard from his wallet and passed it across the table.

Lawrence picked it up, holding it delicately by the edges.

“You needn’t worry about obscuring fingerprints,” said Castle dryly. “There aren’t any.”

The implied admission made his young friend smile. "So you had it tested. You're a thorough man, Steve."

"When my curiosity is aroused."

"Mmmm. This is rather intriguing." Algy seemed puzzled. "What the devil does it mean?"

He dropped the card face upwards on the table-cloth. Four words had been rubber-stamped in gummy black ink across the pasteboard.

The message read simply:

COME TO PADDINGTON FAIR

Sydney Short, stage door-keeper of the Janus Theatre, leaned out of his glass-enclosed cubby hole and called shrilly:

"Miss Christopher!"

Lesley Christopher turned her lovely blue eyes towards him enquiringly.

"Yes, Sydney?"

"A letter for you, Miss. Just a second." The door-keeper hopped off his stool like an ungainly old bird flopping down from its perch.

Lesley waited patiently by the stage door through which she had just entered while its custodian scabbled clumsily through the litter at the back of his shabby sanctum.

"Here it is, Miss. Came by the mid-day delivery." Short hesitated. Then garrulity overcame discretion. "It's marked Personal and Urgent."

An inquisitive note sounded clearly in his voice. Lesley detected it and strove to repress her instinctive irritation.

"Thank you, Sydney." She took the envelope from his bony hand and resisted the temptation to snub him. There was no point in falling out with the old fool now. She never slighted a man unless she was sure she could find no use for him.

"That's all right, Miss." Short eyed the letter rather wistfully.

Lesley slipped it into her handbag and turned away. Then she hesitated briefly and turned back, her long silky hair swinging like a curtain against the collar of her coat.

"Oh, Sydney!"

"Yes, Miss?" The door-keeper leaned out of his cubby hole once more.

"Has Mr. Trent arrived yet?"

"No, Miss." He scanned the face of the clock above the door. "He may be late."

“He usually is.” Behind the professional warmth of Lesley’s smile, a keen observer might have detected a chill of anxiety. “Please ask him to go to my dressing-room when he arrives.”

She walked away along the passage with superb grace and poise.

Short gazed at her retreating figure with admiration, then withdrew to the cover of his cubby hole again. He shook his balding head, sighed sentimentally, and said at random:

“She’s a proper lady.”

A voice answered in the crude idiom of the streets.

“She’s a—.”

The third word was partially smothered by an indignant cry of protest from the door-keeper. “What the ‘ell do you mean by that, Albert Wix?”

“I mean what I say,” returned his companion inside the glass box. Wix, the property master, was a tired-looking man in his middle fifties. He had a seamed and anxious face and a morose gleam at the back of his faded eyes.

“Look ‘ere—.” Short glared at the other man’s unresponsive back. Wix was crouched over an evil-smelling oil lamp, coaxing a kettle of water to the boiling point.

Wix said over his shoulder:

“Don’t get excited, Syd. You’ve got one opinion about our precious leading lady. Well, I’ve got another.”

“I can’t understand why—.”

Wix interrupted. “You’ve never felt the rough edge of her tongue. I have.”

Short muttered rebelliously.

Wix said:

“We won’t quarrel about her. She isn’t worth it.”

Short seemed ready to continue the argument, but bit back the retort which sprang to his lips. Instead he snapped testily:

“Ain’t that ruddy tea brewed yet?”

“Don’t get impatient. There’s plenty o’ time.”

The remark set Short’s thoughts flying off at a tangent. He stared at the clock and muttered.

“Not for Michael Trent, there isn’t. He’s been late for every performance this week. If he wasn’t playing the lead—.” He broke off and shook his head. “What’s the matter with him, anyway?”

The property master's lined face crinkled with one of its rare smiles. He gestured eloquently with his elbow.

"Drink, you mean?" said the door-keeper doubtfully. "Maybe, maybe. He carries it well, then. Does it affect his performance?"

Wix shrugged. "He looks all right from the wings." He busied himself with an old teapot and a couple of mugs. "But star or no, his nibs will give him hell if he's late again this afternoon."

His nibs was the stage manager.

Short said:

"He'll give you hell too if you don't take him those blank cartridges soon."

Wix scowled. "He's an old woman sometimes. Doesn't trust anyone with that revolver but himself. I bring him the blanks every day, don't I? So why doesn't he leave me to load the blasted gun?"

Short looked bored. "It's fired in the big scene, they tell me. I s'pose he likes to make sure that nothing goes wrong."

When Wix had a grievance, he liked to talk about it. He continued to grumble as he finished making the tea. "Fuss, fuss, fuss. That's Mr. Jack Ruddy Austin. Like 'the barber's cat, full o' wind and—."

Short hissed a hurried warning. Then he said in an unnaturally clear voice:

"Hallo, Mr. Austin. Anything I can do for you?"

The property master swallowed an inaudible curse as a long shadow fell into the glass box. He put down the teapot and turned with an insincere smile. "Just coming, Mr. Austin. I have the blanks here."

He rattled a box in his pocket by way of illustration.

Jack Austin nodded curtly. The stage manager was a stockily built man about thirty five years old. He was wearing a loose fitting jacket over a turtle necked sweater, plus grey flannel trousers and tennis shoes.

"Never mind that, Props." The familiar diminutive sounded odd and unfriendly in Austin's clipped, precise speech. "I've other things to attend to."

He turned towards the stage door-keeper. "Have you seen Mr. Trent this afternoon?"

Short replied rather diffidently:

"No, Mr. Austin. Not yet."

Austin's face darkened angrily. "You mean he isn't in the theatre?"

Short glanced apprehensively at the clock but made no response.

“What’s troubling you, Jack?”

Austin turned his head. His face cleared slightly. “Hallo, Victor...It’s Michael Trent. He promised me yesterday he’d be here early for the atinee, but it looks as if he’s going to be late again.”

He glared at his wrist-watch, then corrected himself angrily. “He is late again.”

Victor Friern, general manager of the Janus Theatre, was a distinguished figure in evening dress. He was tall, erect, and square-shouldered. He had greying hair and aristocratic features. He said smoothly:

“Don’t worry, Jack. Give him a little licence. He hasn’t let us down yet.”

Austin responded gloomily. “There’s always a first time.”

Friern shrugged. “Speak to Denzil. Warn him to be ready. He’ll be pleased to play Michael’s part.”

Douglas Denzil was the Juvenile. He was also Trent’s deputy.

Austin asked:

“What about Denzil’s own understudy? He’s barely competent.”

Friern smiled. “It’s not an important role. As Douglas would be the first to tell you. But...” He shrugged again. “There’s no need to worry. Trent will be here soon.”

The stage manager cracked his knuckles. “I wish I could be certain of that.”

Friern took his arm in a friendly fashion and led him gently away. Austin left the general manager at the entrance to the dressing-room passage. Friern strolled along the corridor. Pausing before the door marked with a golden star, he raised his hand and tapped lightly on the panels.

A muffled reply came from within the room. Taking the call as an invitation, Friern pushed open the door and looked inside.

Lesley Christopher was sitting on a chair in front of the dressing-table, staring at her reflection in the lamp-shaded mirror. She turned hurriedly. “Michael, I— .” She broke off. “Oh! It’s you, Victor.” She forced a smile. “Come in, do.”

Friern studied her curiously. Behind her make-up, the colour of her cheeks was wavering. He closed the door and said mildly:

“You’ve dropped something.”

Her sudden turn had sent a card and an envelope sliding to the floor.

Friern bent down to retrieve them. His gaze fell on the card which was resting face upwards on the carpet.

He read the rubber-stamped message in an instant.

It ran:

WE MEET AT PADDINGTON FAIR.

CHAPTER FOUR

Friern said lightly: "A curious message." His voice inflected in a question.

Lesley smiled nervously. "From a crank, of course. It came by the mid-day delivery."

Friern studied the torn envelope. "Anonymous letters are common enough. But this one hardly follows the usual form. For instance— what's Personal and Urgent about it?"

"Oh, really, Victor! I can't explain it. I told you—it must be from a crank."

She seemed tired and irritable. Friern eyed her quizzically, then murmured:

"Forgive me, my dear. I didn't mean to upset you."

Lesley turned back to the mirror. "You haven't upset me, Victor. But— Oh, well. Throw the wretched thing away."

Friern dropped card and envelope into a basket by the dressing table. He said:

"This kind of thing is annoying because it's pointless. But it shouldn't worry you, unless..." He hesitated. "Forgive me again, my dear. But are you in trouble of any kind?"

Lesley was still peering into the mirror, painting her lips a deeper red. She froze for a second, then countered his question with another. "What makes you ask that?"

Friern said gently: "I know you well enough. For the past few weeks you've been nervous, tense, troubled in your mind. Would you like to tell me why?"

"Victor, I—."

Friern interrupted without discourtesy. "Face me, my dear. Please."

Lesley sighed prettily, then obeyed. Despite the heavy mask of make-up pancaked over her face and the white cloth pinned over her hair to protect it, she was a very attractive young woman.

Friern gazed at her with a fleeting hunger in his deep-set eyes. He continued:

“Troubles can be shared. Won’t you let me help you?”

Lesley squeezed her slender hands together. She said:

“I’m in no kind of distress. Truly, Victor, you’re exaggerating... I admit I’m not myself. But then the part I play—.” She hesitated. “It’s exacting. It takes a lot out of me.” She forced a laugh. “It isn’t easy to ‘die’ at every performance.”

“It isn’t easy for Michael to commit murder eight times a week,” commented Friern lightly. “The ‘shot’ he took at you last night was most unconvincing.” He added more seriously:

“But I agree—your role is emotionally exhausting. Perhaps you need a holiday.”

Lesley’s mouth hardened. “I have a run of the play contract.”

Friern gestured grandly. “A leave of absence can be arranged. Two weeks or three....”

“No, thank you, Victor.” Lesley emphasized the negative with a frown. “I’m not going to lose this part.”

“You’re relying on your nerves.”

“That’s how I give of my best.” Lesley turned back to the mirror. “This is my first big success, Victor. I’m not going to throw it away.”

“The decision is yours, my dear. But be careful.”

“Don’t worry.” There was little humour in her laughter. It was hard and brittle. “I’m not going to break down. I shan’t miss a single performance.” She concluded venomously:

“Tell that to Penny Valentine.”

Friern smiled. “You misjudge her, my dear. She doesn’t want to take ‘Marilyn’ away from you.”

“You men!” returned Lesley scornfully. “I’m surprised at you, Victor. Can’t you see she’d give anything—anything—for a chance to play ‘Marilyn’?”

“She has a good part already.”

“But she is also my understudy! Why do you think she was so anxious to take the job?”

Friern was tactful. “She plays one role and understudies another. That’s not an uncommon arrangement in any company. Denzil is in the same position.”

Lesley said bitterly: "You'll never understand."

Friern, on the contrary, understood her completely. But as an old hand in the profession he was used to meeting extremes of generosity and pettiness. He said gently:

"'Marilyn' is yours, my dear. For as long as you wish."

Lesley softened. She murmured. "Victor, dear. You're rather sweet."

Friern put his hands on her shoulders and twisted her gently till she faced him once more. He said:

"I can't make pretty speeches. But remember this, I beg you. You're a special person, Lesley. And there's nothing I would not do for you." He took her hand in his and then, bending his greying head, kissed her lightly on the inside of her wrist.

Lesley's lips quivered. Mingled amusement and triumph showed briefly in her eyes. She whispered:

"Thank you, Victor," and let the tips of her fingers flutter across his cheek.

Friern straightened up. Smiling wryly, he said:

"I mustn't forget I have a rival." He looked pointedly at a framed photograph hanging on the wall.

Lesley followed his gaze. She said, rather too quickly:

"Michael's an old friend. Nothing more."

"As an old friend," replied Friern smoothly, "you should give him a word of warning."

"Of warning?" Alarm sounded in her voice.

"Yes. Trent has been late for every performance this week. The S.M. does not approve—and if Austin advocates extreme measures, then as the general manager I shall have to back him up."

Lesley relaxed. "Oh. Is that all?" She stressed the pronoun lightly.

"All?" repeated Friern. "Isn't it enough?"

"Of course, Victor. I spoke carelessly." She frowned imperceptibly. "You mean Michael is late again this afternoon?"

"He wasn't in at the half." Friern glanced at his watch. His jaw tightened. "He may miss the quarter call as well."

Lesley said anxiously: "But you'll hold the curtain?"

"If necessary. Trent hasn't let us down yet. But this kind of thing can't go on."

They were interrupted by the arrival of Lesley's dresser, a plump and muscular woman with bright, beady eyes. She put a packet on the dressing-table. "Your cigarettes, miss."

"Thanks, Maggie. Now help me into my dress, will you?"

Friern made his exit as Lesley was preparing to throw off her dressing-gown. Outside in the corridor, he found a wizened little man with a gloomy face who was obviously worried.

The cause of his agitation was clear to Victor Friern. "Hello, Ben. Are you looking for Mr. Trent?"

Ben Cotall, Michael Trent's dresser, ducked his head nervously. "Yessir. Is he—is he ill?"

"No," replied Friern rather grimly. "But he's certainly in trouble."

Ben began to gesticulate, suddenly became very conscious of his hands, and plunged them into the pockets of his shabby black jacket.

Friern led the way towards the stage door. Ben trailed after him disconsolately. Sydney Short had left his cubby-hole and was peering through the door into the gloomy alley-way outside. Hearing their footsteps, he signalled the two men eagerly.

"Here he comes now, sir!" he called, addressing the manager.

"Trent? Thank the Lord for that," muttered Friern.

Cotall's gloomy face brightened. He ran forward to meet his employer as he came into the theatre.

Michael Trent was a tall and handsome man with well defined features and glossy black hair. The boyish charm of his smile was off-set by an attractive suggestion of wickedness in his intelligent grey eyes. He swayed slightly as he greeted them. "Lo, all. Am I late?"

Friern said coldly:

"You're drunk."

"That," returned Michael with dignity, "is a canard. A calumny. I go further. A foul slander. I'm not drunk." He seemed to be searching for the right word. "I'm happy." His diction was only slightly slurred. Friern decided with relief that Trent was in a fit state to go on.

Michael himself had no doubts. "Come on, Ben, you old scoundrel. Help me to my dressing-room. No, God damn you," he swore good-humouredly. "Don't try to carry me. I can walk by myself. I've been doing it for years." Cotall led him away.

Friern shrugged. The expression on his face was enigmatic.

A voice in his ear startled him momentarily. "Trent's here at last, then?"

"Oh, it's you, Jack... Yes, he's here. Ben is looking after him."

The stage manager said grimly:

"I'll have a word with Mr. Trent."

Friern patted his shoulder. "Leave it till after the performance. Michael isn't drunk, but he isn't sober either. He might get argumentative. You know what children actors are." Remembering that Austin had once trodden the boards himself, he smiled to rob the words of offence.

The S.M. nodded glumly. "Perhaps you're right. I shall round on him after the show. Meanwhile...."

"Meanwhile," said Friern smoothly, "you might have a word about another matter. His business with the revolver in the last act—."

"Hell, yes!" Austin cracked his knuckles. "Even now, that needs more rehearsal. The way he handles that gun—" He broke off. "Which reminds me—" He interrupted himself again, half-turned, then shook his head and muttered: "First things, first. I'll speak to Trent now."

"Be tactful," smiled Friern. "You can reprimand him later."

Austin nodded. He hurried along to Trent's dressing-room.

The call-boy was just knocking smartly on the door, chanting: "Quarter of an hour, please." Catching the stage manager's eye, the lad added rather guiltily: "One minute late."

Austin grinned briefly, tapped perfunctorily on the wooden panels, and pushed open the door. Michael Trent glanced over his shoulder. He was standing by the wash-basin, twisting the taps. "Hallo, Jack. Have you come to lecture me?"

Austin said:

"No," without a smile.

"That's good," murmured Trent. But for a scarcely perceptible inability to focus his eyes, he looked reasonably sober. He bent over the wash-basin and splashed his face liberally. He straightened up with a sigh. "Ben! Towel, please... Thanks." Cotall watched anxiously while his employer rubbed himself dry. Austin leaned against the wall, stony-faced.

"That's better." Trent slipped into the dressing-gown his dresser held out for him and turned towards the mirror by the basin. "I look human again."

Austin said:

"Trent, I—"

“Please, Jack.” Michael spoke in mock reproach. “Don’t keep me from my paints and powder. The show must go on.” He added an elaborately whispered aside. “What a damn’ silly line.”

Austin snapped: “Stop fooling, Michael. I’m not sure I should let you go on.”

“Remember,” murmured Trent, “my public.” He began to put on his make-up. The S.M. glared at the back of the actor’s head. Catching his eye in the mirror, Michael winked impertinently.

Austin mustered what patience he could. “Listen, Michael. This is important. You must take more care with your business with the revolver in the last act.”

Trent lifted an eyebrow. “In what way?”

Satisfied that he had caught the other’s attention at last, Austin replied heavily: “Aim the gun before you fire it. You’re supposed to shoot ‘Marilyn’ through the heart.”

“Well?”

“Last night you didn’t sight the gun at all. If there had been a live cartridge in the chamber the bullet would have gone into the O.P. box.”

Trent laughed. “Don’t worry, Jack. I’ll be careful. I’ll level the gun at Lesley’s heart.” He added:

“This afternoon, I promise you, the audience will see a convincing murder.”

Jack Austin hesitated outside the door of the adjoining dressing- room. Would it be wise, he wondered, to go in? Making up his mind at last, he rapped on the panels beneath the golden star.

“Come in!” Lesley Christopher, fully made-up and ready for her entrance, was sitting in the chair in front of her dressing-table. Seeing Austin, she gave him a tiny frown. She turned to her dresser. “I don’t need you for the moment, Maggie. See if Miss Valentine needs any help.” Maggie left, a gleam of curiosity in her bright, beady eyes, promising:

“I’ll be back for your first call, miss.”

Austin remarked:

“That was a generous thought.”

Lesley shrugged. “You know I don’t like Penny. It was just an excuse to get rid of Maggie.”

“So that we might be alone?”

“So that you,” replied Lesley dryly, “might be saved from making a fool of yourself in public.”

“Lesley, I—.”

She cut off his words with her own. “Has Michael arrived yet?”

“Yes.”

“I thought I heard his voice.” Lesley frowned again. “Damn! I left him a message, but he hasn’t been in to see me.”

Austin said impatiently: “He has no more time to waste. And he’s not in the best of condition.”

“You mean he’s been drinking again?”

“Yes. But he’s fit to go on. Ben Cotall’s looking after him now.”

Lesley shook her head slowly. She said softly:

“Poor Michael...”

“Never mind him now.” Austin’s voice was rough. “What about – us?”

There was a long silence. Then Lesley said coolly:

“Give me a smoke.” There was a packet on the dressing-table. Austin picked it up, took out a cigarette and placed it between the girl’s lips. Lesley said:

“Now light it.”

Austin struck a match with trembling fingers. Lesley held the cigarette to the tiny flame, inhaled deeply, then blew out a streaming cloud of smoke.

Austin threw the burnt out match into the basket on the floor. “Lesley —.” She said insolently: “I hope you’re not going to be tiresome, Jack.”

Tiny muscles tightened angrily along the line of the S.M.’s jaw. “I asked you a question, Lesley.”

“Yes, you did.” She smiled unpleasantly. “And here’s your answer. There’s nothing between us, Jack. There never was and there never will be.”

Austin felt his throat constrict. He spoke with an effort. “That’s not good enough, Lesley. You led me to believe—.”

Lesley didn’t allow him to finish. She said:

“You should never mistake a smile for a promise.”

Hating himself for his weakness, Austin began to plead. “But, Lesley, I love you.”

She answered coldly:

“But I .don’t love you.” His foolish face annoyed her. Anxiety and fear had set her mind in a turmoil. Powerless to ignore or suppress the dangers which threatened her security, she turned on the only man she could hurt

without wounding herself. She savoured the words as they came to her lips. "I don't even like you."

"Lesley!"

She smiled with a poisonous sweetness. She said:

"You revolt me..."

Austin flushed deeply. Then his nostrils pinched and his face went muddy-white. He lurched forward and grabbed her wrist, bruising her delicate skin. "You little vixen, I—."

Lesley laughed. Poising the smouldering cigarette between her fingers, she mashed the glowing end against the back of Austin's hand. He jerked it away with a curse. The sudden pain brought water to his eyes. The contempt in her voice hurt him more. "Go away. You silly, greedy boy."

Speech strangled in his throat. Before he could move, a knock sounded at the door. A young voice called:

"Five minutes, please!"

"Thank you, Billy."

Lesley peeped at herself in the mirror. The door, which had opened a few inches, closed again. The call-boy's voice died away down the corridor. The interruption had been enough to recall the S.T. to his duties. In a few minutes he would be ringing up the curtain. Without another glance at the girl he loved and hated, Austin wrenched open the door and hurried out of the room.

Immediately, the cruel smile faded from Lesley's lips. Staring at the framed photograph on the wall, she said aloud:

"Help me, Michael. Help me." She whispered:

"I'm afraid.... "

A man was walking slowly across Westminster Bridge. A cold wind from the river plucked at his shabby clothes and stung momentary colour into his pallid cheeks. His shuffling frame was thin and strangely lifeless. His gaze seemed fixed on the ground in front of him, dull as the pavement itself. As he passed in the shadow of Big Ben, the great clock began to chime the half-hour.

The man looked up and smiled. He said:

"I'm coming for you, Lesley." He had cheap cotton gloves on his hands, a self-loading pistol in his pocket, and murder in his heart.

CHAPTER FIVE

The first act of THE FINAL TROPHY closed with a complete black-out. An enthusiastic burst of applause drowned the swish of the invisible, falling curtain. Then the house lights went up suddenly, disclosing an audience whose individual members began to fidget and flutter self-consciously, as if ashamed to be discovered enjoying themselves.

Seated in the front row of the stalls, Chief Inspector Castle scowled at the curtain. He said abruptly:

“Let’s go to the bar.”

Algy Lawrence glanced at his wrist-watch. “If this were a nasty, uncivilised foreign land,” he remarked, “we could buy a drink any time we wanted it. But Britons never, never shall be slaves—except to their censors and bureaucrats. Do I have to remind you about our licensing laws?”

Castle cursed them unprofessionally. “Come along, anyway. I’ll buy you a lemonade.”

“You devil, you.” Lawrence followed his friend to the nearest exit, pursued by the rattle of tea-trays. In the almost deserted bar, they bought two soft drinks and carried them to a table in the corner.

Glowering at his lemonade, Castle asked suddenly:

“Well, what do you make of it?”

“Of the play? Not much. I still wish we’d gone to the Windmill.”

Castle was impatient. “Don’t blather, Algy. I mean who sent us those tickets? And why?”

Lawrence tapped his glass thoughtfully. “I don’t know, Steve. The house isn’t papered. The play seems to be doing good business.”

“We’ve already agreed,” growled the Chief Inspector, “we’re not guests of the management. But why should anyone else want to see us here this afternoon?”

“I’ve no idea. Neither,” admitted Algy wryly, “can I tell you where to find Paddington Fair.”

“That’s not surprising. The place doesn’t exist.”

Lawrence slumped in his chair. “It did once. The name’s vaguely familiar. I wish I could remember....” His voice trailed away aimlessly.
Castle snorted. “It’s gibberish.” He drank his lemonade noisily.

Slamming down the glass, he muttered testily:

“Something’s out of true.”

His young friend nodded. “Uh huh. There’s an odd kind of tension in the air. I can’t locate the cause. Though of course,”— he hesitated— “the leading man isn’t entirely sober.”

“Eh?” The Inspector’s eyes widened. “How can you tell?”

“Little signs.” Algy opened his hand and shut it again. “I can’t go into details. But I’m sure he’s been drinking.”

“I envy him,” commented Castle gruffly. He fished a programme out of his pocket and turned to the cast list. “What’s his name, now? Trent. Michael Trent. Know anything about him?”

“No.” Lawrence looked sleepy. “But he has a talent for improvisation.”

“Huh?” Castle looked blank.

“Didn’t you notice? The girl playing ‘Marilyn’—.”

“Lesley Christopher.”

“Yes. As I was saying, she missed her cue. Dried up completely.”

“Did she? I didn’t notice.”

“Thanks to Michael Trent. He ad-libbed masterfully. Drunk or sober, he keeps his wits about him.”

“I missed all this. How did you manage to spot it?”

“I have that kind of mind,” confessed Algy ruefully. “To coin a cliché, I take my pleasures seriously.”

“Maybe you do. But you seem to be particularly alert today.”

“Somebody wanted you to see this performance and I want to know why.” Lawrence felt for his cigarette case, then let it drop back in his pocket again.

He said softly: “I wonder why she missed her cue.”

Castle shrugged. “Actresses do.”

Lawrence nodded. “I’m probably making a mystery out of nothing. But it was an odd coincidence.”

“What was?”

“A man came into the box on our right at that very point. He was late, and he came in quietly. It seemed to me—.” He paused.

Castle was impatient. “Well?”

“I think Lesley Christopher saw him too. She dried up at once. I got the impression she was—.” He broke off again.

“Yes?”

Lawrence said quietly:

“Scared.”

A bell above the bar rang sharply. It was a warning. They went back to their seats in silence.

Jack Austin had left the prompt box and was standing on stage with his back to the curtain, his gaze roving round the set. Somewhere out of sight the call-boy was chanting:

“Second act beginners, please!”

Penny Valentine was already on stage. She said amiably. “Don’t look so fierce, Jack. Nobody’s walked off with the props.”

The S.M. spared her a brief, amused glance before returning to the prompt box. He was to remember the interruption later. Unimportant though the remark was, it had helped to drive another matter from his mind.

Unperturbed by the clatter around her, Penny Valentine moved Up Centre and stood regarding the closed double doors at the back of the set. The doors opened to disclose a solid-seeming lobby which resolved itself on closer inspection into a few skilfully painted “flats”. Penny concentrated her attention on the man who had opened the doors. “Hallo, Douglas.”

Denzil returned the greeting rather too warmly. He was slim, good-looking man with a young-old face. Across the footlights he exuded youthful charm, mixing shyness with boyish impertinence. He was a competent Juvenile, and had been for several years. Off stage, his manner was not so attractive. Denzil asked:

Did you want me, sweet?”

Penny returned his gaze with a faint glimmer of amusement at the back of her cerulean eyes. She replied:

“In a way. But don’t build your hopes too high! It was only to ask you to be careful with your cues. You gave me one the wrong way round and I nearly fluffed my lines.”

“Sorry, sweet.” Denzil caricatured a bow of apology. “My mind was wandering.” He added:

“I’m no Stanislavsky.”

Penny laughed. “No, my pet. You’re not.”

Denzil said stiffly:

“My role wouldn’t be worthy of such effort. But don’t think I’m not capable of the necessary concentration. With the right part, now....” He paused in invitation.

Penny covered a smile. “Michael’s?”

Denzil eyed her suspiciously. “Well, yes. After all, I am his understudy.”

“And I’m Lesley Christopher’s.”

“Well?”

“Both our principals are in the best of health. Don’t fool yourself, Douglas. You have about as much chance of playing ‘Regan’ as I have of playing ‘Marilyn’. Which means no chance at all.”

Denzil pouted. He said maliciously:

“Dear Michael may soon be resting again. He can’t have his own way for ever.”

A betraying glint of anger showed in the girl’s eyes. She said evenly: “Drunk or sober, he can act you off the stage.”

“Oh, pardon me,” said Denzil with a hint of viciousness. “I forgot you and Michael were—uh—friendly.”

“Darling Douglas. You’re quite a stinker, aren’t you?”

“I have that distinction,” agreed Denzil graciously. One of his more maddening characteristics was a determined refusal to take offence until it suited him to do so. He said:

“I’m also a damn’ good actor.”

Penny had quickly recovered her equanimity. She smiled:

“I know you are, my pet. But be careful you’re not early with your final curtain.”

Denzil’s painted face creased in a surprised smile. “There’s little fear of that, sweet.”

“After all,” said Penny pointedly, “the means are to hand.”

She indicated the revolver hung by pegs on the painted “wall” of the lobby behind him. It was a Webley & Scott with a long jagged scratch on the barrel and the initials “H. W.” engraved above the butt.

Denzil stared at the gun with casual interest. He remarked: “I may not be popular. But even in the hand of an enemy, a gun loaded with blanks couldn’t do me much harm.”

Austin’s voice barked suddenly:

“Clear, please!”

Denzil winked and retired to the “lobby” once more. Left alone on the stage, Penny took up her position Down Left.

“Stand by!” The S.M.’s fingers depressed a switch on the board in the prompt corner. A light glowed green in warning. High in the flies, the signal was accepted by the waiting stage-hands. The light went out. Austin drew a deep breath, then switched on the red for “Go”.

The curtain went up.

“There’s your call, miss.” Maggie Boyd stared at her employer curiously. She didn’t like Lesley—few women did—but the intimacy of their work together had awoken in the older woman’s heart an odd concern for the girl she dressed. She said again:

“There’s your call, dear.”

“What? Oh... Oh, yes.” Lesley seemed to be suffering from some kind of shock. Beneath the flat monotone of her reply was a subtle note of fear.

Maggie said:

“I’ll come with you down to the stage.” She spoke gently, as though to a child. Lesley stood up.

As she went through the door, she mumbled:

“I saw him. And I dried stone dead.”

Maggie followed her from the dressing-room with a hand-mirror and a powder-puff. “What did you say, dear?”

Lesley mumbled:

“In the box....” She spoke no more till they reached the stage.

Michael Trent was waiting in the wings on the prompt side. Ben Cotall was standing behind him, flicking his master’s shoulders with a small brush. “That’s enough, Ben,” murmured Trent as the women approached. “Don’t fuss.” He smiled at Lesley. “Hallo, angel.”

“Michael, I—.” Her voice was unnaturally loud.

A hurried “Ssh!” came from the prompt corner.

Lesley continued in a lower key. “Michael, I have to talk to you.” She sounded hysterical. Trent’s face sobered. The two dressers exchanged enquiring glances.

“*Pas devant les enfants,*” said Michael in schoolboy French.

Ben kept his face impassive but Maggie pursed her lips in disapproval.

Heedless of them both, Lesley blurted:

“Michael, you don’t understand! He’s out there, watching.” She finished fearfully:

“Waiting....”

Chief Inspector Castle sat slumped in his seat scowling at the stage. He was not enjoying himself. He grunted, then looked sideways at his companion. Lawrence’s blond head had drooped slightly forward, and his sleepy blue eyes were half-closed. Castle was not deceived by his young friend’s indolent posture. Lawrence always kept his wits about him. Remembering their conversation in the interval, the Inspector looked past his friend towards the box on their right. He clicked his tongue with annoyance. The man in the box was sitting well to the rear, eluding the glare reflected from the stage. To the Inspector’s eyes, he was only a formless blur.

Castle turned his attention back to the play. He was coming to Paddington Fair.

The second act curtain fell on another black-out. Lesley Christopher and Penny Valentine, who had shared the final scene, stayed motionless and invisible till the lights came on again. Then Lesley hurried away through the prompt entrance, like an animal escaping from its cage. Penny followed slowly, a thoughtful look in her eyes.

Wix, the property master, was standing in the wings. He nodded. “Hallo, Miss Valentine.”

“Hallo, Props.” Penny sounded amused, but a trifle irritated. She knew that the property master tended to regard her as an ally in his feud with Lesley Christopher.

Wix jerked his thumb over his shoulder. He said darkly:

“Her ladyship’s not herself today.”

Penny smiled briefly. “She can’t be. She just forgot to kill my big laugh.”

“Ah.” Wix shook his head wisely. “Something’s upset her, I reckon. Proper scared, she seemed.” His lined, anxious face was unusually cheerful. He rattled something in his pocket with an air of gloomy gaiety.

Penny chuckled. Side-stepping the property master neatly, she headed for the dressing-room passage. She hesitated for a moment outside one of the doors, then tapped the panels lightly. The door opened. Ben Cotall peeped out.

Penny asked:

“How’s Mr. Trent?”

Before Cotall could reply, a voice from within cried gaily:

“Penny, darling! Come on in.” Michael Trent was lounging in a wicker chair by the further wall. He was wearing a dressing-gown, and his face glistened thinly with sweat. He smiled at Penny wickedly. Without taking his gaze from the girl, he said softly:

“Leave us, Ben. For a minute. But,” he warned, “don’t go far away.”

When they were alone, Michael grinned at the girl engagingly. “Penny, my love .Give me a kiss.”

“There’s no time for that,” she replied practically. Taking some tissues from the dressing-table, she began to blot the perspiration from his face. Michael submitted with a fairly good grace. Penny stood back and studied him with a tiny frown. “You need more powder. Otherwise you’ll pass muster.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He stood up.

Penny rested her hands on his chest. Michael stroked her fingers gently. Her mouth trembled. She asked abruptly:

“Have you spoken to Lesley?”

Trent seemed embarrassed. He said:

“Damn it, Penny. These things take time. I can’t just blurt out suddenly —.”

“That you love me, and you don’t love her?”

“I love you,” whispered Michael. “That’s true, indeed.” His hand moved in a long caress over the curve of her spine. Penny’s lips moved silently. Michael covered them with a kiss. The door behind them opened.

Lesley Christopher came into the room. “Michael, I—.” She stopped suddenly.

There was a long pause.

Then Lesley spoke in a choking voice. “You’ll be sorry for this. I promise you.” She went out.

Penny was trembling. Michael tried to soothe her but she pushed his hands away and slipped from his embrace. Running to the door, she called unevenly:

“Ben! Ben, come here, please.” She stumbled out.

Michael bit his lip. He turned back to the mirror. Almost unconsciously, he began to tidy his make-up. His intelligent eyes were anxious. Abruptly,

his fingers stilled: he began to swear fluently and tonelessly. Cotall had shuffled back at Penny's call. Like a second mirror, old Ben's face reflected the anxiety in his master's.

The thin man with the pallid cheeks sat well to the rear of the box, shielded by the curtains from the front stalls. His programme lay unopened on the ledge. A pulse was throbbing in the thin man's temple, blue-veined beneath the skin. His gloved hands were trembling. As the lights went down, he leaned forward.

Taking the self-loading pistol from one shabby pocket, he examined it carefully. Then he placed it on the empty seat beside him, ready to hand. His head went forward. He paid no attention to the drama on the stage. He would pay none till Lesley reappeared. His head drooped.

He seemed to be praying.

CHAPTER SIX

As the curtain went up for the third act Algy Lawrence slumped in his seat and stretched out his legs in front of him.

His lazy blue eyes were moody. They roved absently over the set resting for a moment on the stuffed bear which stood to the rear of the stage on the audience's left. The huge animal was sitting upright on its hams, and from its circular dais seemed to be glowering at the occupants of the boxes on the right. Its paws were spread realistically and its mouth was open in a menacing snarl.

Lawrence shifted uneasily. Though the play appeared to be shaping for a climax, it was beginning to bore him. He was too uncomfortably aware of a larger tension beyond the artificial contrivances of dialogue and plot. When Lesley Christopher made her next entrance, he watched her attentively. He fancied he saw an odd flicker—as of fear—in her eyes as she glanced, perhaps involuntarily, towards the box on his right. Lawrence tensed. The invisible “fourth wall” which separated the audience from the stage seemed to have been shattered by that fleeting glance. Then the moment passed and he wondered if it had existed only in his imagination.

He turned his head slightly and stared hard. It was quite useless. He couldn't see past the curtains which shrouded the side of the box. He directed his attention back to the stage. After a while, he gave up listening to the dialogue. “Paddington Fair” loomed larger in his mind. I should know what it means, he told himself irritably. I've heard the name before. Suddenly, he tensed. An isolated phrase from the dialogue forced its way into his mind and stayed there obstinately.

The shadow of Tyburn Tree... The Tree... and Paddington Fair. Was there a connection? Lawrence closed his eyes, scanning a mental screen. A memory formed, then faded like breath from a mirror. Damnation! Lawrence opened his eyes and glared vacantly at the stage. Penny Valentine made her exit on the O.P. side, leaving Michael Trent alone on the stage. Taking advantage of a spatter of applause that followed the girl through the painted door, Lawrence leaned over and whispered in his friend's ear:

“Steve, I—.”

An indignant “Ssssh!” came from the row behind. Lawrence subsided, ignoring Castle’s grunt of enquiry. The double doors at the rear of the set opened suddenly. Lesley Christopher appeared on the threshold, clutching something in her hand. Lawrence leaned forward instinctively. He could see it was a Webley & Scott revolver—the gun which had been fixed by pegs to the “wall” of the lobby behind her.

Michael and Lesley went into their big scene. It was a tense duologue which commanded even Lawrence’s flagging attention. “Marilyn” threatened “Regan” with the gun. He shrugged, turned away, then wheeled and grabbed her wrist. Silently, the audience watched the struggle. They saw “Regan” wrench the revolver from “Marilyn’s” hand, then back slowly away, covering her with the gun. “Now it’s my turn, baby.”

She whimpered. She backed away from the menacing weapon. The stuffed bear behind her seemed to be spreading its paws invitingly. Lawrence’s eyes were on Michael Trent. Sweat glistened behind the actor’s heavy make-up. Lawrence chilled. He watched with fascinated revulsion as Trent thumbed down the hammer of the revolver and steadied the gun carefully.

Lesley’s heels tapped against the dais, and she seemed to freeze with her body almost within the animal’s clumsy grasp. The gun in Trent’s hand tilted gently, its muzzle pointing like an accusing finger towards the girl’s heart. She whispered:

“No....”

Trent was standing Down Left very near to the setting line with his back to the boxes on the audience’s right. Lesley’s frightened gaze was fixed on the gun in his hand— Or on something or someone in the box behind him? As the startling question formed in Lawrence’s brain, a memory unsealed. And he knew, with a chill of fear, the meaning of Paddington Fair.

He tried to shout a warning, but the sound died in his throat.

Trent was smiling tightly. His crooked finger squeezed against the trigger and the revolver blasted in his hand. Lesley’s body jerked. A sick, puzzled look appeared in her eyes and she swayed back against the animal behind her. Something bubbled thickly in her throat. A red, spreading stain showed briefly on her breast before she fell face downward upon the floor.

Castle stared in bewilderment. Lawrence’s voice sounded in his ear.

“There were two shots—two spurts of flame—.” Castle jerked his head. He had a second’s glimpse of his friend’s white face before the lights faded in a complete black-out. Dazed and bewildered, he waited helplessly in the darkness. He could see nothing.

And then he heard the laughter. It was a crazy sound. And it was evil. Lawrence leaped to his feet. He blundered through the darkness wildly. Nothing relieved the blackness except the lights above the EXIT doors. And they did no more than shape the letters of the signs. They threw no light into the auditorium. Fighting a rising panic, Lawrence battled his way towards the box on his right. He kept his body against the low partition which divided the orchestra well from the front stalls and groped along, ignoring the startled cries of enquiry that followed him. Then the footlights glowed, illuminating the fallen curtain.

Lawrence gasped with relief. He swung his legs over the partition and lurched towards the box. He had no time to feel afraid. He put his hands on the ledge and vaulted into the gloom. He stumbled against a chair and recovered his balance quickly. A man was scrabbling at the door in the rear of the box. He jerked round as Lawrence reached out for him and swung a clumsy blow at the young man’s face. It caught him on the side of his jaw and he stumbled back, momentarily dazed.

He shook his head. His vision cleared. His assailant was a thin man with pallid cheeks. He wore shabby clothes and cheap cotton gloves. He was holding a pistol in his right hand. Lawrence said grimly:

“I knew I saw a gun flash.”

“Shut up!” The man’s voice was hysterical. He muttered:

“Get back against the wall. Hurry up, damn you! I’ve used this gun once. I can use it again.”

Lawrence obeyed. He said quietly:

“Don’t be a fool. You can’t escape.”

“I said, shut up! And put up your hands.”

Lawrence raised his hands above his head. He said again:

“You can’t escape.”

“Damn you!” The shabby man was trembling. “Why did you have to interfere?” He moved nearer, holding the pistol close to Lawrence’s chest. There was a strange gleam in his eyes, frightened yet ruthless. He had the look of a man who had killed once and who would not hesitate to kill again...The muzzle shook.

Lawrence thought: He's mad... He's going to shoot! Lawrence moved quickly. He dropped his left hand and knocked the thin man's pistol hand to one side. At the same time he turned his right shoulder forward. The gun blazed but the shot passed harmlessly under his left armpit and the bullet thudded into the wall behind him. Lawrence grabbed the shabby man's right wrist with his left hand and slid his right foot behind the other's right heel. Then he jabbed his right hand forward. The tips of his fingers thudded into the tenderest part of the other man's throat.

The shabby man collapsed with a sickly choke. Lawrence pulled the gun from his hand and stepped back wearily. He felt ill. He had always hated violence. The house lights went up suddenly. Lawrence leaned over the ledge, ignoring the startled faces that were turned towards him. "Steve! Come quickly."

Castle was already on his feet. "Are you all right?"

"Yes." Lawrence rubbed the sweat from his face. "But hurry." The Chief Inspector turned to face the crowd behind him. He raised his arms and shouted: "Quiet, please!" His authoritative manner subdued the noisy, startled crowd. He said clearly:

"I am a police officer. You will kindly keep your seats." Beckoning to a uniformed attendant, he muttered some hasty instructions. Then he stumped towards the box.

Lawrence shoved the chairs to one side and bent over the fallen man, who was only semi-conscious. Algy stared at the thin, pallid face and felt pity stir. Then he remembered the girl and his lazy eyes hardened. The door behind him opened and Castle appeared, ushered into the box by a frightened programme seller. The Chief Inspector growled:

"Just what in blazes is happening here?"

Lawrence straightened up.

He said:

"You saw that stain over Miss Christopher's heart. It wasn't stage blood. It was real."

Castle nodded slowly. "I feared as much. And so?"

"Two guns were fired, though we heard only one report. I saw a second flame spurt from this box."

"A gun flash?"

Lawrence held out the pistol in a wordless reply. Castle scowled. "So that's it. When the blank was fired on stage our friend here—."

“Fired a live cartridge at the same target,” finished Algy grimly. “Using the noise of one explosion to cover the other.”

“A bold plan,” grunted the Chief Inspector. “But a clever one. He might have escaped if you hadn’t kept your wits about you.”

Lawrence shrugged. “He gave himself away when he laughed so crazily.”

Castle shivered. “He must be mad.”

“Perhaps.” Lawrence stared at the pistol in his hand. It was small but deadly—a Colt .25. “But not in the legal sense.”

“No,” agreed Castle. “This crime was premeditated. And if that girl dies, then this man will hang.”

Lawrence muttered unhappily. “Don’t let it bother you,” advised the Chief Inspector. “Ah, well! Let’s get to work.”

The shabby man groaned.

“He’s coming round,” said Lawrence. He smiled uneasily. “I thought for a moment I’d killed him.”

“You merely bruised his neck,” returned Castle grimly. “The rope will break it.”

Michael Trent groped about in the blackness, fighting a rising panic. The echo of the shabby man’s macabre laughter rang in his ears, and he remembered with a shudder the ugly stain which had appeared on Lesley’s breast in the appalling seconds before the lights went out. He steadied himself with an effort. Clutching hard on the butt of the Webley & Scott, he called:

“Austin! For God’s sake, put on those lights!” When the bulbs flared up, they blinded him. He shut his eyes, then opened them.

“Lesley!” He ran across the stage to the crumpled figure lying at the base of the dais, ignoring the confused babel of sound from the other side of the fallen curtain.

“What’s wrong?” The stage manager had appeared from the wings. Standing by the prompt entrance, he asked again:

“What’s happened?”

Michael turned a blind face towards him. He whispered:

“Lesley – she’s been hurt.”

Austin said blankly:

“I don’t understand.”

Trent lifted the girl's shoulders and stared at the wound in her breast. He choked. He said hoarsely:

"She's been shot."

"B-but—" Austin's mouth worked stupidly. Before he could say more, a gun blasted on the other side of the curtain. Trent let the girl's body slide to the ground once more and moved his hands in an odd gesture of protest. The stage manager cried:

"Good God! What's that?"

Trent shook his head helplessly. Austin cracked his knuckles. He muttered nervously:

"Something's happening out front. They'll need the house lights. I'd better give the signal." Still mumbling, he returned to the prompt corner.

Trent stroked the dead girl's hair gently. He said aloud:

"Good-bye, Lesley." Somebody moved behind him.

A scared voice whispered. "Is she dead?"

Trent stood up. He looked at the questioner dully. He said. "Yes, June. She's dead."

June Merritt was the assistant stage manager. Her plain, rather podgy face was set in a bad caricature of astonishment. "What happened?" The stage manager returned in time to hear the question. He echoed it.

Trent passed his free hand across his forehead, smearing his make-up. "I--I don't know exactly." He looked down at the revolver in his right hand with a kind of dull horror. Then he shook his head, as if rejecting an impossible suspicion. He said:

"Somebody... somebody fired a gun from the box behind me. I—" He swallowed. "I felt the wind of a bullet as it passed my body. Lesley collapsed with blood on her breast. The lights went out."

He finished tonelessly:

"And then there was—the laughter."

Austin and his assistant stared incredulously. Then June Merritt burst out wildly:

"But things like this don't happen in England."

Austin laughed harshly. "Don't be so insular, June. This isn't our first public assassination."

"For God's sake!" Trent's voice shook. "You sound so callous. Aren't you going to send for a doctor?"

"What for?" asked Austin coldly. "You said yourself—she's dead."

Michael stared at him. The S.M. seemed to have recovered his composure rapidly. Had there been a trace of savage satisfaction in his reply? Surely not. And yet... Trent put the thought aside. He cried:

“Don’t you understand? Something must be done!”

“Calm yourself,” said Austin curtly. He added dryly:

“And put down that gun.”

Trent brought up his hand and stared at the revolver once more. He cried with sudden loathing:

“Take it then!” He thrust the gun into the stage manager’s hands.

Austin looked vaguely surprised. Then he slipped the revolver into one capacious pocket and shrugged indifferently. “As you please.” The rough material of his jacket chafed against his hand. Withdrawing it from his pocket, he fingered the burnt flesh gently....

Victor Friern pushed his way past the startled attendants and went into the box with a haggard face. His erect carriage was gone, but he spoke with his usual formality. “Good afternoon, gentlemen. I am the general manager.”

Castle nodded briefly. “I’m Chief Inspector Castle of the C.I.D. I’m glad you’re here, sir. You know what’s been happening?”

Friern nodded his greying head painfully. “I heard—.” He broke off.

Castle grunted. “I’ve made an arrest. But there are certain formalities which must be observed.” He indicated the audience. “These people will have to be questioned. Some may be required to give evidence. And, for the moment, no one will be allowed to leave this theatre. Will you make the necessary arrangements?”

“I’ll do anything I can.”

“Good. Perhaps you’ll take Mr. Lawrence here to a telephone. Algy!”

“Yes?”

“You know what to do. Call the Yard and make a full report. Say I’ve taken charge. They’ll send the right people.”

Lawrence nodded. “Right, Steve.” He followed Friern away.

The shabby man was still on the floor. He sat up, rubbing his throat ruefully. Castle stood over him, his shrewd grey eyes alert. He scanned the other’s pallid face. He asked abruptly:

“What’s your name?”

The thin man said sullenly:

“You should know.”

“What’s that?” Castle scowled with surprise. “Wait, now. Your face does seem familiar, but....”

“We met a long time ago.”

“I don’t remember you.”

“I’m not surprised.” The shabby man sneered. “Prison life has changed me for the worse.”

“You don’t talk like a convict,” said Castle bluntly. “Or a madman. Who are you?”

The thin man said bitterly: “I’m a decent young man who destroyed himself.”

Castle recognized the words as a paraphrase—or a parody—of his own. He caught his breath. “Hell’s blazes! You’re—.”

“I’m a murderer,” said the prisoner savagely. “I made a vow and I kept it.”

“And the girl?”

“Her name was Lesley Barre. Mine is Richard Mervan.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Algy Lawrence replaced the receiver, then turned from the telephone with a sober face. "That's that. The police will be here soon."

Victor Friern clenched his fist. He said painfully:

"It's incredible!"

Lawrence replied:

"It happened."

"But Lesley..." Friern choked on the name.

Lawrence glanced at him sleepily. "Did you see the shooting, sir?"

Friern shook his greying head. "No. I was here—in my office. An attendant came for me after—after—" His voice shook.

Lawrence made his own tone brisk. "Let's take a look back-stage, sir. There may be something we can do."

Friern asked. "Are you an officer too?"

Lawrence grinned crookedly. "I'm not a policeman. But I'm well known at the Yard. My—uh—interference won't be resented."

Friern took a key from his desk, then led the way out of his office and climbed a flight of stairs on the left. Lawrence followed him through a door giving access to the Dress Circle. The manager murmured:

"This way, please."

They went down the wide stairs flanked by the left-hand wall, ignoring the frightened, angry people squirming restlessly in the plush-lined seats. Friern muttered anxiously:

"We can't keep the audience here much longer."

Lawrence shrugged. "Don't worry. Steve knows what he's doing."

Friern said doubtfully:

"I hope so."

By this time, they had reached the front of the Dress Circle. Friern pushed aside a curtain to disclose a short, narrow passage. He said:

"This gives access to the box on this level."

He knocked politely on the door and led the way in. The occupants of the box—a man and a woman—looked round nervously. The manager

murmured a few courteous words, then unlocked the pass-door in the wall nearest the stage. Murmuring a caution, he led the way down a narrow stairway.

Lawrence looked about him with interest flickering in his lazy blue eyes. It was the first time he had been behind the scenes in a theatre. His first impressions were rather confused. He seemed to be lost in a world of bewildering activity, of hoarse voices and hazy lights. And it was something of a shock to discover that the solid-looking "room" he had seen from the stalls was mainly composed of rectangular wooden frames covered with canvas.

The manager said:

"This way."

Lawrence followed Friern through what he later discovered to be the O.P. entrance and found himself on the stage set. He felt vaguely uncomfortable and out of place.

"Victor! Thank the Lord you're here." A man in a loose fitting jacket and flannel trousers broke away from a group of people on the other side of the stage and hastened towards them.

Friern made a hurried introduction. "Mr. Lawrence, Mr. Austin." He took the stage manager's arm. "How is she, Jack?" Austin shrugged. "I'm afraid there's no hope. But—." He pointed to the rear of the stage. "I called for a doctor. He's examining her now."

Friern dropped his hand. He said:

"She mustn't die."

Austin's jaw hardened. He turned away without replying.

An efficient little man with deft hands was bending over Lesley's prostrate form. He straightened up as Lawrence and Friern approached him. The manager said:

"Doctor?" on a note of enquiry. Recognizing the unspoken question, the little man shook his head sadly. "I'm afraid there's nothing I can do. The young lady is dead."

Friern swayed. Then he steadied himself with an effort. He asked:

"Did she—did she suffer?"

"I don't think so. Death was probably instantaneous. The bullet appears to have penetrated her heart." He added kindly:

"No, she didn't suffer."

“Thank God for that.” Friern’s voice was firmer. “And thank you, Doctor, for your help.”

“It was little enough, I’m afraid.” The small man hesitated. Then he asked:

“Shall I return to the auditorium?”

Lawrence interposed. “Not yet, Doctor. The police surgeon will be here soon. I expect he’ll want to talk to you.”

“Ah, yes. Of course.”

Lawrence stared down at Lesley’s body with pity in his eyes. He said abruptly:

“I hate waste.”

Victor Friern said:

“She was rather”—he hesitated—“a special person.” His eyes were blind with pain.

Lawrence nodded slowly. Someone tapped him on the shoulder.

“Have you got the devil who did this?” Michael Trent was standing behind him. The actor’s glossy black hair had lost its sleekness, and his handsome features were blurred with emotion. He asked again:

“Have you found the man who murdered Lesley?”

Lawrence said:

“A man has been detained.”

Trent asked hoarsely:

“He—he admitted his guilt?”

Lawrence said dryly:

“He could scarcely deny it. I took the gun away from him myself.”

Friern interrupted. “Michael, you look all in.”

“Never mind that,” snapped Trent impatiently. His eyes were feverish. “This man—who is he?”

“I don’t know.” Lawrence was gentle. “He’s under arrest. It won’t take long to identify him.”

“Under arrest!” repeated Trent stupidly. “I don’t understand this at all. How did the police arrive so quickly?”

Lawrence explained patiently. The shock seemed to have scattered the actor’s wits. Algy said:

“Chief Inspector Castle was a member of the audience. So was I.” He added:

“I’m Algy Lawrence.”

Trent stared. "You were in the audience too?"

Lawrence repeated softly:

"Too? What made you say that?"

Trent's eyes flickered. He swallowed. "I—I—" He finished with decision. "I'm going to be sick." He stumbled towards the prompt entrance. A wizened little man in a shabby black jacket tried to assist him, his bony hands plucking ineffectually at the actor's coat. Trent. Pushed him away with a curse. "Damn you, Ben! Leave me alone." He lurched into the wings, leaving Cotall blinking unhappily.

Friern murmured.:

"Poor old Ben! He's Trent's dresser, you see, and devoted to him. But his fussiness drives Michael crazy."

Lawrence nodded. "Trent seems to be near collapse. I wonder why?"

Friern hesitated before replying. Then he said with restraint:

"Michael and Lesley were very good friends."

"I see." The two men fell silent, looking at the girl's dead body.

Friern sobbed suddenly. The sound was so harsh and unexpected that Lawrence started involuntarily, then looked away awkwardly. Friern said:

"Forgive me, please. I'm not becoming hysterical. It was a—a stab of memory."

"Yes?"

The manager was himself again. He explained:

"I was talking to Lesley in her dressing-room before the show. She said —." He broke off. Lawrence prompted him gently.

Friern finished grimly:

"She said it wasn't easy to die at every performance."

Lawrence said uncomfortably:

"A macabre comment."

Friern spread his hands. "She was nervous, tense, and troubled in her mind."

Lawrence showed interest. "Why?"

"I don't know. I've been wondering if that queer message had upset her more than she admitted."

"What message?" asked Lawrence sleepily.

"It was on a card in a letter which was delivered to the theatre this afternoon. It was an odd message. It was something about a fair."

The amiable vagueness in Lawrence's eyes was approaching absolute vacancy. "Where is the card now?"

"In her dressing-room, I suppose. I threw card and envelope into the basket. At Lesley's request."

Lawrence nodded. He said with apparent irrelevance:

"Chief Inspector Castle was given two free seats in the stalls. That wasn't a gift from the theatre, was it?"

"Heavens, no." Friern looked surprised. "At least, well, I'll have to check with my business manager before giving a definite answer. But to the best of my knowledge the free list has been entirely suspended. We're doing good business, you know. We're not playing to the Wood Family."

Algy blinked. "What was that again?"

Friern's smile was fleeting. "Sorry. That was theatrical jargon. I was referring to unoccupied seats; empty benches; the Wood Family, in fact. And as I say, business is good. We don't find it necessary to paper the house."

"Now that," said Algy, "is a term I understand. You don't give away free tickets." He spoke absently. Then he asked abruptly:

"Where are the dressing-rooms?"

Friern's reply was interrupted by the arrival of a number of men in uniform and in plain clothes. Lawrence recognized the man in charge as Detective Inspector Wemyss, a capable investigator who frequently worked with Stephen Castle. Leaving Friern to greet the party, Lawrence slipped through the double doors at the rear of the seat. He noticed in passing that the Webley & Scott revolver had not been replaced on the pegs on the lobby "wall." The inner "room" or lobby terminated abruptly beyond the audience's line of sight. In contrast to the standing set, the rest of the stage was dimly lit. The odour of size solution was very strong.

Both disillusioned and fascinated by his glimpse behind the scenes, Lawrence looked around for the entrance to the dressing-room passage. It was close at hand. Lawrence strolled into the corridor and eyed the walls gloomily. The green distemper was shabbily depressing. Then he smiled with simple pleasure. A girl was standing outside the door to one of the dressing-rooms and Algy, who was an impressionable young man, viewed her with frank approval.

She was slapping the panels with her open hand. "Michael! Michael! Please let me in."

Lawrence coughed discreetly.

The girl's eyes met his, and she said:

"Oh," very softly. She stepped away from the door. She was very attractive. Her hair was styled in a page boy bob; it was dusty blonde and streaked with gold. She smiled, and tiny lines of laughter deepened at the corners of her cerulean eyes. Her mouth was warm and kissable. Algy smiled in return.

"Hallo. Let me introduce myself. My name is—."

"Algy Lawrence," said the girl unexpectedly. "I know."

He angled an eyebrow. "You recognized me?"

"From your photographs. The papers all carried your picture when you solved the Querrin House mystery."

"I see." Lawrence was sombre. The case was one he didn't like to remember. He shrugged away the phantoms. He said lightly:

"And you're Penny Valentine."

"That's right."

Lawrence said:

"I'm glad I crossed the barrier of the footlights. Though I wish we had met under pleasanter circumstances." His voice was admiring.

A responsive twinkle of mischievous amusement showed in the girl's clear eyes. Then she remembered. She said gravely:

"I can't pretend I liked Lesley. But I'm sorry she was killed."

Lawrence drew a bow at a venture. "And sorry," he murmured, "that Michael had to watch her die?"

"Poor darling." Penny's eyes were troubled. "He's locked himself in his dressing-room." Her lips trembled. "And he won't let me in."

"There are times," said Algy mildly, "when a man prefers to be alone. Trent is probably being sicker than a dog."

"Oh!" Amusement, sympathy, and confusion showed in her face. She retreated along the corridor.

Lawrence gazed after her, admiring the supple motion of her body, the graceful sway of her hips. Then he opened the door marked with the golden star and walked into the dressing-room. It was empty. Lawrence located the basket by the dressing-table and examined the interior eagerly. "Ah!" He picked up the card with the enigmatic message, holding it delicately by the edges. He placed it carefully on the table top. WE MEET AT PADDINGTON Fair.

Lawrence read the words aloud. He murmured. "I wonder... "

A heavy tread sounded in the passage outside. Algy turned to discover Castle in the doorway. Castle gave a good-humoured growl. "Look here, young Algy. Are you tampering with the evidence again?"

Lawrence grinned an apology. "Sorry, Steve. My curiosity outran my discretion." He indicated the card. "I found that in the basket."

Castle pursed his heavy lips. He lumbered across the room. Then he swore violently. "Paddington Fair!"

"Yes. Friern tells me the message came by the mid-day delivery. It was addressed to Lesley Christopher"—Lawrence stooped over the basket again—"and was enclosed in this envelope." He added:

"The postmark is London, S.E.1."

Castle confessed his bewilderment with another blood-curdling oath.

Lawrence said wearily:

"I know what it means, Steve. So should you"

"Eh?"

There was a bitter taste in the young man's mouth. "A line from the play gave me the clue. I saw the truth—too late."

Castle scowled. "You'd better explain."

Lawrence sighed. "You recall the reference to Tyburn Tree?"

"What about it?"

"The Tree was the gallows. And Tyburn is in the parish of—"

"Paddington." Castle flushed with excitement. "Hell's blazes! You mean...."

"When our forefathers went to Paddington Fair," said Lawrence dully, "they went to witness a public execution."

He closed his eyes wearily. "We accepted a killer's invitation. We came to the Fair today."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Castle sighed noisily. “So that was it! A prosy message of defiance. ‘See me commit murder. And catch me if you can.’”

Lawrence shivered. “A challenge like that,” he muttered, “is crazy.”

“It’s the product of a mind unhinged,” agreed the Chief Inspector. “Mervan lusted for revenge.”

“Mervan?”

“We’ve identified the man. He’s an old... acquaintance of mine.” He laughed uneasily. “Funny—I nearly said friend.”

Lawrence regarded him, thoughtfully. “You have a story to tell.”

“Later,” said Castle flatly. He sounded tired. “There’s work to be done.” Lawrence followed him out of the dressing-room. As they made their way back to the stage, Castle grunted an aside. “I found two spent shells on the floor of Mervan’s box—the cartridge cases ejected from his pistol. Calibre .25.” Lawrence nodded absently. This was routine work. Matched with the bullets from the wall and Lesley’s body, the empty cases would prove the prisoner’s guilt.

“You’re going to give him a fair trial,” said Algy suddenly, “and then you’re going to hang him.”

Castle said patiently:

“This isn’t a frame-up. There’ll be no miscarriage of justice.”

Lawrence grinned a rueful apology. “I know, Steve. I’m sorry. But I don’t like capital punishment.”

Castle replied grimly:

“I don’t like murder.”

They went through the prompt entrance in silence. Lawrence discovered that much had been done during his comparatively short absence. Lesley’s body had been removed and was now on its way to the mortuary. Algy glanced at the chalk outline and the red stain which marked the place where the girl had fallen, then looked away with clouded eyes. The stuffed bear seemed to be snarling in triumph.

Detective Inspector Wemyss approached his chief and spoke in low tones. “The police surgeon has just left, sir. He has promised to perform the post-mortem at once. He will let you have the bullet as soon as he recovers it from the dead woman’s body.”

“Good.” Castle grunted approval. “I shall want an immediate report from ballistics.”

“Right, sir. The .25 pistol and the two ejected cartridge cases are on their way to the laboratory. And I’m about to recover the second bullet from the wall of that box.”

“I’m glad,” said Castle ferociously, “that we haven’t got to dig it out of Mr. Lawrence’s chest.” He glowered at his friend affectionately. “You took an awful chance, young Algy.”

Lawrence shrugged. “Someone had to tackle Mervan.”

Castle asked Wemyss:

“Have you begun to question the audience?”

The Detective Inspector nodded. “Each person will be interrogated before leaving the theatre.”

Lawrence looked surprised. “Are you taking statements from everybody?”

“No. Just names and addresses.”

Castle broke in:

“Every man, woman, and child in the auditorium witnessed a murder this afternoon. We must know where to find them.”

“I suppose so.”

Wemyss lowered his voice. “What shall we do with these people, sir?” He indicated the men and women huddled together in a corner of the set.

Castle grunted. “I’ll speak to ‘em now.” He stepped forward and cleared his throat noisily. “Ladies and gentlemen! Your attention, please.” Silence fell like a blanket. The Chief Inspector said:

“We shall be taking statements from you later. Meanwhile, those of you in costume”—Castle’s gaze fell on Denzil and his companion, an attractive young girl in a fringe—“may go to your dressing-rooms and change. I must ask you, however, not to wander about the theatre. And nobody should leave the building without permission.”

There was an uncertain pause. Castle coughed. “Thank you. That’s all for the moment.” Rather to his surprise, no one moved.

Then Victor Friern detached himself from the group and advanced with the air of a spokesman. Castle eyed the manager's sunken cheeks. The tragedy had evidently affected Friern deeply. "Chief Inspector—" It was a false start. The manager's voice pitched oddly, then faltered and died away.

Castle growled, not unsympathetically:

"Yes, Mr. Friern. What is it?"

"Your—your work will be finished soon?"

"I imagine so." Castle squinted inquisitively. "Why do you ask?"

Friern said baldly:

"We have another performance scheduled for this evening."

Castle stared. "You're surely not asking me for permission to give a show tonight? After all that's happened?"

"I am."

"But good God, man! No one will expect you to open tonight."

"We like to keep faith with the public."

Lawrence and Castle exchanged glances. Then Algy murmured:

"If somebody says 'The show must go on', I shall probably cry aloud."

Friern said with dignity:

"The phrase may be hackneyed. But I can assure you it represents a very real tradition of the theatre."

Castle thought:

he speaks sincerely. But... He shrugged. "Suppose I agree? You've lost your leading lady."

"She has—had a competent understudy."

Castle scowled thoughtfully. "Well, now. We shall probably have completed our routine work here before eight o'clock."

Friern said, not eagerly:

"That gives us time enough." He gestured. "This is a standing—that is, a permanent—set."

Castle spread his hands. "Very well, then. You can give the performance. But remember," he warned, "our work takes precedence. I shall expect you all to hold yourselves at our disposal."

Friern nodded. His face was slightly flushed.

Castle beckoned to Wemyss. "I'm leaving you in charge. You know what to do."

Lawrence asked: "Where are we going, Steve?"

“We?” echoed the Chief Inspector. “This is no case for you, young Algy. No sealed rooms. No black magic. No hocus pocus. Just a straightforward killing.” He finished sarcastically:

“Mere routine.”

Lawrence said:

“I wonder.”

Castle started. “What the devil do you mean by that?”

Lawrence grinned lazily. “Nothing, probably. But I’d like to see the case through to the end.”

Castle grunted. “All right, then. Come with me. I’m going to question Richard Mervan.”

The two friends left.

Douglas Denzil waited till they had disappeared from view, then crossed the stage and clapped Victor Friern on the back. “Good work, sir. You handled the Dogberry well.” He was grinning hugely.

Friern regarded him with distaste. The manager said coldly:

“It’s hardly a matter for congratulations. I don’t think of it as a victory. I simply want to keep faith with the public.”

“Of course,” said Denzil on a subtle note of mockery.

The manager frowned. He said with a spurt of irritation:

“Stop smiling!”

Denzil’s expression sobered. But his eyes remained lit with malicious amusement behind the mask of gravity. He murmured. “I’m sorry.” He coughed. “May I break the good—the news to Penny?”

“I suppose so.” Friern looked tired. “Someone must tell her to be ready. It might as well be you.”

“Right.” Denzil capered away. Arriving in the dressing-room passage, he paused for a moment outside the door marked with the golden star. Setting his face in a grotesque caricature of melancholy, he bowed to the emblem. Then he knocked on the adjoining door and glanced into Trent’s dressing-room.

Michael was huddled in a chair, looking rather the worse for wear. Ben Cotall, having at last reclaimed his charge, was fussing round him anxiously.

Denzil said:

“Hallo, Michael.”

Trent spoke without any particular emotion. “I wish I’d kept that damn’ door locked.”

“Naughty man,” said Denzil calmly. “You can’t offend me, Michael.”

“I can try.”

Ben Cotall began anxiously:

“Gentlemen, please—.”

“Shut up, Ben,” said Denzil pleasantly. “I have news for you, Michael. The show goes on tonight.”

“What! But I can’t—I mean—oh, hell!” Michael bit his lip.

Denzil grinned maliciously. “It’s too late for objections now. Friend Victor has made up his mind. And the Dogberry is amenable.”

Trent ran a monogrammed comb through his thickly-growing hair. Then he swore softly and dropped the comb carelessly.

Denzil’s eyes narrowed. “Squeamish, Michael?” His smile was feline. “You don’t have to go on tonight. I’d be happy to deputize.”

Trent’s response was terse.

Denzil retreated gracefully. “Don’t worry, Michael. I’m not trying to step into your shoes. Or tread on your toes. The part is yours.”

Outside the door he added softly:

“For the moment....”

Penny Valentine looked up with a start when the door of her dressing room opened. “Who’s there? Oh, it’s you, Douglas.” Her voice flattened. “Don’t you bother to knock?”

Denzil ignored the question. “Hallo, sweet. I bring good news.”

“That’s nice,” said Penny equably. She smeared grease over her face.

Denzil pointed his toes like a dancer. He cried:

“Marilyn the first is dead. Long live Marilyn the second.”

Penny was removing her make-up. Her fingers faltered for a moment, then busied themselves again.

She said wearily:

“That may be a joke, Douglas. But I don’t feel like laughing.”

Denzil pouted. “I’m not fooling, Penny. THE FINAL TROPHY goes on tonight with you in the lead.”

The girl stared at her reflection in the mirror. “But the police—.”

“Have given us permission.”

Penny said:

“It’s hard to believe.”

Denzil put his hands on her shoulders. “This is your big chance. Make the most of it.”

Penny whispered:

“But to get it like this, because Lesley was killed....” Her eyes shadowed.

“I feel as if I were robbing a grave.”

CHAPTER NINE

Chief Inspector Castle said gravely:

“I’m speaking unofficially. But I think I ought to tell you”—he coughed behind his hand—that you might be wiser to keep silent.”

Richard Mervan slumped in the hard-backed chair. “What’s the use? I’m done for anyway.”

“Very well.” Castle scowled at the table between them. He said impersonally:

“Richard Mervan, it is my duty to warn you that anything you say will be taken down and may be used in evidence.”

The prisoner’s mouth twitched.

He said abruptly:

“For God’s sake, give me a cigarette.”

Castle nodded a signal. Lawrence stepped forward and held out his silver case. When the cigarette was between the prisoner’s lips, Lawrence reversed the case and flicked up a flame from the lighter in its spine.

Mervan inhaled deeply. “Thanks.”

He blew out a streamer of smoke.

Castle waited patiently. Lawrence retired to a seat in the corner. The station shorthand writer flipped open his notebook.

Mervan took the cigarette away from his mouth.

He spoke with uneasy bravado. “Well, Inspector. Where shall we begin?”

“Anywhere you please.” Castle’s voice was gentle, almost sympathetic. “I’ll help you compose a formal statement later.”

Mervan asked abruptly:

“You know why I killed her, of course?”

Castle nodded. “She was Lesley, the girl who betrayed you.”

“Yes.” Mervan’s cheeks hollowed. He forced a laugh. The sound was harsh and ugly.

Castle prompted him gently. “Tell me about her.”

Mervan said desperately:

“I loved her... “

He went on:

“It all began on the day a thug tried to rob me outside Head Office. I downed him with a simple piece of Judo—it was one of the tricks that the Army taught me. I take no particular credit for it.

“But I did save the bank’s money. And I hoped for some small reward.”

“Did you get it?” asked Castle.

Mervan laughed shortly. “I received,” he said bitterly, “a personal letter of commendation from the Directors. Which had no cash value.” He dragged smoke from the cigarette. “That was the start of it all. My discontent. And my friendship with Lesley.”

He paused, remembering. He said angrily:

“I can see now how she played upon my resentment. I could have forgotten the disappointment in time. But she kept reminding me about it. She acted as if the Directors had cheated me—she spoke as if they owed me something....

“I thought she was genuinely indignant and speaking out of sympathy and friendship. But I can see now that she was preparing me for what I had to do.”

He choked. He said:

“I thought she loved me. I knew I loved her. She seemed so good, so kind, so beautiful—.”

He broke off with a stifled sob.

Castle waited patiently.

Mervan bit his lip hard. His voice was unsteady. “I asked her to marry me. She refused. I said I wanted to make a home for her. She said you needed money to make a home.”

He hunched his shoulders. “She was right, of course. An over-worked, under-paid bank clerk couldn’t hope to provide for her. She wouldn’t be content with love in a cottage. She wanted a place in the sun.

“Money became an obsession with me. With it, I could buy happiness... I could have Lesley.”

A hungry look came into his eyes. “I watched the money pass to and fro across the counter, watched it packed each night in the vaults. I kept thinking about the strong-room. All that money, the property of rich, idle, worthless people... They had so much, while I had so little.

“I talked to Lesley. I felt as though I were in a trap. She asked me if— if I had the courage to break free. I was afraid, but I had to listen. She put into

words all the secret longings and convictions which crowded my mind.... “

Mervan choked.

He went on:

“She showed me it was only fear that restrained me. I had taken nothing. But here—inside—I was no longer an honest man.

“I had no more illusions. I was ready to do whatever she wished. And then she gave me the keys.”

Mervan stared at his hands. “I could hardly believe my eyes. There were the keys—duplicates of those held only by the senior officials. Lesley said that they had been struck from wax impressions taken from the originals.

“I pressed her for an explanation. She said only that the impressions had been taken of the keys while they were in Spurling’s charge, without his knowledge, and in circumstances that made complaints impossible... You understand?

“I was mad with jealousy. But she swore that there was no longer anything between them. And I wanted her too much to let my anger take command.

“She bewitched me. I was ready to do anything for her.”

Mervan looked up. “Once the decision had been made, the rest seemed easy. We had only to wait for a favourable opportunity.

“Lesley resigned from the bank and we kept our association a secret. It seemed the safest course.” Mervan laughed bitterly. “And it was— for her.”

He brooded. “I waited patiently. At last, the moment came. My name went up on the duty list to hold the keys one Saturday. That meant they would be in my charge for the week-end—and the strong-room wouldn’t be examined until Monday morning.

“It was Spurling’s turn to hold the other set of keys, as it happened. That was the irony of fate—nothing more.

“We locked up the safes, the Accountant and I, and then we left the bank. But I returned in the middle of the afternoon and let myself into the building.

“I had my keys and Lesley’s duplicates. I opened the strong-room and filled up a suit-case with money. It was as easy as that.”

Sweat glistened thinly on Mervan’s forehead. He continued in a low voice:

“I went to join Lesley. We were going to smuggle the loot abroad and build a new life in another country... Lesley was waiting in her flat. I

‘phoned her first to let her know everything was all right, then went to her with the money.’”

Mervan finished in queerly hurried tones, as though forcing himself to speak. “She called me into the bedroom. I went through the door... Something crashed on my head. My brain seemed to swell and burst with pain.”

His eyes were tortured. He whispered:

“Somebody had been waiting behind the door. But I saw no one but Lesley. She was looking at me. And laughing.”

There was a long silence. Then—

“I came to in an alley-way behind the flat. I struggled into the street, then collapsed again... You know what happened next.”

The cigarette had smouldered down to Mervan’s fingers. He dropped the charred stump into an ash-tray and continued wearily:

“All those years in prison... Only one thing kept me alive. The hatred in my heart.”

Castle sighed noisily. He spoke with genuine feeling. “You should have listened to me. I told you to forget revenge, to choose justice.”

Mervan laughed bitterly. “I could have told you the whole story. You might have believed me. You might have found Lesley. Would you have been able to convict her?”

“Perhaps.”

“And perhaps not. I wanted a real revenge. I wanted—her life.”

Castle sighed again. “Go on.”

Mervan slumped in his chair. “I came out of prison with only one thought in my mind. To find Lesley.”

“And exact retribution.”

“Of course. I had one clue—her name.”

Castle looked puzzled. “Her name?”

“Yes. ‘Barre’—that meant nothing to her. But ‘Lesley’ was a lovely name, and she was proud of it. I knew she would never change it.”

“I see,” said Castle heavily. A small vanity, he thought. And yet it had helped to bring a girl to her death.

The muttering voice went on. “One of the Aid Societies helped me find a job. In my free time, I carried on the search.”

“And then?”

“I found her.”

Castle grunted. “Did it surprise you to discover she was an actress?”

Mervan said:

“I might have guessed.” His voice trembled. “She made me believe her when— when she told me she loved me.”

Castle said nothing.

Mervan continued:

“I saw her picture in a magazine.” He paused, remembering the thrill of discovery. The face in the photograph had altered with the years, but it was still Lesley’s. And it was still lovely.

“I went to the theatre. I sat in the gallery, watching performance after performance.”

He pressed his palms against the table top, staring down at the backs of his hands. “I wanted to watch her without being seen. So I went into the gods.” His waxy face grew animated. “I felt like a god myself. A god with the power to snuff out a human life.”

He looked up. He said more calmly:

“I bided my time. I could afford to wait. I knew that she couldn’t escape me now.

“I think she glimpsed me from time to time, in the theatre or on the streets. It didn’t matter. Nothing could rob me of my revenge... I made my plans.

“The gun itself wasn’t hard to find. No, Inspector”—he smiled wryly—“I shan’t tell you where I got it. I used to be in prison, remember. I made some useful contacts.”

Castle knew all about the underworld’s illegal trafficking in firearms. He growled:

“Go on.”

“I booked that box for this afternoon. It gave me the best position for a shot at the stage. Besides, there was an exit nearby.

“I came late—deliberately. I had my .25 automatic. I waited for the close of the first scene of the third act. For the moment when Lesley—died.”

His voice faded.

He remembered the pleasure-pain of the moments spent waiting for the covering blast of the blank cartridge on stage. He recalled the feel of the gun against his gloved hand, the flame-spitting roar as the bullet sped towards its target. There was a hot, salty taste as of blood in his mouth.

He said:

“I turned the make-believe into reality. And as the bullet crashed into her body, I think she knew that I was the man who killed her.”

His eyes blazed suddenly, accentuating the prison-pallor of his cheeks.

“That was the instant—when we were one at last.”

There was silence in the room. Lawrence shivered and licked dry lips.

Castle shifted his bulky frame. He said brusquely:

“You’ve left something out.”

Mervan shook his head. “I don’t think so... I was giddy with triumph. I laughed, I remember. I was a god.”

The glow faded from his eyes. “I thought I could manage to escape before you discovered the girl was dead. But your friend vaulted into the box. You know the rest.”

Castle scowled. “I was talking about the cards. The messages sent to Miss Barre and to me. About Paddington Fair.”

Mervan looked puzzled.

He said wearily:

“I sent no cards. I know nothing of Paddington Fair.”

Chief Inspector Castle looked tired.

He said tonelessly:

“Well, there it is. Mervan’s full statement, signed and witnessed.”

Lawrence commented unhappily:

“His death warrant.”

Castle squinted at him. He said:

“We can’t afford to be squeamish. Mervan is a murderer. He will have to pay the penalty.”

“I know.” Lawrence scuffed his foot against the carpet. Mervan had been taken back to his cell; the two friends were alone.

A tiny frown marred the serenity of Algy’s pleasant face. He said abruptly:

“I can’t understand why Mervan persists in denying he sent those cards.”

“Neither can I. But it doesn’t matter.”

“Doesn’t it? I wonder. He might be telling the truth. If so....” He shrugged helplessly.

Castle stared. He said doggedly:

“Mervan must have sent those cards. Everything points to it.”

Lawrence nodded slowly. “A crazy message of defiance to you. A melodramatic warning to his victim. Well, perhaps. But—.”

Castle said:

“The proof is self-evident. Take the message to me. It was addressed to Detective Inspector Stephen Castle. That was my rank at the time Mervan was convicted. He didn’t know I’d been promoted.

“Besides that, the post-marks on both envelopes were the same. London, S.E.1. Now look at Mervan’s address. It’s in the same area.”

He concluded:

“Everything fits neatly.”

Lawrence said softly:

“Too neatly.”

Castle’s head jerked up. “Hey?”

Lawrence grinned lazily. He said:

“Steve, old friend. This looks like a frame-up.”

Castle roared like a wounded bull. “What the devil do you mean by that? Hell’s blazes! I never saw a clearer case in my life.”

He stopped to draw breath. He grumbled:

“We’ve established the motive, opportunity, and means. We made an on-the-spot arrest and we’ve obtained a full confession. What more can you possibly want?”

Lawrence didn’t reply directly. Instead, he said dreamily:

“Consider the situation. A man commits—or appears to commit—murder. In the presence of hundreds. All of them, mark you, potential witnesses for the prosecution. What’s more, the man himself is convinced of his guilt and makes a full confession. And yet—.”

He paused. Then he finished lightly:

“He’s innocent.”

Castle stared at his friend for a long time.

Then he said heavily:

“And a brilliant young amateur sets himself the impossible task of proving the man’s innocence. Is that what you mean?”

Algy laughed. “Don’t worry, Steve I was only day-dreaming. But you must admit it would have been a wonderful situation.”

He was saved from Castle’s wrath by the timely arrival of the station sergeant. “Telephone for you, sir.”

The Chief Inspector grunted: “It’s probably Wemyss. He knows I’m here.”

He stumped out of the room. Lawrence stared out of the window moodily.

He had an uneasy feeling that the case was far from finished. And yet....

When Castle came back, he had an odd look on his rugged face.

He spoke in an uncharacteristically subdued voice.

“We’d better go back to the theatre, young Algy. Something has happened.”

CHAPTER TEN

Trudy Ann was a very pretty girl. She was also extremely determined. She said:

“You really must help me, Douglas.”

Denzil gave her a feline smile. “You fret too much, child. You know your lines. And I don’t feel like rehearsing now.”

Trudy Ann pouted. “It’s all very well for you. But it isn’t easy for me. Penny is playing ‘Marilyn’ tonight. That means I take the second lead. It’s my big chance. I don’t want to spoil it.”

They were standing at the back of the stage, well beyond the set. Ignoring the notice stencilled on the bare brick wall behind him, Douglas Denzil lit a cigarette.

He sighed out smoke. “You’ve persuaded me, wench. I’ll help you run through your lines. Though to hear them now—.”

He affected a shudder. “It’s a wretched play.”

“It is not,” said the girl firmly. “Mr. Windsor has written a very good play. With a fat part for you.”

Denzil rejected the contention. “For Trent you mean. Now if I had his part—.” His eyes gleamed. “Ah, well. Where shall we go for this impromptu rehearsal?”

“To the greenroom,” suggested Trudy Ann. “Or are the police there?” she concluded doubtfully.

Denzil shrugged. “They’re everywhere, my dear. They’re positively crawling out of the walls... But we can try—.”

“Denzil!”

The stage manager was hurrying towards them. He frowned at the cigarette between the actor’s fingers, then gestured towards the notice. “You know better than that, Douglas. Smoking is forbidden here.”

Denzil looked bored. “You’re stuffy, Jack. But”—he twitched his shoulders—“I won’t argue. Come along, child.” He took the girl’s hand. “Let’s be off.”

He tossed the cigarette away. It bounced off the side of a fire bucket and rolled along the floor, its tip glowing red.

Denzil left with the girl. Austin stared after him angrily.

Detective Inspector Wemyss came out of the dressing-room passage. Catching sight of the stage manager, he walked towards him.

Austin was stooping to recover the discarded cigarette. He pinched it out, then dropped it tidily into the fire bucket. Something caught his attention. He smoothed away the sand and picked something out of the bucket. "That's odd," he muttered.

Wemyss coughed.

Austin glanced up with a wondering gleam in his eyes. He said quietly. "Look at that."

Wemyss stared at the object resting on the stage manager's open palm. It was a blank cartridge.

"There are five more buried in the sand here," said the Detective Inspector. He was squatting on his heels beside the fire bucket. "Five plus one makes—."

"Six," muttered Austin. "Six cartridges. That's a full load—."

"For the average revolver. Yes." Wemyss looked at the stage manager thoughtfully. He stood up.

He said on a note of enquiry:

"Such a gun is fired in the course of the play?"

"Yes. It's a Webley & Scott."

"I haven't seen it."

"No." Austin clutched his pocket. "As a matter of fact, I had forgotten all about it. I've been carrying it about with me. Trent gave it to me immediately after the curtain fell—."

"Quite," said Wemyss shortly. "May I see the gun now?"

"Yes. Of course." Austin pulled the revolver out of his pocket. Wemyss took it from his hand and studied it carefully.

The stage manager mumbled. "Please don't take it away. We shall need it for the evening performance. I was about to reload it."

"With blanks, of course."

"Yes. As I do at every performance."

Wemyss broke open the revolver and examined the magazine. His face changed oddly.

He asked:

“Did Michael Trent fire this gun on stage?”

Austin stared. “Yes.”

“At Miss Christopher?”

“Yes. I—.”

“You took it from him immediately afterwards?”

“You know I did,” snapped the S.M. impatiently. “Why do you ask these pointless questions?”

“Because,” said the Detective Inspector woodenly, “there are five live cartridges in the cylinder of this revolver. And an exploded case in the chamber under the hammer.”

The revolver had been tied to a piece of thin wood, through which holes had been bored for the fastenings. Chief Inspector Castle was scowling at it pensively.

Detective Inspector Wemyss was saying:

“It was an odd discovery, sir. I thought it best to notify you at once.”

Castle nodded. ‘I’m glad you did.’ He raised his voice. “Mr. Friern! Will you come here, please?”

They were sitting in the general manager’s office. Victor Friern came forward with laggard steps.

Castle showed him the revolver. “I’d like a formal identification. Is this the gun used in your play?”

Friern bowed his head. “Yes. It’s a Webley & Scott, calibre .32.”

“Thank you.” Castle scratched his chin. “Well, sir. You heard what the Inspector said. This revolver was found to be loaded with live ammunition. And a bullet has been fired from it recently.”

“I can’t explain,” said Victor Friern. His voice was harsh and troubled. “We use blanks – “

“Like the ones concealed beneath the sand in the fire bucket?”

“Yes.” Friern’s hands were trembling. “Loading the gun—that’s Austin’s responsibility. Wix, the property master, brings him the blank cartridges half an hour before each show. Austin sees the revolver is fully loaded—.”

Castle interposed a question. “You mean there are always six blanks in the magazine? Wouldn’t one be enough?”

Friern replied. "Austin is a cautious man. He checks and double checks. As stage manager, it's his job to see that nothing goes wrong. With only one blank in the gun, he felt there would always be the danger—however slight—of a misfire. And if the hammer fell on an empty chamber the whole effect of the first scene of the third act would be ruined."

"I see." Castle rubbed his heavy jowl.

He asked Wemyss:

"Have you questioned Austin?"

"Not in detail."

Castle sighed. "All right. Let's go back-stage."

Austin spoke defensively. "I can swear to this, Inspector. The gun is in precisely the same condition now as it was when I took it from Michael Trent."

Castle studied him shrewdly. The stage manager seemed sincere. The Chief Inspector felt sure he was telling the truth. And yet....

Castle grimaced. Austin looked about him nervously. The two men were standing on stage, like actors waiting for the curtain to rise.

The Chief Inspector said wearily:

"Let's go back to the beginning. Is this the revolver fired on stage?"

"Yes, of course. It's the only gun in the theatre."

"Describe it, please."

"But why—Oh, very well." Austin spoke rapidly, impatiently. "It's a Webley & Scott revolver, calibre .32. I can't tell you the number, because it has been filed off. But it's easily identifiable. The gun has a long, jagged scratch on the barrel and some initials—"H.W."—engraved above the butt."

Castle nodded. "That's correct. Well, now." He thumbed his chin. "You saw that the gun was loaded with blanks for the atinee?"

"Yes."

Castle considered. "Hmmm... Friern tells me that you follow a definite routine. The property master brings you a box of blank cartridges half an hour before each performance. You load the revolver in his presence, making sure there are six blanks in the magazine. You then place the gun on the pegs in the lobby 'wall' and return the box to Wix. Right?"

"Yes, that's my normal routine. I ---."

A noisy argument broke out in the wings. Austin swallowed the rest of the sentence and swung round nervously. "What the devil's that?"

He hurried through the prompt entrance and added his voice to the clamour.

Castle followed to discover Algy Lawrence conducting a long distance conversation with a stage-hand who was half-way up a long iron ladder stretching up to the grid above.

The Chief Inspector made expressive noises. "Algy! What the blazes -- -."

Lawrence grinned. "We're having a slight difference of opinion, Steve. I want the curtain raised. Our friend aloft considers it should remain where it is."

The stage-hand appealed to his chief. "Mr. Austin! Your orders was to keep it dahn."

The S.M. said tiredly:

"I'm not giving the orders any more. Ask the Chief Inspector."

Castle growled an aside to Lawrence. "What the hell are you playing at? If this is one of your damn' fool jokes—"

Algy's pleasant face sobered. "It's no joke, Steve. I give you my word."

Castle squinted thoughtfully. Turning to the stage manager, he said mildly:

"Raise the curtain, please."

Austin shrugged. Craning backwards, he called out a brief instruction. The stage-hand clattered up the ladder into the flies.

Castle hunched his shoulders. "What happens now?"

"Now," said Lawrence lightly, "we reconstruct the crime."

As they returned through the prompt entrance, the curtain began to rise. Castle stared into the empty auditorium and felt vaguely disturbed.

Lawrence said cheerfully:

"Ghostly, isn't it?"

Austin re-entered. Algy hailed him. "I'm going to ask you for more help."

Austin shrugged assent.

Castle was restive. "For Heaven's sake, Algy."

"Patience, Steve." Lawrence's eyes were unusually serious. "Mr. Austin, I'm asking you to deputize for Michael Trent. Steve, you'll stand in for Richard Mervan."

"Eh?"

“Into the box, old friend.” Lawrence spoke with gentle firmness. “Mervan’s gun has gone to the laboratory, so we’ll have to improvise. Use your pipe, Steve. I’d call it a deadly weapon. Its effects are well-nigh lethal.”

Castle allowed himself to be shepherded across the footlights. Still clutching the board to which the revolver had been tied, he stepped from the corner of the stage to the ledge of the box, then manoeuvred his bulk down into the box itself.

“Right.” Lawrence pulled his ear thoughtfully. “Mr. Austin, will you come here, please.”

The S.M. obeyed. Lawrence said quietly:

“Let’s speak plainly. The revolver has been in your possession since the curtain fell this afternoon. You could therefore—since then—have tampered with the ammunition in the cylinder. The Chief Inspector must have considered that possibility.”

Austin looked unhappy. “I swear—.”

Lawrence interrupted without discourtesy. “If you have any such suspicions, Steve, discard them.” He paused, then said slowly:

“I’m convinced of this. If Austin had broken open the gun immediately after taking it from Trent’s hand, he would have found it in exactly the same condition as it is now.”

Castle’s chin jerked upward. “But—.”

He broke off.

He said grimly:

“Go on.”

Lawrence continued:

“First, we’ll set the scene.” He glanced at Austin. “This is the prompt side, I believe?”

“That’s so.” Austin cleared his throat. “In case you didn’t know, the actors’ left is the audience’s right. In other words, though a man in the stalls would say we are now standing on the right-hand side of the stage, we are actually positioned Down Left.”

Castle glowered.

Lawrence said amiably:

“And the other side, on the player’s right?”

“Opposite prompt—the O.P. side.”

“Uh huh. Now, as I remember it, Michael Trent was standing close to the footlights when he pulled the trigger.”

“Yes. His heels were almost touching the setting line. That’s the boundary of the acting area, or the point on both sides from which the building of the scene commences. Or to put it another way, it’s an imaginary line running between the edges of the proscenium returns.”

“Let’s not get too technical,” smiled Algy. “In layman’s language, Michael Trent was standing about eighteen inches up-stage from the front curtain. On the extreme edge of the set, with his back to this box.”

Castle grunted:

“With a murderer behind him.”

Austin seemed to hesitate.

Then he said abruptly:

“He told us he felt the wind of the bullet as it passed his body.”

Lawrence nodded. “Take his position, please.”

Austin obeyed.

Lawrence said softly:

“Hold it, now,” and backed across the stage till his heels tapped against the dais.

He said:

“My position now is—uh—Up Right, I suppose. Anyway, I’m standing diagonally opposite to you both.”

They watched him silently. He said:

“Aim, please.” Holding a fountain pen at waist level, Austin pointed it towards Lawrence’s heart. Looking equally sheepish, Castle held up a large and virulent pipe in the manner of a gun.

Lawrence didn’t smile. A rare spark of excitement illumined his sleepy eyes. He said:

“It’s as I thought. The angle of each weapon—and the range of both shots—they were virtually the same.”

He walked away from the dais. Austin held his pose as if frozen. With the dummy “gun” tilted in his hand, his sleeve had fallen away from his wrist.

Lawrence murmured:

“You can relax now. Hallo! You’ve burned your hand.”

Austin bit his lip. “It’s nothing. Nothing at all.”

Behind him in the box, Castle roared impatiently. “What’s all this about?”

Lawrence grinned lazily. "I think you know, Steve. But to put it into words...."

He spread his hands.

He said mildly:

"There were no blanks in the Webley & Scott revolver. Michael Trent fired a live cartridge at Lesley Christopher this afternoon."

Austin's face was as livid as the scar on the back of his hand. "But that's impossible!"

Lawrence shook his head. "No. Somebody took the blanks out of the revolver before Lesley carried it on stage in the third act."

"But I—"

Austin's voice faltered and died.

Lawrence said sympathetically:

"It's the only explanation. You must accept it."

The S.M. nodded dumbly.

Then he said hoarsely:

"But there weren't two wounds in Lesley's body."

"No. Two shots were fired. But one of the bullets missed her."

Castle asked softly:

"Which one?"

Lawrence gave him a fleeting smile. "That's a question which can only be answered by an expert in ballistics."

The Chief Inspector grunted. "To hell with ballistics. I can use my common sense."

Lawrence looked a question.

Castle growled:

"I remember the careful way Trent steadied his revolver. The muzzle was pointing towards the girl's heart."

Austin asked hoarsely:

"Do you mean—he couldn't have missed?"

Castle's silence was an eloquent reply.

Lawrence said suddenly:

"Somebody's laughing at us, Steve. That somebody is the person who really murdered Lesley Christopher. And yet he's safe, because another man has already confessed to the crime—"

He broke off, then said with wonder:

“Richard Mervan is innocent and doesn’t know it himself!”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“In other words,” growled Stephen Castle, “Mervan is only a murderer by intention. But not in fact. Well, it fits the pattern. He’s made a mess of everything else in his life. It isn’t surprising he bungled this.”

Lawrence said softly:

“I’m glad he did.”

Castle shook himself like a huge dog. “So am I. But this means our job has only begun. So let’s set to work... There’s something you haven’t explained.”

“What’s that?”

Castle drummed his fingers on the ledge of the box. “You say both Mervan and Trent fired at Lesley Christopher. One bullet lodged in the girl’s heart. The other missed. Very well, then. Where is it?”

“Ah,” said Lawrence. “That’s the question. But I think I can answer it.”

Motioning his friend to stand clear, the young man jumped lightly into the box. He said:

“Mr. Austin, will you take up your position again, please.”

In an undertone, he continued:

“Look, Steve. By moving to the rear of the box, Mervan could sight his pistol past Trent’s body at the girl’s. Now where was she standing?”

“Diagonally opposite,” replied Castle. “In front of that stuffed bear.”

“Exactly,” said Lawrence with a satisfied smile.

“You mean—?”

“Watch,” grinned Algy. He climbed out of the box on to the stage.

Tapping Austin on the shoulder he asked:

“Is that animal ever moved?”

The S.M. shook his head. “No. This is a standing set. We don’t strike the flats or shift the props.”

“Good.”

The bear seemed to glower at Lawrence’s approach. Algy stopped at the base of the circular dais and stared into the brute’s face.

“He’s no beauty, is he?”

Castle clambered out of the box. “Algy—“ he began. “Patience, Steve.” Lawrence’s eyes slitted. He had taken a miniature torch from his pocket and was playing the light on the animal’s muzzle. ‘I think I see—Ah!’”

“What is it?” asked Castle.

Lawrence side-stepped. “Look there, Steve. Into the bear’s mouth.”

He angled the rays of the torch. The Chief Inspector caught his breath. “By God, yes! There’s a hole inside—.”

He grabbed the light from his young friend’s hand.

Lawrence circled the dais, then raised his fist and tapped the bear lightly on the head.

He said sleepily:

“Bruin has a hard skull. It’s succeeded in stopping a .25 calibre bullet.”

Stephen Castle replaced the telephone receiver and stared blankly at the wall opposite. “That settles it,” he mumbled.

Victor Friern’s anxious voice forced itself through the detective’s barrier of preoccupation. “Chief Inspector—.”

“Huh?” Castle roused himself. He had been called to the telephone immediately after the discovery of the missing bullet, and had left Wemyss in charge on stage. “Yes, Mr. Friern. What is it?”

“Am I—am I to understand that L-Lesley was not murdered by the madman you arrested?”

“I’m afraid so. Unpleasant though it sounds, the brutal truth is this: Miss Christopher was murdered by a member of your own company.”

“But—.” Friern put out a hand to steady himself. “We know that this man Mervan shot at her from his box.”

Castle explained patiently:

“Mervan fired a .25 self-loading pistol—a so-called ‘automatic’. He meant to kill the girl—make no mistake about that. But he missed. Continuing on its upward flight, the bullet passed over Lesley’s head and lodged instead in the skull of the stuffed bear behind her.”

“But why wasn’t the bullet discovered at once?”

“Because it went into the brute’s open mouth,” continued Castle. “The hole of entry was hidden to all but a searching look... We haven’t yet established the exact composition of the stuffing in the bear’s head. It was

tow, I expect. Anyway, it was sufficient to trap the bullet and prevent its exit.”

Friern said unhappily:

“Then Lesley—.”

“Died,” said the Chief Inspector. “But not by Mervan’s hand. By Michael Trent’s.”

“I still can’t believe it! Damn it all,” said the manager helplessly. “You were certain that Mervan had killed her. Why didn’t you discover the mistake at once? You had the evidence. The range of the shot—the angle of the bullet—.”

Castle sighed. He spoke with the same mechanical patience. “Our error was an honest one. Excusable too, I think... Mervan was only a few feet—two or three yards at the most—to the rear of Michael Trent. In other words, the range of each shot was virtually the same. Ballistics can tell us a lot. But it’s impossible to say whether a shot has been fired from five yards or from twenty.

“As for the bullet’s passage into the girl’s breast”—Castle spoke with deliberate flatness, ignoring the pain in the manager’s eyes—“well, a surgeon can’t work miracles. He can indicate the general direction of the bullet, but no more. He can’t be precise to a degree—not when he’s dealing with a human target.”

“I suppose not,” said Friern dully.

Castle fingered his jowl. “In one respect at least,” he growled, “ballistics is an exact science. We can match a bullet with the gun that fired it... Lesley Christopher died with a .32 bullet in her heart. And it was fired from a Webley & Scott revolver.”

“Is that—certain?”

“Yes.” Castle pointed a stubby finger at the telephone. “That call was from the police surgeon. He’d just finished the post mortem. The bullet extracted from the girl’s body was a .32. And the Webley type of rifling—.”

Friern looked blank as the Chief Inspector went into technicalities.

“—was distinctly engraved on the bullet. Seven broad grooves, a right handed twist and narrow lands—that’s the rifling used in all Webley revolvers.”

Friern shrugged helplessly.

Castle muttered:

“All that remains now is to match up the bullet with this revolver.” He indicated the gun which had been tied to a piece of thin wood to preserve all possible clues. “I’ll have it sent to the laboratory at once.”

“I suppose,” said Friern, “that’s hardly more than a formality.”

“A very necessary one,” jerked Castle. “But, as you say, a formality. There’s no further doubt. This is the murder weapon.”

“But I can’t believe ---that Michael Trent—.”

Friern’s protest died away unfinished. Castle eyed him quizzically. “I said that Miss Christopher died by his hand. Not that he murdered her.”

“You mean—.”

“I mean,” replied Castle, “that if”—he stressed the word briefly— “if Trent didn’t know he was firing live ammunition, then he wasn’t guilty of murder.”

Friern murmured his relief.

“Remember I said ‘if’,” warned the Chief Inspector. “All we can be certain of is this. Somebody put six bullets in this revolver. Who? We don’t know. It could have been Michael Trent. For that matter,” added Castle benignly, “it could have been you.”

“I?”

Castle was bland. “Everyone back-stage had access to the weapon.”

“Including the manager,” said Friern with a touch of bitterness. “Well, sir, I had a high regard for Miss Christopher. I wouldn’t have harmed her for the world. Will you take my word for that?”

“Certainly,” returned Castle politely. “But it would help if you could also prove an alibi,”

“I believe I can.” Victor Friern frowned thoughtfully. “Let me see, now. I must prove I was given no opportunity to extract the blanks from the gun and refill the magazine with bullets.”

“Yes.”

Friern’s face cleared. “I was talking with Austin half an hour before the performance. At that time he hadn’t yet loaded the revolver with. Blank cartridges.

“We parted at the entrance to the dressing-room passage. I went into Lesley’s room—.”

“Why?” asked the Chief Inspector.

Friern hesitated, then outlined his conversation with the girl. Castle made no comment.

The manager continued:

“I left when Maggie Boyd arrived.”

“Maggie Boyd?”

“Miss Christopher’s dresser. Lesley had sent her out for some cigarettes... When I left, I found Ben Cotall outside in the corridor. He was looking for Michael Trent.

“We went back to the stage door. When Trent arrived, Cotall helped him to his dressing-room. Michael was—hm!—indisposed.”

“Drunk?” asked Castle mildly.

“Tipsy,” said the manager with a frown. “No more. As I say, his dresser took charge of him... Austin joined me at the stage door. We talked again.

“After Austin left, I exchanged a few words with Short, the door-keeper. Then I left, too.”

“By the stage door?”

“Yes. As you know, there’s a pass-door in the proscenium arch; but it’s always kept locked when the theatre is open to the public.”

“Go on.”

“I walked round the building to the front entrance and went through the foyer into my office. I didn’t go back-stage again. You can check with the stage door-keeper. He never leaves his post during a performance.”

Castle nodded slowly. “I shall question the people you’ve mentioned. If they corroborate your story—as I’ve no reason to doubt they will—I think I can accept your alibi.”

“Thank you, Chief Inspector.” Victor Friern looked relieved. He hesitated, then said with difficulty. “Lesley—Lesley was very dear to me. If there’s anything I can do to help you, I—I—.”

He choked.

Castle eyed him sympathetically.

He said:

“We’ll find the man who murdered her. He won’t escape.”

Friern and Castle came through the O.P. entrance on to the standing set. The men from the Yard were hard at work.

Detective Inspector Wemyss caught his chief’s eye and threaded his way towards him. Castle growled a greeting, then repeated the surgeon’s report to his colleague.

Wemyss received the news unemotionally. “It looks like our work is just beginning.”

“There’s a lot to be done,” agreed the Chief Inspector. “We shall have to take statements from everybody back-stage. Mr. Friern!”

“Yes?”

“I need hardly say that there will be no performance tonight. I’m closing the theatre until further notice... Meanwhile I want to interview every member of your staff who went back-stage this afternoon.”

Friern suggested:

“You could examine them in the greenroom. And I could tell them all to wait for you in the wardrobe room.”

Castle nodded. “That will leave the stage clear for your men, Wemyss.”

Sweeping his hands under the tail of his battered raincoat, he stumped to the rear of the set. Regarding the open double doors up-stage and centre, Castle said:

“As I remember it, the revolver was resting on pegs in the ‘wall’ of the lobby there.”

Friern agreed. “Yes. The ‘wall’, of course, consists of a number of painted flats. The pegs are fixed to a horizontal rail nailed across the frame to the stiles—that is, the uprights—behind the canvas.”

“Is the gun always left on the pegs?”

“Yes. Except when Austin hands it to Props to be cleaned and oiled.”

“Props?”

“Wix, the property master.”

“Ah, yes. I’ve yet to speak to him.”

Friern hesitated.

Then he spoke with a trace of discomfort. “I don’t know what the man will tell you. But I advise you to treat his statements with a certain amount of reserve.”

“Huh?” Castle’s eyes snapped. “What d’you mean by that?”

Friern replied with distaste:

“It’s all rather silly. But Wix seemed to imagine he had a grudge against Lesley after she’d spoken to him rather sharply once or twice. He was somewhat resentful.”

Castle said softly:

“Speak plainly, sir. Are you suggesting that Wix may have put real bullets instead of blanks into the revolver?”

“Heavens, no!” The manager seemed shocked. “I meant only to warn you that the man’s evidence might be distorted—no, that’s not the right word—might be coloured by his dislike for Miss Christopher... As for loading the gun, he leaves that to Austin.”

Castle nodded absently. He walked through the open doors.

The tail of his eye caught a flicker of movement. A vague figure was disappearing round the last flat of the lobby “wall” into the obscurity of the deserted stage behind.

“What the—.”

Castle took a stride forward, then stopped with a shrug. The eavesdropper, whoever he was, was gone.

The Chief Inspector turned back to the pegs in the “wall.” On those flimsy supports, the gun had rested. A gun that had been harmless until an unknown hand had filled it with six shiny messengers of death. An unknown hand, an unknown man.

Castle’s face was grim. He spoke his thoughts aloud.

He said:

“You have a name, my friend. And I’ll know it soon, I promise you.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Algy Lawrence looked up with a smile as the door of the greenroom opened.

“Hi, Steve. Make yourself at home.”

Castle gave a good-humoured groan. His young friend was sprawled in a saddlebag chair with his blond head on a cushion and his feet on a magazine rack. A large, heavy volume lay open on his lap.

“Algy! What on earth are you doing now?”

“Merely examining the theatre library.” Lawrence indicated the packed shelves at his side. “I’ve found some interesting volumes. For instance,”—a glint of bibliomania showed in his lazy blue eyes—“take this one here....”

Castle held up his hand.

“I refuse to hold up another case while you talk about your blasted books.”

Lawrence grinned.

He said disrespectfully:

“I know policemen only read books when they are trying to find an excuse to ban and burn ‘em. But honestly, Steve, this one should interest you. It’s a bound volume of the Gentleman’s Magazine for 1783—.”

“Not,” said Castle firmly, “another word.”

He stared around.

An electric fire glowed in one corner. The room had been furnished with a number of easy-chairs and was well supplied with books and periodicals. Some theatrical posters and portraits hung on walls which had been painted a cheerful green. It was, Steve decided, a cosy place.

He said with approval:

“This will do.”

“For what—the inquisition?”

“For the interviews,” returned Castle heavily.

“That which we call a rose,” quoted Algy, “by any word would smell as sweet.”

He replaced a marker between the leaves of the volume on his lap, then slipped the book into its place on the shelves.

“Algy—.”

“What’s in a name?” mused Lawrence. “What indeed?”

He said with maddening persistence:

“Really, Steve, you ought to read the Gentleman’s Magazine for 1783.... “

Austin cracked his knuckles nervously. His glance flickered towards the expressionless man with the open note-book, then returned to meet the level gaze of the Chief Inspector.

Castle said:

“You will appreciate the importance of your evidence. I don’t have to tell you that it’s vital. Well, now! Let’s start from the beginning. Your name and occupation, please.”

Austin swallowed. “Uh... Jack Austin. Stage manager.”

Lawrence interposed a question. “Jack—that’s for John, I suppose?”

“Yes.”

Stephen Castle glared at his young friend.

Algy murmured: “I thought so,” and seemed absurdly pleased with himself.

The Chief Inspector said: “If you’ve finished, we’ll proceed... Mr. Austin! I want you to describe in detail how you loaded the revolver this afternoon.”

The S.M. licked his lips. “I followed my usual routine. The property master brought me the blank cartridges half an hour before the performance —.”

“Just a minute.” Castle squared off his notes with his thumbs. “Victor Friern told me he was talking with you at that time. You hadn’t then loaded the revolver.”

“No. I’m afraid my mind was on other things.” Austin hesitated. “I was waiting for Michael Trent. Actors are always supposed to be in at the half, but Trent had been late throughout the week. He—he drinks.” The S.M. licked his lips. “I discussed the matter with Victor Friern. He told me not to worry.”

Castle consulted his notes. “You left him at the entrance to the dressing-room passage?”

“Yes. I saw him go into Miss Christopher’s room.”

“And then?”

“I returned to my post back-stage. Props brought me the blank cartridges and we went to load the revolver.”

“Ah!” Castle blew out his cheeks. “At what time?”

“About—about five minutes past two.”

“Right. Now describe your actions in detail.”

Austin shifted uncomfortably. “I removed the Webley & Scott from its pegs on the flat—.”

“Is the gun always left on the lobby ‘wall’?”

“Nearly always. We regard it as part of the standing set.”

“Go on.”

“I broke open the gun—it’s a break-down, not a solid frame model – and pulled the extractor.”

“Emptying the magazine?”

“Yes. I had followed my usual routine the night before: I had replaced the gun on its pegs after taking it from Michael Trent after the Third Act curtain... There were five unfired blanks and one exploded blank left in the cylinder.”

“So?”

“I removed the exploded cartridge, examined the five remaining blanks, added another from the box Wix handed to me, then—after testing the action of the gun—I refilled the magazine. Then I replaced the revolver on its pegs.”

“And returned the box of cartridges to Wix?”

“Yes.”

“Hmmm.” Castle thumbed his chin. “Are you absolutely certain that the six cartridges in the gun were blanks?”

Austin was definite. “I couldn’t mistake a live cartridge for a blank. It’s quite different in appearance.” The S.M. paused, then said abruptly. “Wix will confirm my statement. The gun was loaded with harmless blanks when I replaced it upon the peg.”

“M’yes.” The Chief Inspector relaxed in his chair. “Now, then. You and Wix were standing in the lobby. That part of the set is separated from the main scene by double doors. Were those doors open?”

“No. They were closed in readiness for Act One.”

“So,” said Castle softly, “you and the property master were alone at the vital time when the gun was loaded?”

Austin blustered. "I don't like your insinuation!"

"I've made none." The Chief Inspector was dangerously calm. "But I'd like to remind you, Mr. Austin, that a murder has been committed. And your own carelessness made the killer's task an easy one."

Austin flushed, then paled. "I—I don't understand."

Castle said. "Before a stage revolver can be fired, a licence must be obtained from the police."

"We have a licence," cut in the S.M.

"But not, I imagine," said Castle gently, "for this particular gun. Since the registration number has been filed off, it might fairly be described as an illegal weapon."

Austin looked unhappy. "Props supplied the gun."

Castle screwed up his face. "There's another thing. The barrel should have been stopped up. Even if you had done nothing more than plug it with a wad of paper, it would have made the murderer's task more difficult."

Austin fingered the burn on the back of his hand. "You're right, I suppose. But none of us dreamed—."

He broke off, then said flatly:

"We used a property gun at rehearsals. But the author complained that it looked like a toy. The producer agreed: he has a passion for realism. He decided to use a real gun with an unplugged barrel. He wanted nothing to interfere with the full effect of the explosion."

Castle made an ironic interjection. "He wanted the audience to see a convincing murder."

Austin caught his breath, then expelled it with a hiss. "Good Lord!"

Castle asked: "What's the matter?"

The S.M. said slowly, unwillingly:

"The words you used—they startled me. Michael Trent used them in his dressing-room before the show."

"Oh?" Castle scribbled a note. "Repeat them, please."

Austin mumbled reluctantly. "Michael told me: 'This afternoon, I promise you, the audience will see a convincing murder.'"

"As it did." Castle dropped his pencil on the table top. The noise of its fall seemed very loud.

The S.M. said, rather too eagerly. "A coincidence."

"But a strange one," commented the Chief Inspector. "Perhaps you had better explain."

Austin sketched out what he could remember of his conversation with Michael Trent. Castle listened in silence. When the S.M. had finished, the Chief Inspector said dryly:

“That’s interesting. But you haven’t answered my original question.”

Austin’s mouth hardened.

He said sullenly:

“Props and I were alone.”

Lawrence coughed politely. “The double doors were closed. But the lobby isn’t masked on the prompt side, is it?”

“No.” Austin frowned thoughtfully. “It’s visible from the wings. Anybody passing might have seen us. But I don’t think anyone did.”

“It can’t be helped,” said Castle mildly. “We’ll have to take your word.”

Austin spoke with sudden violence. “Why should I want to harm Lesley? Damn you, I loved her!”

Castle’s eyebrows quivered.

Austin looked away, feeling angry and foolish.

Castle asked:

“Did she love you?”

“No.” Austin laughed harshly. “She knew how to use men. But she cared for no one but herself—and Michael Trent.”

Castle remembered the photograph on the wall of the dead woman’s dressing-room. “Trent, eh? I—.”

The door of the greenroom flew open with a bang. Austin started nervously, Castle bit his tongue, and the shorthand writer scored a jagged line over the surface of his open notebook.

Only Lawrence was undismayed. He gazed with evident admiration at the graceful figure of the girl who was standing on the threshold.

“Where,” she enquired, “is Chief Inspector Castle?”

Steve was annoyed. He snapped:

“Young lady, I—.”

He wasn’t allowed to finish. The girl’s teeth met with a tiny click of anger. “Ah! So you—.”

She approached Castle like a particularly beautiful tigress advancing upon its prey.

Lawrence studied her with interest. She had hazel eyes, slanting eyebrows, wide cheekbones, and a tiny but determined chin. She wore her hair in a kiss curl fringe. And her figure was exquisite.

She paused with her hands on her shapely hips.

She said to Castle:

“You are a very nasty man.”

Lawrence chuckled. “Steve, I disown you now.”

Castle spluttered.

The girl transferred her attentions to Lawrence, who met her glare with a winning smile. He said promptly:

“Forgive us, please, for whatever we’ve done to offend you. And may I congratulate you on your performance this afternoon? You were delightful.”

She had a charming smile, as Castle noted with some relief. He scowled horribly to re-establish command of the situation.

“Now, young lady,” he began.

She waved a disdainful hand. “I shall talk to your friend,” she announced. “He is a gentleman.”

Steve turned purple. Lawrence disguised a laugh with a cough. He said:

“You mustn’t be too hard on the Chief Inspector. Uh—what has he done?”

The girl answered tragically:

“He has closed the show.”

Castle shut his eyes, then opened them again. He had already recognized the girl as the actress who had played a small part in the first and second acts: he had last seen her with Douglas Denzil when he had given them permission to go to their dressing-rooms and change. He explained patiently:

“Young lady, I had no alternative. This case is no longer the simple affair it once seemed.”

Lawrence interposed tactfully:

“Closing the theatre—that’s only a temporary measure. It will soon be re-opened. Of course,” he added brightly, “to finish their work, the police will need the help of everyone in the theatre.”

The girl paused, her lovely face puckered in thought.

Then she said sweetly:

“I shall co-operate.”

“Good.” The Chief Inspector breathed heavily. “Please sit down.”

The girl nodded graciously. She seated herself in the chair Austin had vacated, crossing pretty legs and smoothing her skirt over nyloned knees.

Castle said hastily: "Ha-hmmm... Your name, please."

"Trudy Ann."

"Trudy Ann what?"

"Nothing."

Castle growled inaudibly. Then he continued:

"Young lady, I want your full name."

The girl widened her lovely eyes.

She replied with an air of kindly patience:

"You have it. My name is Trudy Ann. You know—like Vera-Ellen. But without the hyphen."

"Oh." Castle digested this information in silence. Something about it disturbed him. "Very well, Miss Ann—."

"No, no," she cried. "Don't split my name. I can't bear it."

"I understand," said Lawrence gravely. "These things are important to an artiste."

She favoured him with a dazzling smile.

Castle regarded his young friend with some bitterness. Then he returned to the girl. "What shall I call you, then?"

She said simply. "Call me Trudy Ann."

Castle surrendered. "Very well, miss. Ha-hmmm! I imagine you all know now how Miss Christopher was killed?"

"Yes, indeed." She sighed. "Poor Michael."

"Huh! Be that as it may," huffed the Chief Inspector. "The problem facing us now is to plot everyone's movements back-stage from the half hour call till the gun was actually fired. So, miss, let's start with you."

Trudy Ann pouted prettily.

Before she could speak, Jack Austin asked:

"May I go now?"

Castle shook his head. "No, Mr. Austin, not yet. You can wait here; this won't take us long."

He turned back to the girl. "Now, miss! Describe your movements, if you please."

Trudy Ann folded her hands with an air of schoolgirl primness. She said:

"I reached the theatre about three quarters of an hour before the atinee. I went to my dressing-room to make up. I stayed there, reading, until the five minutes call. Then I went on stage."

Castle asked:

“And then?”

“I played my part. It isn’t,” added the girl reproachfully, “much more than a walk-on. But I do my best with it”

Lawrence guessed that such unusual frankness meant that Trudy Ann had her eyes on something better. He made a mental note.

The Chief Inspector continued:

“And what did you do when you weren’t on stage?”

“I waited in my dressing-room for my calls. Billy makes the rounds.”

Castle frowned. “You were alone, then?”

“Yes. I like privacy. And I can’t stand back-stage talk—it’s all theatre shop.” She fluttered her lashes ingenuously. “And these back-stage feuds are such a bore.”

She darted a mischievous glance at the Chief Inspector, as if daring him to rise to the bait.

Castle looked down his nose. He said:

“You didn’t appear in the first scene of the last act.”

“No. I don’t appear in Act Three at all. I was in my dressing-room when I heard about Lesley’s death. Then I joined the crowd on stage.”

“I remember.” Castle said keenly:

“You had made your final exit in Act Two. Yet you were still in costume.”

“Of course.” The girl spoke with pitying tolerance. “I was waiting to take the curtain calls.”

Lawrence interrupted again. He said cheerily:

“I’ll take the opportunity of applauding you now.”

He was rewarded with another warm smile. Castle growled. “Shut up, Algy, for Heaven’s sake. Or for mine at least... Now, young lady, I understood you to say that you divided your time between appearing on stage and waiting in your dressing-room.”

“Yes.”

“Didn’t you leave your dressing-room at all?”

“Only,” said Trudy Ann demurely, “for the natural emergencies.”

Castle continued hastily:

“You mentioned back-stage feuds. Was Miss Christopher concerned in them?”

“She was indeed.”

“Ah!” Castle paused invitingly.

Trudy Ann said nothing.

Castle prompted her. "Had she any enemies?"

The girl answered naively:

"I don't think anybody liked her, once they knew her really well. Not even Michael Trent. Though he sometimes went to bed with her."

Castle broke the point of his pencil and swore inaudibly. He said:

"I asked you if she had any enemies."

Trudy Ann considered "I wouldn't call them enemies. But many had cause to dislike her. Especially—."

She stopped abruptly, her lips framed silently about a name.

Castle leaned forward. "Yes?"

Trudy Ann smiled piquantly. "I don't think I'll tell you now."

Castle breathed hard. He said coldly:

"You promised to co-operate."

"Perhaps I did. But," said the girl accusingly, "I can see that you have a nasty, suspicious mind. And I don't want to help you make trouble."

Lawrence interposed hastily. "Trudy Ann, the Chief Inspector is only doing his duty. And Lesley Christopher has been murdered. Don't you want the guilty person to be punished?"

"No," she replied, "I don't think I do."

"Why?" roared Stephen Castle.

She answered gently:

"I didn't like Lesley Christopher."

"But—." Castle fought for breath.

Lawrence asked mildly:

"Why didn't you like her?"

"She was a bitch," said Trudy Ann with disarming frankness.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Lawrence smothered a laugh.

He said gravely:

“Not even a bitch deserves to be murdered.”

“N—no,” said Trudy Ann doubtfully. “But—.”

Lawrence coaxed her. “Unless we learn the truth, the wrong people may suffer. You wouldn’t want that to happen, would you? Be a good girl, Trudy Ann. Tell us all you know.”

“W—well—.” She hesitated. Then she said with a mutinous pout:

“Lesley really was a bitch, though. Ask Penny Valentine; she suffered the most. She could act La Christopher off the stage. But she was only the second lead. And she didn’t know all the dirty tricks, while Lesley did. She trod on Penny’s lines and killed her laughs—.”

Castle was sharpening his pencil with vicious slashes. Snapping shut his penknife, he said grittily:

“This is interesting, but not strictly relevant. Unless Miss Valentine is the special person you had in mind.”

“Penny? Why, no. It was J—.”

She broke off. Lawrence saw the stage manager start.

Castle commanded:

“Go on.”

Trudy Ann said, very softly:

“It was Jack Austin whom I saw leaving Lesley’s dressing-room.”

Algy Lawrence spoke lightly. “That’s not necessarily cause for suspicion. Is it, Mr. Austin?”

Trudy Ann was regretful. “I’m sorry Jack. I didn’t mean—.”

“Whatever you meant,” said Austin bitterly, “you’ll have to explain it now.”

Trudy Ann gazed at the Chief Inspector with an air of innocent enquiry. “Must I?”

Castle replied heavily:

“You’re not compelled to tell us anything.”

He managed to surround the speech with an aura of menace.

Trudy Ann took the hint. She said without conviction:

“It was nothing, really. But I couldn’t help seeing—.”

She stopped. After a tantalizing pause, she continued:

“I left my dressing-room after the five minutes call. As I was walking along the corridor, I saw Mr. Austin. He came bursting out of Lesley’s dressing-room with a face of thunder.”

Castle was prosaic. “You mean he seemed angry?”

“He was furious,” said Trudy Ann. “He went on to the stage like a bat out of hell. I was almost afraid to follow.”

“You’ve made your point,” interrupted Austin thinly. “Don’t over-act.”

The girl’s lashes brushed her cheeks “I’m sorry, Jack. I didn’t want to tell them. Truly I didn’t.”

“You haven’t told us anything yet,” said the Chief Inspector caustically. “Continue, please.”

“W—well,” hesitated Trudy Ann. “I couldn’t help wondering what had upset Mr. Austin. So a little while later I asked young Billy, the call-boy. And he said—.”

“Really, Inspector,” said the stage manager restively. “Is this sort of thing evidence?”

“Not in a court of law, perhaps,” replied Castle. “But it’s permissible during the course of an investigation... Please don’t interrupt. Go on, young lady.”

Trudy Ann continued: “When Billy calls the times he knocks on the door and opens it an inch or two. Sometimes”—she smiled demurely— “he opens it more than he should. And he told me—in confidence, of course—that before he made the five minutes call, he overheard the sounds of a quarrel and then a cry of pain in Lesley’s dressing-room. So when he knocked, he pushed open the door and peeped in.”

“And?”

“He saw Mr. Austin. Jack was nursing his hand.”

Algy Lawrence angled an eyebrow. “Was that when you burned it, Mr. Austin?”

The S.M. compressed his lips. He made no reply.

The Chief Inspector shuffled his notes and spoke to the girl. “We needn’t keep you now. I shall. Probably ask you to sign a statement later.”

He stood up with an air of dismissal.

Algy Lawrence escorted the girl to the door. She said in a low voice:

“I hope I haven’t made things too unpleasant for Jack.”

Lawrence grinned at her lazily. “You haven’t told us enough to hang him. So don’t worry. But—.”

She peeped through thick lashes. “Yes?”

“Uh—you haven’t explained why you were so cross with Steve for closing the theatre tonight.”

Her hazel eyes were innocent. She said obliquely:

“Though there are five characters in the play, we have only two understudies on the pay-roll—one for me and one for Douglas Denzil. You see, Douglas deputizes for Michael, and Penny for Lesley.”

“So Penny Valentine”—Algy spoke thoughtfully—“will now play ‘Marilyn’.”

“It’s her big chance,” agreed Trudy Ann.

Lawrence murmured. “I’m sure Miss Valentine has everyone’s good wishes. But if she has been promoted, who now plays the second lead?”

Trudy Ann’s lips parted in a slow sensuous smile.

She lifted her hand and stroked cool fingers against his cheek.

“Silly boy,” she cooed. “This is my big chance, too.”

Algy Lawrence closed the door behind her and turned to discover the S.M. in the hands of the Inquisition.

Austin was perspiring freely. He said miserably:

“All right, then. I admit it. We were quarrelling. I lost my head and grabbed Lesley’s wrist. So she—she stubbed out her cigarette on the back of my hand.” His fingers moved nervously over the burnt flesh. “I stormed away. I—I was blind with anger.”

Castle spread stubby fingers over his jowl. “So your feelings for the dead girl could hardly be described as friendly.”

Austin’s head jerked up. “I was angry with her, yes. But that doesn’t mean I murdered her!”

“Perhaps not. But why did you tell us you loved her?”

“Because it was true! But she didn’t love me. That’s what the quarrel was about. I was a fool—I pressed her too hard.” Austin’s voice wavered. “She was capricious and cruel. But I loved her.”

His chin sank. Castle’s gaze met Lawrence’s over the stage manager’s bowed head. Algy nodded slowly.

Castle continued mildly:

“Now I’d like to put your movements into sequence—from the time you loaded the gun with blanks till the moment of the tragedy.”

Austin paused for a moment to collect his thoughts. “After Props and I had seen to the revolver, I busied myself back-stage. As stage manager, I have a lot to do.

“I went to the stage door to see if there was any sign of Michael Trent. I arrived in time to see his dresser take charge of him... I exchanged a few words with Victor Friern”—he described the conversation briefly—“then went to see Trent. I’ve told you about that. I left Michael’s dressing-room and went into Lesley’s.” He flushed. “You know what happened then.”

Castle nodded. “You took up your duties back-stage. You gave the signal to ring up the curtain. What did you do then?”

Austin smiled faintly. “I hope you don’t imagine my work was finished. I was in the prompt corner—that’s my post back-stage. I spent most of the afternoon on the book—.”

“The book?”

“The prompt script. I always hold it. You never know when an actor is going to dry—forget his lines.”

“As Lesley did,” commented Lawrence, “in the first act.”

The S.M. nodded. “Yes. She dried stone dead. I gave her the word—prompted her—but she didn’t seem to hear me. Trent managed to cover up for her.”

Castle gestured impatiently. “That’s by the way... Continue, please.”

Austin dabbed his forehead. “As I say, I spent the afternoon on the book, giving signals from the prompt corner switchboard.”

“You didn’t leave the prompt corner?”

“I—I left it for a brief period after the curtain had gone up on the third act.”

“Oh? Why?”

“For no sinister reason, I assure you.” Austin gave an uneasy laugh. “I wanted to check on a special effect that was due to be given in the final scene. You didn’t see it, so I needn’t bother you with details.” He continued rapidly. “I put my A.S.M. on the book and left her in the prompt corner. I wasn’t away for more than a couple of minutes, and was back in my corner with June before—before—.”

“Before Miss Christopher died.” Castle tapped his thumbnail with the pencil. “Thank you, Mr. Austin. I shall ask you to sign a statement later. Now I would like to interview the property master.”

Austin stared. “You mean I can go?”

Castle spoke in a neutral tone. “We may recall you later.”

The stage manager made his escape.

“Exit Antigonus, pursued by a bear,” commented Lawrence idly. “Tell me, Steve. Is friend Austin’s harassed air the sign of a guilty conscience, or is it the natural result of your third degree tactics?”

“There’s been no third degree.”

“You were rather rough with him, though.”

“I’m not sure he was telling the truth.”

Lawrence nodded.

He said:

“I wonder.”

Castle glared at the property master accusingly. Wix fidgeted and drummed his bony fingers on the table between them.

The Chief Inspector snapped. “Sit still, man! Please.”

The morose gleam in the other’s faded eyes deepened perceptibly. His tired mouth quivered.

Castle said, more mildly:

“I want you to answer my questions as clearly and concisely as you can. You are the property master, and your evidence will be very important.”

Wix eyed him suspiciously. “You’ve already seen Mr. Austin—ain’t he told you all you want to know?”

“We’d like to confirm his evidence, if we can.”

Wix nodded energetically. “Ev’rything he told you was the truth.”

“You don’t know what he told us—yet,” said Castle softly.

The seamed face reddened. “R’you tryin’ to trick me?”

“It’s more than likely,” returned Castle dryly, “that you’re trying to trick yourself. Come off it, man. We know why you’re on the defensive. We’ve heard about your feud with Lesley Christopher—.”

“Feud!” Alarm sharpened the lines etched in the surface of the property master’s face. “What the ‘ell ‘r’you saying? Are you tryin’ to make out I put bullets instead o’ blanks into that ruddy revolver? I—.”

“Control yourself, man!”

Algy Lawrence dropped a casual remark into the silence that followed. "Nobody has suggested that you put cartridges of any sort into the gun. We know that the stage manager himself—."

"Yes." Wix licked dry lips. "Yes, that's right. Mr. Austin loaded the gun. I watched him do it."

He forced a smile of apology. "Sorry, gents. I didn't mean to get excited."

He confirmed Austin's story in every detail. He had brought the S.M. a box of cartridges. He had watched Austin emptying the revolver, testing the action and reloading with six blanks. He was positive that no error had been made. "Believe me, gents, his nibs don't make mistakes."

"Hmmm." Castle scratched his nose. "Can you account for your movements after five minutes past two?"

"If you mean can I prove an alibi," said Wix sulkily, "the answer's no. I don't move about under escort. When I wasn't in the wings, I was in the prop room—alone. But"—his faded eyes gleamed—"I didn't go near that blasted gun again and you won't find anyone to tell you different!"

Castle asked:

"Where were you when the girl was shot?"

"I wasn't watching her, if that's what you mean," sneered Wix. "I was having a break—drinking tea with Syd Short."

"The stage door-keeper?"

"Yes. He likes to brew up in his box."

Castle produced the six blank cartridges which had been found in the fire bucket. "Can you identify these?"

"What d'you mean, identify 'em?"

"Are they the blanks you gave Austin to put into the revolver?"

"Ow the 'ell should I know? You can't tell one bloody blank from another!" Wix clawed a half-empty box from his pocket and slapped it on the table. "Look for yourself. That's the box I took the fresh cartridge from this afternoon."

Castle examined the blanks in the box. They matched those hidden in the sand.

The Chief Inspector grunted. He said abruptly:

"Let's talk about the revolver. The Webley & Scott with the engraved initials. Are they yours, Wix?"

The sudden question startled the property master. But he replied quickly. "Course not. My name's Albert. You don't spell that with an H."

“But you did supply the gun?”

Wix was sulky. “What if I did? That’s no crime, is it?”

Castle was benign. “It could be. It was an unlicensed weapon and the number has been filed off. Would you mind explaining how such a gun came to be in your possession?”

“I—I—.” The faded eyes flickered. “I gave ‘em a prop gun for the rehearsals. They didn’t like it. Said it looked like a toy. The producer—the author—.”

He stopped suddenly. His eyes shifted focus. Then Wix said rapidly:

“The author—he was the man. He asked me if I had a real gun. When I said no, he produced one himself. The Webley & Scott .32. ‘H.W.’ Those were his initials above the butt.”

“Well, well.” Algy Lawrence teetered gently on his heels. Then he turned and tipped a mock salute to the poster on the wall behind him.

“THE FINAL TROPHY,” he read. “By Herbert Windsor. The man who set the stage—for murder.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

After Wix had gone, Lawrence stood staring at the closed door with dreamily vacant eyes. As Castle knew, this was invariably a sign that his young friend's brain was working hard.

Before the Chief Inspector could phrase a question, the door opened again. Castle grunted a greeting to the man on the threshold. "Hallo, Wemyss. Have you anything to report?"

The Detective Inspector was as emotionless as ever. "We've extracted the bullet from the bear's head. As we expected, it's a .25. I've sent it to the laboratory for examination." He paused, then added: "We have also plotted the trajectory of the bullet. It was delicate work, but we think it's accurate."

Lawrence pricked up his ears. "You mean you've managed to demonstrate the actual path of the bullet?"

Wemyss nodded. "Yes."

Lawrence turned to his friend. "I'd like to see this, Steve."

"Do what you like," returned Castle tiredly. "We don't need you here."

"So I feared," said Lawrence cheerfully.

He went out.

As he headed for the stage, he passed Michael Trent. The actor was on his way to the greenroom in the company of a policeman.

Trent's easy air of self-possession had deserted him completely. Lawrence looked at his haggard face and wondered... That air of grief seemed genuine. Yet it could have been assumed.

Trent was, after all, an excellent actor.

Arriving on stage, Lawrence studied the figure of the bear with interest. A long piece of twine stretched from the animal's mouth across the stage to the interior of the box which Mervan had occupied.

"Looks as if he's having a tooth pulled, doesn't it?" came a cheery voice in the young man's ear.

Lawrence nodded to the speaker, a detective sergeant who usually worked with Wemyss. "Hallo, Bob. This is your work, I suppose?"

Robert Penrhyn was an amiable and obliging young man who had only recently been promoted. He liked to talk about his work. “It is. Shall I explain?”

“If you promise not to blind me with science.”

Penrhyn grinned and crooked a finger. “Come here, then. Br’er Bear calls for closer study.”

Lawrence obeyed.

Penrhyn said:

“To some extent, this animal is a museum piece, a survival from the past. Taxidermists today have abandoned the old idea of stuffing a skin with tow and fixing the posture with wire. Nowadays they model the body first and place the skin around it... Bruin shows the influence of both methods. In particular, he has a hard skull. Beneath the hide we found an outer layer of some hard substance and beneath that, tightly packed tow rags.”

“Which could stop a .25 bullet.”

“Yes. When you come to think of it, a stuffed head is not so very different from the boxes of cotton waste that our ballistics men use to catch bullets in the lab.”

“Go on,” said Lawrence keenly.

“As you know, the bullet entered the interior of the animal’s open mouth. It penetrated the roof of his mouth somewhere below the snout, continuing on its angled, upward course not far beneath the surface. Ploughing through inches of tow, it finally lodged in the hard outer layer which prevented its exit through the back of Bruin’s head.”

“And was, of course, invisible beneath the furry skin.”

“Right,” agreed Penrhyn. “The bullet had virtually disappeared. There was nothing to betray its presence. If you hadn’t thought of examining the bear’s mouth—.”

Lawrence shrugged speculation aside. “You examined the bullet, of course.”

“Yes. Even if it had been set up and deformed we could have told by the weight that it was calibre .25. But it was quite undamaged—it had passed through the tow cleanly and showed clearly defined markings. We shall be able to match it with the pistol that fired it.”

“I’m with you,” mused Lawrence, “so far.” He pointed to the length of twine. “Now explain that.”

Penrhyn spoke with boyish enthusiasm. "It marks the path of the bullet. We were able to calculate the exact angle of penetration—and project it to its origin."

Lawrence raised a mild objection. "That's only possible if you can be sure that the target itself has not been moved."

Penrhyn scoffed. "Sure? Bruin weighs a ton. And he's securely fixed to the dais. The whole contraption would need half a dozen stage hands to move it."

Lawrence remembered the producer's reported passion for realism and his insistence upon using the genuine article. For once, he felt grateful for it.

He said:

"Then the impact of the bullet—"

"Was absorbed immediately," finished Penrhyn. "I doubt if Bruin swayed a fraction of an inch."

Lawrence nodded. He asked:

"How did you project the bullet's angle of penetration?"

"We sighted along the line of entry—in reverse, of course—using one of our special gadgets. It sends out a pencil-thin beam of light."

"Marking the path of the bullet?"

"Yes. The spot from the flashlight hit the rear wall of the box which Mervan had occupied. We marked the spot on the wall, then ran the twine from there to the hole inside the bear's head. As a final check, we matched the line against the angle of penetration and found it to be identical."

Lawrence said:

"From the academic point of view this is all very interesting. But," he added pessimistically, "you've only proved what we already knew. It hardly helps us now."

Penrhyn was undismayed. "I'll chalk it up to experience."

Lawrence was not so volatile. He nodded a gloomy farewell to the sergeant and walked through the open doors at the rear of the set.

When he reached the entrance to the dressing-room passage he turned and scanned the stage thoughtfully. From this position he could see the reverse sides of the painted flats which formed the back "walls" of the scene but was unable to see into the lobby itself. But by taking a few steps into the wings in the direction of the prompt entrance he obtained a clear view of the lobby "wall" on which the revolver had been placed.

Frowning slightly, he returned to the dressing-room passage.

The corridor was deserted but the sound of voices pressed against his ears. The voices weren't loud but were hard and persistent. They belonged to Douglas Denzil and Penny Valentine. The two seemed to be quarrelling.

The door with the golden star stood open. Lawrence edged towards it. He was prepared to eavesdrop shamelessly.

Denzil's malicious tones shaped into words as the listener approached.

"... make the most of it, sweet. Dear Michael won't be playing 'Regan' to your 'Marilyn' for long."

Penny's reply was incoherent but angry.

Denzil continued, unruffled:

"Or Romeo to your Juliet. Tell me, sweet—is he good in bed?"

There was a clear note of sexual jealousy in his voice. Without giving the girl any chance to reply, he continued impertinently:

"You'd find me better."

Her answer was as cold and clear as a piece of ice. "You flatter yourself, Douglas. But if you are as good as you seem to think—are you sure I'm worthy of your favours?"

Denzil said coolly:

"You'll suit me very well."

As Penny told Lawrence later:

"He looked at me as insolently as if I were a prize sow in a market."

"Are you sure?" Penny spoke with ruthlessly controlled fury. "You don't want to cheat yourself. You should consider the vital statistics. Now my figure's good, but hardly voluptuous. Bust 34, waist 22, hips 34. Height, five feet three. Weight—"

"Stop it, Penny. Verbal strip-tease doesn't suit you."

Penny replied with a hard little laugh. "I have my faults. You'll have to take me as I am."

Denzil said arrogantly:

"I can take Michael's place—on stage and off. And tame you as well."

"You flatter yourself," said Penny again. "Or perhaps—"

She broke off. She went on.

"Maybe you're trying to prove something to yourself. But I think you're bluffing, Douglas. I don't think you really want me. I don't think you want any woman."

There was a brief silence.

Then Denzil hissed:

“You little—.”

There was the sound of a scuffle, a gasp of pain, and the crack of a hand across Denzil’s face.

Then the door wrenched wide in Penny’s grasp and the girl hurried out into the corridor. She paused for a moment as she sighted Lawrence. Her lovely face flushed. Then she ran past him without a word.

Lawrence looked into the dressing-room and discovered Denzil nursing his cheek. Though the angry marks of Penny’s fingers stood out redly against the whitened flesh, Douglas did not seem unduly abashed.

He smiled a casual greeting. “Hallo, friend. You’re the Dogberry’s assistant, aren’t you?”

“In a way.” Lawrence eyed Denzil curiously. The actor looked cool and composed: it was as if he had already forgotten the flare of temper which had betrayed him into an undignified scuffle with the girl.

“I suppose you’re going to tell me I should be waiting in the wardrobe room.” Douglas grinned boyishly. “I slipped away while the bobby was escorting dear Michael to the Torquemada’s chamber. Well—I apologize.”

“You needn’t. You’re not a prisoner. But—.”

“Yes?”

“I would like,” said Lawrence carefully, “to know what you’re doing in Lesley Christopher’s dressing-room.”

Denzil spoke in portentous parody. “I was looking for clues to this dastardly crime.”

Lawrence angled an eyebrow. “Shouldn’t you leave that to the police?”

Denzil grinned impudently. “Perhaps. But you’ve no right to reproach me. I’ve placed you now. You’re not a professional sleuth. You’re an amateur, just like me. Why do you spend your time hunting murderers?”

Lawrence stuck his tongue in his cheek. He said firmly:

“It’s my legitimate work for society.”

Denzil used a rude word pleasantly.

He continued:

“Amateur detectives are like morality leagues and censorship boards. They ascribe to themselves the worthiest motives and claim to be working in the best interests of society. But they’re really meddling busybodies who love to poke their noses into other people’s business.”

Lawrence grinned wryly. “Perhaps you’re right. But my status as a sleuth is at least quasi-official. Yours isn’t.”

Denzil gestured gracefully, if theatrically. “I won’t argue. If you insist, I shall withdraw gracefully. But don’t think I’m idly curious. I am concerned in this— ah—odd affair.”

“As a suspect, perhaps,” said Lawrence gently.

Denzil laughed. “I asked for that. But dig into my past—you’ll find no grounds for suspicion. I’m one of the few people in this theatre who had no reason to want Lesley dead.”

He spoke with confidence.

Lawrence shrugged. “That’s for the police to decide.”

Denzil said softly:

“Aren’t we splitting hairs? Several people had motives—but only one person killed her. He’s the man you will have to arrest.”

Lawrence stared. “You mean—.”

“Michael Trent.”

“But—.”

Denzil waved his hand. “He shot her through the heart. That’s all you need to prove. You must arrest him.”

Eyes glinted maliciously in the young-old face.

Lawrence said:

“Wait now. It’s not as simple as that. Trent killed her, yes. But unless we can prove he knew he was firing a live cartridge, no jury will call him a murderer.”

“But—.”

It was Lawrence’s turn to interrupt. “He will have to appear at the inquest, of course. And the Coroner or his jury may commit him for trial on a technical charge. But it won’t be more than a formality. And I can’t see the police opposing bail. Trent’s in no danger yet.”

“I see.” A shutter seemed to drop behind Denzil’s eyes. He rasped his thumb over the point of his jaw. It made an impatient, irritable sound in the silent room.

He said. “In the meantime—.”

“It’s up to you all to assist the police,” finished Lawrence politely. “Shall we return to the wardrobe room?”

Denzil nodded reluctantly. “I gather my short career as a detective is already at an end. Dear me. It’s really too sick-making. However—.”

He broke off and moved towards the door. Lawrence stood aside to let him pass.

Algy said:

“You wouldn’t have found any clues here. The police have already searched this dressing-room.”

Denzil stopped. “No?” His lips curved in mockery. “The police aren’t infallible, though. And sometimes a clue is too obvious to be seen by clever fellows like you.”

His gaze flicked briefly towards the photograph on the dressing-room wall.

“Mr. Lawrence!”

There was a tremor in Penny Valentine’s voice and troubled shadows in the depths of her cerulean eyes.

Lawrence gave her a friendly smile. “Yes?”

Penny spoke with an effort. “I want to talk to you—about Michael Trent.”

“Of course. Uh—is this private enough?”

They were standing in the corridor outside the wardrobe room. Lawrence had just returned Denzil to the friendly custody of the constable he had eluded.

The girl answered:

“Yes,” to Algy’s question, then paused. She murmured:

“It’s rather difficult to put into words.”

Lawrence guessed she was wondering how much he had overheard outside Lesley’s dressing-room door. He said sympathetically:

“If it’s anything to do with Denzil, you needn’t worry. I don’t take anything he says very seriously.”

A smile touched her lips briefly. “You know that we quarrelled. It was all very childish and silly. I—hit him.”

Lawrence was tactfully silent.

Penny continued:

“I had asked the constable for permission to go to my dressing-room to fetch a handkerchief. On my way back, I saw Douglas in Lesley’s room. He seemed annoyed when I challenged him. He wouldn’t tell me what he was doing. Instead he began to taunt me. He told me Michael was in serious trouble—.”

“Now look,” said Lawrence firmly. “If Denzil believes Trent is going to jail then either he knows very little about law or he’s indulging in wishful thinking.”

He repeated to the girl what he had already told Denzil. Penny listened attentively.

She asked like a child seeking reassurance.

“Then Michael is—safe?”

“Unless we discover new evidence.”

Penny’s hands had clenched into two small fists. She opened them slowly.

She said softly:

“I don’t think you will.”

Lawrence smiled rather sadly. “Now it’s my turn to ask a question.”

“Yes?”

“Why are you so worried about Michael Trent?”

Her smile was a shaft of sunshine through the clouds. “Because I love him.”

She walked away. Lawrence strolled back to the greenroom with a slightly rueful expression on his pleasant, lazy face. He had forgotten the mystery he was trying to solve.

He was thinking instead of the luminosity of Penny’s blue eyes, and the streaks of gold in her dusty blonde hair.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Trent's romantic successes might have made him a man to be envied, but Lawrence felt glad he was not in the actor's shoes when he returned to the greenroom. Slipping unobtrusively into his seat, he studied the other's handsome face.

Michael Trent seemed near collapse. His cheeks were grey and he drew raggedly on a cigarette. His mouth trembled: smoke spilled out with words. "For God's sake! I've told you all I know."

Castle regarded him thoughtfully. "You haven't been very explicit about your relations with the dead woman."

Trent shaded his eyes wearily. "I had no—relations with her."

"No?" The Chief Inspector was mild, almost gentle. "One witness at least has suggested that Miss Christopher was your mistress."

Trent dropped his hand and looked up. An oddly distorted smile drifted over his lips. He said in a brittle voice:

"She certainly wasn't my—mistress."

"You were just good friends," supplied Castle sardonically. "Tell me, Mr. Trent: how long had you known her?"

"For ten years," replied Trent with mechanical quickness. Then his jaw slackened and the skin stretched taut over his cheekbones.

Castle's eyes glinted. He said:

"Thank you, Mr. Trent. That will be all. For the time being."

Trent stumbled to his feet. His hands lifted, then dropped. He went out.

Castle looked at Wemyss. "Well—what do you think?"

"I think," answered the Detective Inspector cautiously, "that Mr. Trent knows rather more than he has told us."

"Just what," asked Lawrence, "has he told you?"

Castle grunted. "Precisely what you'd expect—no more and no less. He didn't know there were live bullets in the gun and he's shocked half out of his wits to discover he was used to kill the girl." The Chief Inspector waved towards the shorthand writer. "When the report has been transcribed, you can read Trent's statement for yourself. But I've given you the essence."

Lawrence asked gently:
“How much of the statement is true?”

Castle replied with brutal frankness. “Not very much, in my opinion. What do you say, Wemyss?”

The Detective Inspector answered unemotionally. “Trent is, of course, the most obvious suspect. He pulled the trigger and he was the only person who could have been certain that the bullet would go through the girl’s heart.”

The quiet words sent a chill through Algy Lawrence. He thought: Poor Penny, and wondered if he was wholly sincere.

He said:

“You surprise me. I thought Trent was safe from arrest.”

“He is,” growled Castle. “Make no mistake about that. We’ve no real evidence to prove his guilt. We can’t even suggest his motive.”

Algy’s sense of fairness made him speak. “I can help you there. Friern told me that Michael and Lesley were good friends. Trudy Ann’s account was blunter. Let’s accept her version for the moment.”

“Well?”

Lawrence said, not very happily:

“Penny Valentine is also involved with Michael Trent. I think they’re lovers.”

“Do you now?” Castle’s eyebrows went up. “Then the two girls were rivals— off stage as well as on?”

“Yes. And if Trent preferred Penny to Lesley—.”

“Miss Christopher might not have accepted her dismissal.” Castle looked grim. “Trent wouldn’t have been the first man to discover he had to murder his mistress to discard her.”

Lawrence said coolly:

“That sounds a little too melodramatic to be convincing.”

Castle glared. “Dammit, Algy. You yourself—.”

Wemyss interposed smoothly:

“I think we should keep an open mind. We haven’t heard all the evidence yet.”

Castle turned down the corners of his mouth. “You don’t mean evidence. You mean back-stage gossip.”

“If it’s gossip you’re after,” commented Lawrence, “I know a promising witness.”

Castle snorted. “So do I. And I may be prejudiced, but he’s not a man I like.” He sighed noisily. “Oh, well. Let’s have him in.”

Douglas Denzil displayed an engaging smile. “I’ll be frank with you, gentlemen. I didn’t have any special feelings about Lesley Christopher one way or the other. So”—he drew in his breath with a little hiss—“I can’t say her death distresses me. But that doesn’t mean I would care to protect her murderer”—his smile became feline—“even if he turns out to be one of my colleagues.”

Castle’s tone was neutral. “Just tell us what you know. Your responsibility ends there.”

“I’m ready. Ask your questions.”

The Chief Inspector began by charting the actor’s movements from the moment he had arrived at the theatre. Denzil was not evasive, but neither was he specially helpful. “You see, I’m a wanderer. Actors have a habit of straying from their dressing-rooms and getting into the most peculiar places. I’m no exception.”

Castle persevered. “You say that you spent most of the time between the half hour call and your first entrance in your dressing-room.”

“Yes. For once, I was on my best behaviour. You see, I’m Trent’s understudy—and dear Michael’s movements have been uncertain of late. He wasn’t in at the half, so the S.M. warned me—.”

“Austin warned you? When?”

Denzil said vaguely:

“Before the quarter... He told me Trent was missing, but would probably turn up. He asked me to wait there in my dressing-room, to be ready to make a quick change if I had to play the lead. He said he’d send word by the A.S.M. if Michael didn’t arrive in time. But, of course”—Denzil grinned rather savagely—“Trent did.”

“So you played your usual part.” Castle considered. “Now, sir. Will you detail your movements during the first and second acts?”

“Oh, really, Inspector!” Denzil chuckled ingenuously. “You’re asking too much. As I told you before, I’m a wanderer.”

Castle sighed. Close questioning, plus an examination of the prompt script and the time sheet, enabled him to pin-point Denzil’s appearances on stage; but the actor was not particularly helpful about his movements behind the scenes.

At the time when Lesley had died, he had been in the dressing-room passage talking to Penny Valentine. After hearing the news, they had

hurried on stage. Trudy Ann had joined them later. And by that time a crowd had collected.

Castle blew out his cheeks. "This tells me nothing I didn't know before. Nothing valuable, that is. Nothing that has any bearing on the crime."

Denzil said cautiously:

"I don't want to speak out of turn. But I might be able to help you."

"I'm listening."

"I don't want to tell tales out of school." The gleam in Denzil's eyes betrayed him. "But I suggest you ask Michael Trent to tell you what happened in his dressing-room during the second act wait."

Castle fiddled with his notes. "The second act wait—that's the interval between the second and third acts?"

"Yes. I don't want you to think I was eavesdropping—."

"No," said Castle dryly.

Another man might have flushed. Denzil merely grinned. "I was strolling along the passage. I saw Lesley go into Michael's room. She left the door open. She said in a loud, choking voice: 'You'll be sorry for this. I promise you.' Then she came out."

The Chief Inspector frowned. "Well?"

"I think she interrupted something. Penny Valentine followed her out, called for Ben Cotall—Michael's dresser: he was nearby—then scampered into her own dressing-room. None of them seemed happy."

"And then?"

"I walked away."

"Is that all you have to tell me?"

Denzil countered the question with another. "Isn't it enough?"

Castle was deliberately obtuse. "No. You'll have to be explicit."

"All right." Denzil's reply was tinged with anger. And the mask had slipped badly: his face was nakedly spiteful. "I'll tell you this. Trent's too damned attractive for his own good. When he wants a woman, he takes her. Drops her, too, when he's had enough. But Lesley wouldn't stand for that—she was too possessive. She—."

He stopped suddenly.

He relaxed. He smiled boyishly. He said:

"No. I shan't tell you any more. You can draw your own conclusions."

After Denzil had left, Wemyss said quietly:

“The dead woman may have discovered a liaison between Mr. Trent and Miss Valentine. But does that provide Trent with a motive for murdering her?”

“I think so.” Castle rubbed his jowl. “Lesley Christopher may have been in a position to make things bad for him.”

The Detective Inspector hesitated. He repeated softly:

“‘You’ll be sorry for this. I promise you.’ Was that a strong enough threat to bring murder in reply?”

“It could have been,” said Castle stubbornly. “If Trent had a guilty conscience—if he knew that Lesley knew some secret in his past—.”

Lawrence protested. “You’re guessing wildly.”

“Am I?” grunted Castle. “You heard Trent tell us he had known the woman for ten years. He spoke without thinking. Then he looked like a man who had made a guilty admission.”

“You mean—.”

“I mean,” said Castle quietly, “we know what happened seven years ago. Richard Mervan robbed a bank. He was betrayed by Lesley Barre, alias Lesley Christopher. She took the loot and escaped. With an accomplice. With... Michael Trent?”

Ben Cotall muttered rebelliously. “You can’t make me tell tales about Mr. Trent. He’s the best employer a man ever had—yes, an’ friend, too.”

“You’ve been with him a long time?”

“Five years or more.” Pride showed clearly in the dresser’s wizened face. “He gave me a job when no one else would look at me. He was unknown then. Now he’s a star.”

Castle said:

“Tell me about Miss Christopher.”

Cotall scowled weakly. “She was no good for him. But he couldn’t give her up.”

“Or get rid of her?”

Ben’s mouth snapped shut. He made no reply.

Castle shifted ground. “Let’s consider your own movements from the time you arrived at the theatre this afternoon.”

Cotall was frank but uninformative. He had gone back-stage about an hour before the performance was due to begin. He had gone to Trent’s dressing-room to prepare it for his master. He had uncovered the dressing-

table, laying out the articles of make-up, and had taken Trent's costume for the first act out of the wardrobe. After he had conscientiously attended to every little job he could think of, there had been nothing to do but await his employer's arrival.

"Mr. Trent was late?"

"Yes. He was— unwell."

"You mean he had been drinking?"

"What if he had?" Ben stuck out his jaw pugnaciously. "There's plenty that do worse."

He had taken charge of his employer as soon as Trent had passed through the stage door. And from that moment he had followed him like a shadow. Or—

"Like a faithful dog," mused the Chief Inspector, as the door closed behind old Ben. "They say no man is a hero to his valet. Evidently that doesn't apply to his dresser."

"In Cotall's case, no," smiled Wemyss. "But I think we shall find that Miss Christopher's dresser took a more objective view of her employer."

Maggie Boyd said bluntly:

"No, I didn't like Miss Christopher. Few women did "

"What about"— Castle hesitated— "the men?"

Maggie's bright beady eyes glinted cynically. "They were attracted to her. So she used them."

"And?"

"They meant nothing to her. She loved nobody but herself."

"And Michael Trent?"

Maggie jerked beefy shoulders. "Perhaps. There was some kind of a bond between them—I never knew what, exactly. But she always turned to him when something was troubling her. As she did this afternoon."

Castle said:

"Tell us about this afternoon."

Maggie folded plump hands. "I'm not one to gossip. But it won't help Miss Christopher to keep her secrets now... Something happened during the first act. Miss Lesley came back to the dressing-room as pale as a ghost—and trembling. She didn't tell me what had upset her. But she mumbled something about seeing a man in one of the boxes."

Castle shuffled his notes morosely. He already knew that the sight of Richard Mervan had given Lesley a shock. This was old news now.

Maggie prattled on. "I went into the wings with Miss Lesley. Mr. Trent was there with his dresser, waiting to make his entrance."

"In the second act?"

"Yes. Miss Valentine and Mr. Denzil were already on stage."

"I remember," grunted Castle. "Go on."

"As I say, the four of us were waiting in the wings. Miss Lesley appealed to Mr. Trent—said she had to talk to him. It was like a cry for help."

"Oh?" The Chief Inspector was interested. "How did Trent react?"

Maggie pursed disapproving lips. "He tried to put her off—made excuses because Ben and I were there. He said something silly in French. Not in front of the children—something like that. But he couldn't keep Miss Lesley quiet. She blurted: 'Michael, you don't understand. He's out there, watching. Waiting...'"

Lesley's voice echoed faintly from Maggie's throat.

Somebody moved sharply.

Then Castle asked mildly:

"And Mr. Trent—did he understand?"

Maggie Boyd frowned. "He didn't answer. But I think he knew what Miss Lesley meant."

Castle gave a satisfied rumble. "There you are, gentlemen. Was I guessing so wildly?"

Maggie Boyd had left. The investigators were alone.

Wemyss spoke dubiously. "I'm not sure—."

Castle interrupted. "Lesley Christopher was obviously referring to Richard Mervan. So Trent must have known all about him—and the robbery, too. I think Trent was very probably the man who helped the girl to double-cross Mervan by knocking him out in her flat."

"That's guess-work," objected Wemyss half-heartedly. "But if you're right"—he spread his hands—"then Trent had a motive for murder."

Castle nodded. "Crazed with fear and jealousy, Lesley could have given him away. She might have come to us in a moment of malice or panic. Trent had to stop her mouth."

Wemyss coughed. "This is only a theory," he reminded his chief. "We can't prove it. Of course," he added shrewdly, "we've yet to question Miss

Valentine. She may be able to help us.”

Stephen Castle was moody. “She could. But I don’t suppose she will. If she loves Michael Trent, she won’t be eager to put a rope round his neck.”

As the Chief Inspector had feared, the interview was unrewarding, though Penny Valentine answered all his questions about her movements with an air of perfect frankness. She agreed that she might have had one or two opportunities to tamper with the ammunition in the gun but—with no display of resentment, anger or fear—quietly denied having done so.

Castle tried to question her about Michael Trent, but had no success at all. When he began to make clumsy hints about her relationship with the actor, the girl’s eyes glimmered mischievously but she made no direct reply.

Castle started to perspire. He said bitterly:

“Young lady, you’re not helping me at all.”

Penny replied calmly:

“I don’t have to answer your questions. You know that as well as I do.” .

“If you don’t answer,” huffed Castle, “you can’t blame us for being suspicious.”

“Be anything you wish.” Penny was tranquil. “I love Michael Trent. I won’t deny that. As for the rest”—she dimpled suddenly—“you’ll have to use your imagination.”

“Very well,” said Castle, making up his mind, “you may go back to the wardrobe room. I shall ask you to sign a statement later. And I may question you again soon.”

Penny left, with a quick smile for Lawrence.

The young man said quietly:

“Leave Penny to me, Steve. I think I’ve won her confidence.”

Castle looked down his nose. “And I’m just a blundering policeman. Is that what you mean?”

Lawrence grinned. “No. But I can move amongst these people freely, unhindered by rules and regulations. I can gain their friendship, win their trust. You can’t.”

Castle scratched his nose. He admitted: “The Valentine girl may talk to you. If she does”—he gestured—“ask her what happened in Trent’s dressing-room during the second act wait.”

Lawrence nodded.

Wemyss cleared his throat. "Trent may be our Number One suspect. But we mustn't lose sight of the others."

"You're right," growled Castle. "Every person back-stage had a chance to load the gun with bullets. We'll have to chart everybody's movements from the half-hour call—."

He bit back his words and swallowed them.

He sighed. "Oh, well. Let's begin."

Afterwards, Stephen Castle recalled the interrogations as a nightmare procession of faces, for the most part blurred and indistinguishable. A few sharpened into focus: June Merritt's, plain and podgy with a lingering expression of shocked astonishment; the call-boy Billy's, youthful and scared, yet pleurably horrified; and others. But mostly they were just faces: fleshy frames for mouths shaping meaningless words.

Heavy-eyed, the Chief Inspector yawned over a mounting pile of statements. They had all been laboriously compiled from shorthand notes, read back to their originators, and then signed and witnessed.

At last, Lawrence stretched and yawned. "I shall take advantage of my amateur status. I'm going home to bed."

Castle consulted his watch. "It's getting late. I'm tempted to follow your example. What d'you think, Wemyss? Is there anything more we can do here tonight?"

The Detective Inspector shook his head. "I think not, sir."

"Then—."

Somebody knocked on the greenroom door.

Castle called:

"Come in... Oh, it's you, Mr. Friern. You look worried. There's nothing wrong, I hope?"

The manager said jerkily: "Yes... No... I'm sorry, gentlemen, if I sound confused. I've been having rather a difficult time. Your decision to close the theatre—that meant we had to turn away the ticket-holders this evening. And then there were the reporters—."

"Dear me, yes," commented Castle with unusual mildness. "I had forgotten them. They gave you no trouble, I hope."

"I—I gave them the statement you authorized. I'm afraid it didn't satisfy them."

“Devil take ‘em,” growled the Chief Inspector. He laughed harshly. “Cheer up, sir. You’ll be re-opening soon. And this publicity won’t do you any harm.”

Victor Friern replied simply:

“Increased business is no compensation for the loss of a very dear friend.”

Castle said gruffly:

“You’re right, of course.”

He added in half-apology: “Perhaps my job makes me callous. Ha-humph! Have you a night watchman?”

“Yes. He has already arrived.”

“He’ll have a companion tonight. I’m leaving someone to keep an eye on things. Wemyss! Have you told off a man for duty?”

“Yes, sir. Bailey is staying.”

Friern asked:

“Have you finished your work?”

“We’re doing no more tonight. Everyone can go.”

Wemyss and Friern went out.

Castle lumbered to his feet and banged both fists on the pile of statements. “Hell’s bloody blazes! What a case.”

Lawrence chuckled. Castle eyed the young man suspiciously. Algy had strolled back to the bookshelves. Steve glared at the back of his friend’s blond head. “Come away from those ruddy books! You’re wasting time.”

“No, I’m not,” said Lawrence mildly. “No case is complete without one red herring.” He turned with a heavy volume in his hands. “And here it is.”

Removing a marker, he opened the book and put it on the table facing the Chief Inspector. Castle regarded the pages with lack-lustre eyes. “What’s this?”

“A bound volume of the Gentleman’s Magazine.”

“That’s the blasted book you were babbling about hours ago.”

Lawrence said quietly:

“Read it, Steve.”

Castle obeyed with a grumble. His glance fell at random on the old print.

... From Newgate to Tyburn he behaved with great composure. While the halter was tying, his whole frame appeared to be violently convulsed. The Ordinary having retired, he addressed himself to the populace: “Good people, I request your prayers for the salvation of my departing soul; let my

example teach you to shun the bad ways I have followed; keep good company, and mind the word of God.”

Castle looked puzzled. “What’s so interesting about this?”

“Look at the date. The 7th of November, 1783.”

“Well?”

“That was the date,” said Lawrence, “and this is the description – of the last public execution at Tyburn.”

Castle narrowed his eyes. “I believe you’re right.”

“Uh huh. I’ve already checked up. I ‘phoned a librarian I know.”

Castle said:

“This is interesting. But we don’t want to get Paddington Fair on the brain.”

Lawrence’s eyes glimmered. “Did you notice the name of the man who was hanged?”

“Huh? Why it was—.”

Castle found the name.

Then he looked up with startled eyes.

“It’s—.”

“Yes,” said Algy Lawrence.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It was one o'clock in the morning. Outside in the streets, a fine, light rain was falling. It misted the nimbus of light about each lamp-post and transformed the pavements into black mirrors.

Fitful moonlight played over the two faces of Janus, guardian spirit of the doorway. Below the pagan emblem, the unilluminated tubes of a neon sign ghost-spelled the legend of THE FINAL TROPHY, a play by Herbert Windsor. And beneath the fade, a darker shadow moved against the wall of the theatre, then was gone.

“... And that makes thirty-one.”

Bailey watched his companion gloomily as the night watchman bent over the cards, counted the hands, and pegged the scores on the cribbage board.

The policeman said abruptly:

“I'm tired of this—d'you mind if we drop the game?”

Tom Purrett shifted the pipe to one corner of his mouth. “No, I don't mind. Anyway,”—he glanced at the clock—“it's time I made my rounds.”

The two men were sitting in the night watchman's cubby-hole, a small room at the back of the theatre. A kettle was spluttering wisps of steam on a gas-ring in the corner.

Purrett glanced at it and asked:

“Would you like a cup of tea?”

“I'd prefer something stronger,” answered Bailey without much hope.

Purrett lowered a leathery eye-lid. “Mebbe I can oblige.”

He stood up, scratched his thigh, then lumbered across the room. Opening a cupboard under the sink, he groped inside and extracted a beer bottle. It was empty. Purrett studied it with regret, mumbled: “Must've finished it last night,” and returned it to the cupboard.

He straightened his back with a grunt. “Mebbe it's for the best. Beer makes you sleepy—an' on my job you're s'posed to keep awake.” He glanced at his companion. “No reason I can see why we should both stay up, though. Why don't you take a nap while I'm doing my rounds?”

Bailey replied regretfully:

“I have orders to stay awake.”

Tom Purrett sniffed. “Please yourself.” He sorted out a heavy electric torch and, gripping it tightly in a horny fist, stamped out of the room.

Bailey sighed. He gathered the greasy playing cards together, then cursed briefly and slammed the deck down on the table.

He felt bored and unhappy. Routine work like this would never bring him an appointment to the C.I.D. If only there was some way to prove his worth—

He brooded. Somewhere in the theatre, there might be a valuable piece of evidence waiting to be found....

He hesitated. It might not pay to interfere. His job was to see that nothing was touched until the Chief Inspector and his men returned to complete their investigations. But—

The temptation was too great. With no real plan in mind, but day-dreaming wistfully of a spectacular piece of detective work which would win him instant promotion, Bailey made his way out of the room and along the dark corridors in the direction of the dressing-room passage.

The beam from his flashlight drove back the shadows. At the entrance to the passage, Bailey paused and listened. Behind and above him, something moved and creaked high in the grid. An old back-cloth perhaps, stirred by the fugitive wind sighing its way in through the top of the theatre.

It was an innocent sound. It meant nothing, except that the theatre was somehow alive—and waiting.

Something moved in the passage.

Bailey’s heart leaped. He swung his flashlight wildly. The beam slashed into the black corridor like a knife-blade. The passage was empty. But one of the doors was partly open. It was the door with the golden star.

“Who’s there?”

Bailey’s voice cracked. He cleared his throat and called again. “Who is it?”

Silence. Bailey felt glad he was still in uniform. He drew his truncheon and moved forward cautiously. There was no further sound, beyond that of his own soft footfalls.

Bailey began to relax. Perhaps it was a false alarm.

He reached the Number One dressing-room. Standing against the wall, he reached out with his truncheon and thrust against the panel. The door with

the star swung open to its fullest extent.

Nothing happened.

Bailey directed the rays of his flashlight into the inner blackness. The room was empty.

Bailey laughed shakily. He made to turn.

Then a savage, crashing blow on the back of his head hurled him through a tunnel of pain into oblivion.

Tom Purrett had returned to his cubby-hole. He was frowning round the empty room.

The kettle still spluttered on the gas-ring. The night watchman looked at it absently. Then he padded across and twisted the tap, extinguishing the tiny flames.

He paused for a long moment, exhibiting a curious air of indecision. Then he seemed to make up his mind to act.

He picked up the heavy electric torch and lumbered out of the little room, slamming the door behind him. He began to call in a curious monotone. "Mr. Bailey! Mr. Bailey!"

His voice echoed eerily along the dark corridors. Ghost calls returned in sardonic parody.

Purrett came to a halt on the night-shrouded stage. He swung his torch uneasily. He seemed unwilling to proceed.

"Mr. Bailey! Where are you?"

Somebody groaned.

The night watchman caught his breath, then expelled it in a long and toneless "aah". He stumbled towards the entrance to the dressing-room passage.

The torch eye jumped, then steadied. Its rays focused on the body of a man on the floor.

"Gawd!" Bailey was lying on his face with his head and shoulders over the threshold of the Number One dressing-room. Purrett lumbered towards him. He half-fell, half-knelt beside the prostrate figure.

Old Tom put out a cautious hand. The back of the policeman's head felt soft and warm and sticky. Purrett stared at his fingers in the torch-light. They were streaked with blood.

Bailey groaned again. Purrett put the heavy torch down carefully. He put both hands on the policeman's shoulders and rolled him over.

Bailey's eyelids stirred. His mouth quivered helplessly. "Aaahh... "

Purrett's voice cracked. "Are you all right?"

Bailey's eyes opened in a sightless stare. Then he groaned again and his head rolled limply.

Purrett scanned the waxy face with fear-filled eyes.

He whispered:

"For God's sake, man! I don't want you to die.... "

The police surgeon's face was tired and irritable, but his hands were deft and kindly.

Stephen Castle was watching anxiously. "Well, doctor?" he asked at last.

The police surgeon stood up. He said:

"Bailey is suffering from severe concussion, but I don't think there'll be any permanent damage. He was lucky. That blow might have fractured his skull."

The Chief Inspector nodded grimly. He commented:

"I'm glad you could give him prompt attention. Fortunately the night watchman had sense enough to 'phone us immediately. And he didn't attempt to move him."

He looked down at the unconscious man. He asked abruptly: "How was the blow delivered?"

The doctor shrugged. "With the traditional blunt instrument, I suppose. I couldn't tell much from the wound. The scalp was torn and bloody. So the weapon was probably heavy and metallic. Take your choice between the butt of a gun and a section of lead piping—your guess is as good as mine."

The two men were not alone in the dressing-room passage. Purrett was standing some distance away, watching uneasily. And the Chief Inspector had brought a small band of assistants with him.

Castle said:

"We've sent for an ambulance. I – Good! It must be here."

The theatre was by now ablaze with light. Two uniformed men had arrived with a stretcher. They lifted the injured man on to it gently.

Castle watched in gloomy silence.

Suddenly, he tensed. "Hallo! What's that?"

He was gazing at a small object on the floor which had, until then, been concealed under Bailey's body.

The police surgeon said irritably:

“Bailey must be taken to the hospital as soon as possible—.”

“Huh?” Castle started. “Oh, get him away by all means. I don’t want to delay you. But what do you make of that?”

The doctor signed to the attendants who continued on their way back to the ambulance with the unconscious man. Then the police surgeon’s gaze followed Castle’s pointing finger.

He answered:

“It’s an ordinary comb.”

Castle grunted. “In an extraordinary place—under an injured man’s body. And whose is it? Not Bailey’s. Not Purrett’s.”

“How do you know that?”

“It’s monogrammed. Look at those initials.”

Leaving the police surgeon staring, Castle stepped forward and put his head round the dressing-room door. “Penrhyn! Come here, will you?”

The detective-sergeant obeyed. His chief indicated the comb. “See that? I want it tested for prints.”

“Right, sir.” Robert Penrhyn called two men out of the dressing-room and gave them precise instructions. Then he turned back to Castle. “Sir, there’s something in here you should see—.”

“Oh, very well.” The Chief Inspector was gruffly good-humoured. He stumped over the threshold. “What is it, what is it? I—Hallo!”

His eyes narrowed. His lips pursed.

The photograph of Michael Trent was no longer in its place on the wall. The shattered frame was lying on the dressing-table and the photo itself had been ripped out and flung to the floor.

“Well, well.” Castle scowled thoughtfully.

Penrhyn answered the unspoken question. “We’ve tested the fragments. There are no identifiable prints—only smudges. I expect our man was wearing gloves.”

“He’d need them to protect his hands.” Castle studied the splintered glass and the shattered frame. “But what the devil was he doing?”

Penrhyn said:

“I think he was looking for something which had been hidden behind the picture.”

Castle nodded slowly. “Lesley Christopher may have concealed some important paper inside the frame under the photograph. Her murderer may have wanted it. But he couldn’t get at it while we were here—.”

“So he came back tonight.” Penrhyn spoke eagerly. “He meant to break into the theatre, take what he wanted, and slip away unseen. But Bailey must have heard him—.”

“And got knocked on the head.” Finished Castle grimly, “before he could make an identification. Our unknown friend is a dangerous man.”

“Or woman.”

“Huh?” Castle jerked his head in surprise. “I suppose it’s possible Bailey’s assailant was a woman. But it’s damned unlikely.”

Penrhyn smiled. “I was trying to keep an open mind.”

Castle grunted. “That’s the right attitude. But at the risk of setting you a bad example, I’m going to say now that the man who murdered Lesley Christopher was also the man who cracked Bailey’s head open. And, God damn it, I’m as certain of his name as I am of my own.”

Penrhyn asked softly:

“Michael Trent?”

Before his chief could reply, a roar of wrath sounded behind them.

“That’s the daftest notion I ever heard!”

Tom Purrett lumbered through the doorway. His face was red with anger. “Michael Trent is no murderer. He’s one of the kindest, gentlest, most generous men there is. Oh, I know”—he held up a horny hand – “he’s not a saint! He’s a devil with the women and he drinks too much. But he ain’t a ruddy killer!”

The Chief Inspector bit his lip. Silently, he cursed the unguarded words the night watchman had overheard.

He said abruptly:

“I’ve accused no one. You needn’t spring to Trent’s defence.”

Purrett scowled. “I know what I ‘eard. An’ if you coppers are gettin’ funny ideas about Mr. Trent you’re going to make bloody fools of yourselves—an’ that’s the truth.”

“That’s enough!”

Mumbling ominously, the night watchman turned to go.

“Wait!” snapped Castle. “As you’re here, you may as well answer a few questions.”

Purrett said impatiently:

“I’ve told you all I know. I made my rounds, everything was in order, I didn’t hear nothin’ suspicious. Mr. Bailey was gone when I got back to my room. I went to look for him—.”

“Yes,” agreed Castle. “I’ve heard all that before. Now! You found Bailey with his head and shoulders across the threshold here.”

“Yes.”

“Did you move him at all?”

Purrett replied sulkily:

“I rolled him over on his back. The poor bleeder was lying on his face.”

“Ah!” Castle drew a satisfied breath. “Did you notice anything on the floor by his side?”

Purrett scratched himself thoughtfully. “There was his truncheon. It looked as if it ‘ud fallen out of his hand.”

“Not that. A—a smaller object.”

Old Tom shook his head. “I don’t remember nothing else. Course, I was worried ‘bout Mr. Bailey.”

“Of course.” If Castle was disappointed, he didn’t betray his feelings. “But if there had been such an object by his side, can you explain why we found it under his body?”

“I told you,” snapped Purrett. “I turned the poor basket on his back. Mebbe I rolled him on top of this object of yours—whatever the ----ing thing was.”

“Good,” said the Chief Inspector. “That was the answer I wanted.”

Purrett looked at him suspiciously. “Can I go now?”

“You may.”

The night watchman lumbered out.

Castle said expansively:

“Here’s my theory, for what it’s worth. Bailey was prowling round the theatre; playing detective, I’ll bet. He heard a sound from this passage. He thought it came from this room. Well, he was wrong. The man he wanted had slipped into the room next door. That’s—.”

“Michael Trent’s.”

“Ah hah!” Castle’s eyes gleamed. He continued:

“Our man waited until Bailey poked his head into this room, then stepped out from his real hiding-place and attacked him from behind. How’s that?”

“It seems likely enough,” agreed Penrhyn cautiously. “Do you think the picture was smashed after the attack – or before??”

“It’s hard to tell.” Castle frowned pensively. “The frame seems to have been broken apart by a man in a hurry.”

“That’s true, sir. As a matter of fact”—Penrhyn paused dramatically—
“he left part of his booty behind.”

“What!”

“Yes, sir. I should have mentioned it before—.”

“You should have indeed.” Castle spoke with unusual restraint.

“Sorry.” Penrhyn produced a cellophane envelope and handed it to his chief. “You mentioned a hidden document. This seems to prove your theory. As you see, sir, it’s a scrap of paper—.”

“I’m not blind.” Castle’s growl was amiable. He studied the contents of the transparent envelope. The paper looked vaguely official and seemed to have been torn off the corner of a certificate of some kind. “You found this —?”

“Caught in the splintered frame,” replied Penrhyn. “Our man must have missed it in his haste.”

Castle said savagely:

“That wasn’t the only mistake he made.” He went to the door once more. “You, there! Have you found any dabs on that comb?”

“Yes, sir.” The reply came promptly. “There are several prints. They’re badly smudged. But they’re identifiable.”

“Good.” Castle chuckled grimly. “Photograph ‘em.” He turned back to Penrhyn, rubbing his hands. “We’ve taken fingerprints from everyone in the theatre. It won’t take long to identify those on the comb.”

Penrhyn coughed. “This comb, sir. Was it the—um—object you found under Bailey’s body?”

“It was,” answered Castle. “You heard me question Purrett. He confirmed my theory. The comb must have fallen out of our murderous friend’s breast pocket. He was probably bending over Bailey’s unconscious body—perhaps to see if he was still alive.”

“And the comb fell out unnoticed.” Penrhyn whistled. “Jove, sir! A mistake like that could hang a man.”

“I hope it will,” returned Castle grimly.

He reclaimed the comb from the fingerprint men. “Look at this, Penrhyn. Can you identify its owner?”

The detective-sergeant studied the monogram.

Then he replied:

“I know of only one suspect with the initials ‘M.T.’”

“Indeed you do,” said Castle softly.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Michael Trent cried desperately:

“All right! All right! The comb is mine. I admit it. But that’s all, damn you!”

His voice died away in a frightened whimper.

Chief Inspector Castle studied the actor curiously. Michael Trent was no longer the suave, self-possessed and handsome man who nightly projected the wicked charm of a strong personality across the footlights. Perhaps, as Castle told himself cynically, Trent needed a sympathetic audience. Now, as he struggled to convince three stony-faced policemen of his innocence, he seemed to be subtly disintegrating. Even his normally well-defined features appeared to be blurred; and fear had driven the intelligence from his frank grey eyes.

Trent said hoarsely:

“For God’s sake, give me a cigarette.”

Castle looked at Wemyss and nodded. While the Detective Inspector ministered to the actor’s needs, Castle stood up and stretched. He went to the windows and sighed imperceptibly. The blinds were down: daylight framed the corners.

Castle turned back. He said baldly:

“That’s a nice suit, Mr. Trent. Do you always keep a folded handkerchief in the breast pocket?”

Trent dribbled smoke from the corner of his mouth. He answered shortly. “Yes.”

“A comb, too?”

“Sometimes.” Michael’s face gleamed waxily in the harsh, artificial light. His eyelids stirred warily. “Why do you ask?”

Castle was gentle. “Smudged fingerprints were found on the comb by Bailey’s body. The prints are yours. And the comb could have fallen out of somebody’s breast pocket as he crouched over his victim.”

There was a brief silence.

Then Trent choked out:

“The comb is mine—I haven’t denied it. But I didn’t take it with me when I left the theatre yesterday evening.”

He looked at the blank, unresponsive policemen’s faces and said

bitterly: “That’s the truth. But what does it matter to you? You’ve found a scapegoat. That’s all you care about.”

Castle said:

“If you’re an innocent man you have nothing to fear. Tell us about the comb.”

“I’ve told you before... Oh, very well.” Trent dragged soothing smoke into his lungs, then expelled it jerkily. “I left the monogrammed comb in my dressing-room. I don’t remember where.” He pressed his aching head. “I don’t recall the last moment I saw it. I had—other worries. You hadn’t been giving me an easy time.”

Castle thumbed his chin. “If you didn’t remove the comb from your dressing-room, then somebody else did. Who knew you had such a comb?”

“Everybody back-stage.”

Castle yawned hugely. “Perhaps, perhaps.” His voice changed abruptly. “Where were you at one o’clock this morning?”

“I—I can’t tell you.”

Castle smiled without humour. “You weren’t at home. I sent a man round to your flat. He had to wait until two o’clock before you arrived.”

Trent tore the cigarette out of his mouth and flung it across the room. “I can’t tell you where I was because I just don’t know! Don’t you understand? By the time you let us leave the theatre last night I was so sick and confused I didn’t know what I was doing. I didn’t want the company of my friends and I found I couldn’t stand solitude either. I left my flat and went drinking. There are places, if you know them. By one o’clock I had tired of that, too. I found myself wandering aimlessly through the streets. By two o’clock I felt exhausted. I thought I could sleep at last. I went home.”

He finished dully:

“I found a detective waiting for me. He was very polite. He brought me here. And that’s all I know.”

Castle waited until the last echoes of the speech had died away, then paced across the room and slowly ground the still-glowing cigarette between his heel and the floor.

He said:

“We’re all rather tired. We need a break.”

He went to the windows and raised the blinds. Daylight streamed into the room. A shaft of watery sunlight struck Trent's eyes and made him blink. He huddled in his chair.

Castle nodded to Wemyss and the shorthand writer, then clicked off the electric lights and went out of the room. He rubbed his eyes wearily, then shook himself like a huge dog and stumped across the passage and went into his own office.

Algy Lawrence was waiting. He had been standing by the window, looking down on the Embankment with an enigmatic gleam in his lazy blue eyes.

He turned with a grin. "Hi, Steve."

Castle growled a reply. Lowering himself into the swivel chair behind his desk, he asked abruptly:

"How much do you know about last night?"

"Not a lot. I came to the Yard to discuss the case. I arrived to find you were holding Trent for questioning."

Castle nodded. He thumbed tobacco into his large and virulent pipe. Lighting up, he began to describe the events of that strangely peaceless Sunday morning. As he talked, a blue haze eddied about his greying head.

When his friend had finished, Lawrence said quietly:

"I think you're making a mistake, Steve. There seems to be a lot of evidence against Michael Trent. But it's only circumstantial."

Castle laughed grimly. "Most murderers are hanged by circumstantial evidence."

Lawrence said dryly:

"That's a good argument against capital punishment."

Castle gestured impatiently. Lawrence continued:

"Circumstantial evidence is like a signpost pointing in opposite directions. Or to put it another way"—he hesitated briefly—"like Janus, it has two faces."

Castle shrugged. "Be specific"

Lawrence accepted the challenge. "You believe that the comb fell out of Trent's breast pocket. You say that its position against the folded handkerchief in the same pocket was responsible for smudging his fingerprints."

"That's right. I do."

Lawrence grinned crookedly. “But suppose I say that the prints were blurred because another person had wrapped that comb in a handkerchief to preserve them—however imperfectly?”

Castle shifted uncomfortably. “You mean the comb was a plant—it was deliberately dropped by Bailey’s side to incriminate Michael Trent?”

Lawrence smiled. “It’s as good an explanation as yours.”

“But dammit, Algy!” Castle was irritable but uneasy. “I’m sure Trent’s guilty. Look! Bailey was assaulted soon after one o’clock. The night watchman gave the alarm almost at once. I found the comb by Bailey’s body. I sent a man round to Trent’s flat. Trent wasn’t at home and he didn’t turn up until two. He told us this preposterous yarn about wandering through the streets—.”

Lawrence chuckled. “I like that story. It’s thin enough and unlikely enough to be literally true.”

Castle made impatient noises.

Lawrence said sleepily:

“Let’s tackle the problem from another angle. Admit that there’s no direct proof as to the identity of the person who attacked Bailey... Now how did this unknown man get into the theatre?”

“We don’t know,” admitted the Chief Inspector. “There were no signs of a forced entry.”

“Then let’s suppose the intruder was carrying a duplicate or skeleton key. He was also carrying a bludgeon. And he left the theatre with some kind of stolen document. Did you find any of those three articles in Trent’s possession?”

“No,” confessed Castle. “But that doesn’t mean much. He could have cached them—or chucked ‘em into the river.”

“I suppose so.”

Castle scowled at his fists. “Trent covers his tracks well... I ‘m sure he was mixed up in that bank robbery seven years ago. But I can’t prove it.”

“It hardly matters now.”

“Perhaps not. But why should he escape, while that poor devil Mervan —.” Castle broke off and shook his head gloomily. “Mervan doesn’t know, even now, that Trent was the man who double-crossed him.”

“Then don’t tell him,” advised Lawrence. “We don’t want another murder on our hands.”

“There’s no fear of that.” Castle was forbidding. “Mervan has lost his liberty now. He will have to answer two charges: shooting with intent to cause grievous bodily harm; and unlawful possession of a firearm. That will be enough to send him back to jail for a long time.”

“Poor devil.”

Castle said, almost defiantly:

“I can’t afford to worry about him.”

Lawrence’s eyes were vacant. He said:

“Mervan may be able to help us.”

“How?”

“There are two questions I’d like you to ask him. Wait—I’ll write them down.” Lawrence grabbed pen and paper from Castle’s desk and scrawled quickly. “There, Steve.”

Castle squinted at the questions. “I don’t see why—.”

Lawrence grinned. He drawled:

“A doll is innocent in itself. But if you follow the strings attached to its limbs you find the puppet-master.”

Before Castle could demand an explanation, a knock sounded on the office door.

“Come in!”

Chief Inspector stood up as Victor Friern entered.

The manager seemed to have aged considerably since Lesley Christopher’s death. His erect carriage was gone and his face was lined with grief. But his voice was still calm and his manner authoritative.

He said sombrely:

“I have just been informed of the night’s events. And I understand”—he seemed suddenly angry—“I understand you are holding a member of my company a prisoner in this building.”

The Chief Inspector sighed noisily. Then he said firmly:

“Michael Trent is not a prisoner.”

“You haven’t arrested him?”

“No. But”—Castle paused momentarily—“I would be less than fair if I didn’t admit that he is under the gravest possible suspicion.”

The flare of anger had burnt itself out. Friern passed a hand over his twitching mouth. “I can’t believe—.”

Castle interrupted. “Perhaps I’d better explain.”

He summed up the situation with meticulous fairness. He concluded:

“You see? Mr. Trent has much to explain.”

Victor Friern nodded reluctantly.

Then he said rebelliously:

“I’m not given to melodrama. But I tell you this in all sincerity. I would stake my life on Trent’s innocence.”

Big Ben was chiming eleven as Algy Lawrence left New Scotland Yard.

He scanned the Embankment with thoughtful blue eyes. Then he looked both surprised and pleased, and walked briskly towards one of the public seats.

“Penny! Uh—Miss Valentine.”

She was simply and unobtrusively dressed, and there was very little make-up on her lovely face. She was wearing a beret and a belted raincoat and her fingers were pressed hard on a plain grey handbag. Her cerulean eyes seemed almost blind.

She looked up with a tiny smile as the tall young man approached. But the smile died quickly as she returned his greeting.

Lawrence spoke with deliberate flippancy. “For an actress, you’re almost in disguise.”

The smile came back. “I don’t feel very flamboyant this morning.”

Then her mouth was sad again.

Lawrence seated himself beside her. He said softly:

“You mustn’t worry.”

She answered without reproach. “That’s easy to say. But—.”

She broke off, then asked painfully:

“They’ve arrested him, haven’t they?”

Lawrence said:

“No. They just believe Michael can help them with their enquiries.”

Penny parodied a smile. “I’ve seen that phrase often enough in the newspapers to know what it means.”

Lawrence produced his silver cigarette case and offered it to the girl. She accepted a cigarette and put it between her lips. Algy touched flame to the tip from the lighter in the case’s spine.

He said quietly:

“I can reassure you. As matters stand now, Michael cannot possibly be arrested for murder.”

Penny seemed not to have heard. She said dully:

“Something happened at the theatre last night.”

“Yes. But how did you know?”

“I was—told.” Penny’s voice dropped.

Lawrence regarded her thoughtfully, studying the soft curve of her cheek. She was very lovely.

He said gently:

“I think you need a friend to confide in.”

She nodded. Lawrence waited patiently.

Penny turned her face away. She spoke in a muffled voice:

“There’s something—.”

“Yes?”

“Something I have to do.” She choked. “God knows I don’t want to! I’ve been sitting here watching—waiting—trying to make up my mind—.”

She turned back to face him. He saw with distress she was crying.

“Penny, my dear—.”

She cried desperately:

“Don’t stop me now. Here, take it quickly.”

She snapped open her handbag and snatched out a crumpled paper. She thrust it into Lawrence’s hand with trembling fingers, then watched dumbly as he unfolded the paper and examined it. It was dated some five years before. It was the certificate of a marriage between Michael Trent and Lesley Barre.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Lawrence said gently:

“You mustn’t over-rate the importance of this thing. The Chief Inspector will be interested in the marriage certificate. But he won’t swear out a warrant for Michael’s arrest on the strength of it.”

Penny smiled wanly.

“Now”—Lawrence gave her an encouraging grin—“explain from the beginning.”

The girl nodded. She cradled her hands round a cup of steaming coffee.

The two young people were sitting in a Westminster tea-shop. Lawrence had insisted on removing Penny from the public seat on the Embankment, and they had found a secluded corner in the restaurant where they could talk in private.

Penny said:

“This won’t be easy. But I’d rather tell you than a policeman. I—.”

She faltered.

Lawrence smiled at her. “Take your time.”

Penny started again. “Michael—Michael didn’t tell me that Lesley was his wife. I knew that she had some kind of hold over him, but at first it didn’t seem to matter. She made demands on him but—but he was tactful. He knew how to handle her. And I think she had her reasons for not claiming him publicly as her own.”

Lawrence nodded slowly.

Penny flushed very slightly. “Michael and I—we became lovers several months ago. We used to meet secretly. He explained that Lesley must know nothing. He didn’t say why and I was too much in love to ask him to explain.”

“Was?”

“And am.” Penny’s flush deepened. “Michael is the only man in the world for me. If I should lose him—.”

Lawrence said:

“You’re not going to lose him.”

She thanked him with a warm smile. She continued:

“We tried to keep our secret. But it wasn’t easy. We were living in a small, well-integrated group with our lives revolving around the play. That’s one of the penalties of a long run: you get to know your fellow players too well.

“Douglas Denzil soon discovered our secret. I think Trudy Ann knew, too. She doesn’t miss much, bless her designing little heart.” Penny was indulgent; there was no sting in her words.

“Fortunately, Lesley herself was the last to know. It wasn’t until yesterday afternoon in Michael’s dressing-room—.”

Penny faltered again.

Then she said more firmly:

“She had been suspicious, of course. She had never liked me. It was professional jealousy, I suppose. But it was becoming something worse towards the end...

“Michael suffered, too. She became increasingly possessive. She began to make”—Penny hesitated—“physical demands upon him again. Michael hated it, poor darling.”

Lawrence waited in sympathetic silence.

The girl continued:

“Things were getting steadily worse. We had to give up our meetings. Lesley was making Michael’s life a hell. And he was drinking too much, poor sweet.” A spark of anger showed in her beautiful eyes. “She was destroying his life. And I had to watch.”

Lawrence asked:

“And you—what was she doing to you?”

Penny shrugged gently. “She had her knife into me. She was out to kill my performance at every show. Not that that mattered, so long as I could be sure of Michael’s love for me.”

Her lips trembled. “But I was afraid of losing him. I thought Lesley was succeeding in driving us apart. Then at last I couldn’t stand it any more. I went to Michael and told him—.”

“Yes?”

“That he must break with Lesley. Or with me.”

Lawrence asked:

“Was that wise?”

Penny blinked back a tear. “Don’t you see? An ultimatum—that was my only chance. I had to make him act before it was too late. Before Lesley—.”

She choked. She said dully:

“She was killing him. And killing his love for me.”

She drank some coffee. It seemed to refresh her. She continued:

“When I told him that, it shocked him. And then I knew he still loved me. He—he said he’d rather die than live without me. He swore that he would break with Lesley. With her consent or without it.”

Lawrence said nothing. But his face was grave.

Penny said:

“I know what you’re thinking. But it isn’t true. He didn’t resort to murder.”

“I hope not.” Lawrence added mentally: for your sake.

Penny said desperately:

“Michael isn’t a murderer. You must believe that.”

Lawrence replied:

“I’ll try to. I can’t say more than that. Go on with your story.”

Penny looked away. “I didn’t know that Michael was Lesley’s husband. He didn’t tell me, even then. But he vowed he would break the hold she had over him. He meant to tell her he loved—only me.”

She smiled faintly. “I believed him. But he must have lost his courage again. He began to drink more heavily than ever. It affected his work.

“He had been late for every performance last week. He was tipsy again yesterday afternoon. And he still hadn’t managed to tell Lesley the truth.

“Then chance took the matter out of his hands. Lesley must have suspected us, but she had never actually known. Until—.”

She hesitated, then said flatly:

“Until yesterday afternoon. She came into Michael’s dressing-room during the second act wait. She found me in his arms.”

Lawrence murmured:

“And said: ‘You’ll be sorry for this. I promise you.’”

“How did you know that?”

“It doesn’t matter, Penny. Go on.”

The girl answered in a low voice:

“Lesley’s face was evil. And—and scared, too, in some strange way. As if her last hope had failed her, making her despairing and vengeful at the same time.”

Her hands clenched. “She frightened me.”

Then Lawrence said cheerfully:

“All right, then. You’ve cleared up several obscurities. But this is only half the story. Now you must tell me about the marriage certificate.”

Penny nodded. Her face changed.

She said uncertainly:

“It’s an odd story. Something happened this morning which made me feel wretched. Yet now it seems rather silly... I hardly know whether to laugh or cry.”

Her mouth quirked.

She remarked with apparent inconsequence:

“I’m afraid Douglas is a rather incompetent blackmailer.”

“Denzil?”

“Yes. He gave me the certificate.”

“Did he, now?” Lawrence’s eyes were sleepy.

Penny nodded again. She said:

“I couldn’t tell this story to anybody else but you. Certainly not to a policeman.”

“Don’t you trust the police?”

“I suppose so. But I don’t like them.”

Lawrence grinned. “Nobody does. Not since they became the custodians of morals and motoring... Tell me about Denzil.”

Penny pushed aside her cup and saucer. She drew a deep breath and obeyed.

“He came to see me this morning....”

Penny Valentine regarded her visitor with unfriendly eyes. “You do have a thick skin, don’t you? I thought I’d made my feelings plain.”

Denzil smiled unpleasantly. “You did, my sweet. But I don’t take offence until it suits me to do so. And as for the slap”—he rubbed his cheek lightly—“I’ve already forgiven you.”

Penny thanked him dryly.

She was wearing a black night-gown, a filmy black atinee, and fluffy black slippers. Denzil stared at her with cool insolence. She stirred restively under his gaze. “I can’t imagine why you came here.”

“Let me in and I’ll tell you.”

Penny shrugged and stood aside. Douglas strolled into the living room while the girl closed the front door of her flat.

She followed him. “Now, Douglas—.”

He mimicked her. “Now, Penny.” He moved towards her. He said:

“You know you’re very beautiful. And you smell deliciously of flowers.”

It was almost a deliberate caricature of his manner on stage. Amusement shimmered briefly in Penny’s lovely eyes. Then she yawned slightly and turned away.

“Ah—pardon me, Douglas. But it is rather early. And I usually sleep till noon.”

Denzil said:

“I have something to show you. I think it’s of interest.”

He spoke maliciously.

It was his usual tone; but an alien cadence caught Penny’s ear. She felt suddenly afraid.

She sat down on the sofa. “Well?”

Denzil seated himself beside her. Unhurriedly he withdrew a folded paper from an inside pocket and put it into her hands.

Penny examined it with puzzled eyes. “It’s—.”

“A marriage certificate,” said Denzil pleasantly.

Penny read the names. She said nothing. A clock ticked loudly in the room.

Denzil relaxed against the cushions. “Penny, my sweet. Haven’t you anything to say?”

Penny folded the paper carefully.

She said:

“No. Except that this isn’t your property. And I didn’t think you were a thief.”

Denzil’s eyes glinted briefly. He answered smoothly:

“I’m not. As a matter of fact, my conduct has been beyond reproach.”

The mockery in his voice became more pronounced. “As a public-spirited citizen, I have an obvious duty. To hand this paper to the police.”

Penny caught her breath.

Denzil had been watching her closely. He smiled a cat-like smile. He said softly:

“That wouldn’t help Michael. You know what policemen are. They might think he had a motive for—ah—removing his wife.”

Penny said clearly:

“I don’t think you need worry about Michael. It might be better to consider your own position. The police may ask you some inconvenient questions.”

“I can answer them all,” returned Douglas lightly. “If necessary.” He stressed the word “if.” He continued: “You see, sweet, I didn’t steal that certificate. I found it.”

The girl asked:

“Where?”

The word was only a breath.

Denzil replied:

“In my letter box.”

Penny shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

“Neither do I, sweet. But there it is. And was.” Denzil’s eyes slitted. “You know I have a flat in a mews not far from the theatre. When I got up this morning, I found this certificate in the letter cage inside my door. Some unknown hand had delivered it during the night.”

His young-old face seemed puzzled. “There was no note, no explanation of any sort. I was curious, of course. I decided to telephone Michael.”

He grinned slightly. “There was no reply. He wasn’t at home.”

“But—.”

“Patience, sweet. Next, I rang the theatre. I found myself talking to a policeman. A charming fellow, you understand, but uncommunicative. The police are so discreet... I told him Michael was missing—.”

Penny said:

“You’re so thoughtful of others.”

Denzil grinned. “True, my sweet. But to continue: my policeman hemmed and hawed for a while but eventually unbent. He told me there had been trouble of some sort at the Janus in the night and he believed that Mr. Trent was assisting the police in their enquiries—I believe that’s the phrase?”

Penny’s hands clenched. “Michael—.”

“Oh, don’t worry, darling. The beloved is in perfect health.”

The girl relaxed.

Denzil went on:

“I ‘phoned the Yard. Yes, Mr. Trent was there. No, I couldn’t speak to him. He was still—h’m—assisting the police.”

Penny stood up. "I must go to him."

"Not so fast, my sweet." Denzil's voice flattened oddly. "We have things to discuss."

"What things?"

Denzil said softly:

"I don't believe the police have arrested Michael. But they obviously suspect him. What do you suppose they'll think when they discover that he and Lesley were secretly married?"

Penny said dully:

"I don't know."

"Then I'll tell you. The police know about you and Michael. And they know that Lesley was a jealous, possessive woman. They'll say that Michael had to kill her to get rid of her."

"No!"

"Yes." Denzil was persuasive. "You have to face it, sweet. This certificate makes all the difference. The police already know that Michael had the means and opportunity. Now they can prove he had a motive for the crime as well."

Penny tried to speak, but no words came.

Douglas gave her a side-long glance. The corners of his mouth lifted.

He said gently:

"Of course, the police don't have to know about the marriage. Do they?"

"Aren't—aren't you going to tell them?"

"Well. That depends."

"On what?"

"On you, my sweet." Denzil stretched like a cat. He said, very quietly:

"You might be able to persuade me to forget about that certificate."

Penny's breasts rose and fell beneath the gentle, caressing confinement of black chiffon. She asked:

"Persuade you—how?"

Denzil told her.

The girl paused, remembering. Then she laughed rather shakily. She told Lawrence:

"Douglas made a certain suggestion. It wasn't exactly a surprise, though something of a shock. Douglas can be rather crude at times. You probably

heard what he said to me in Lesley's dressing-room yesterday. And he looked at me as insolently as if I were a prize sow in a market."

Lawrence rubbed his cheek. "I gather you didn't accept his offer."

"Proposition," said Penny, "might be the better word." There was a fleeting gleam of amusement in her eyes. Then she said more soberly: "No, I didn't accept. I love Michael too much to cheat him."

Lawrence nodded. "You couldn't have kept the secret, anyway. Even if Denzil had been willing to keep silent about the marriage, another might have spoken."

"Another?"

"The man who sent the certificate." Lawrence frowned thoughtfully. "Why the devil did he give it to Denzil?"

Penny suggested. "To do Michael a bad turn."

"Perhaps. But—." Lawrence hesitated briefly. "Finish your story, Penny. How did Denzil act —"

"When I refused him?" The girl smiled. "He didn't appear unduly perturbed. I suspect he was rather relieved... He didn't try to reclaim the certificate. He said he would leave it with me while I made up my mind what to do."

"So you brought it to me."

Penny said:

"Meeting you was a lucky chance. I couldn't make any real decision. I came here because I had to be near Michael. Yet I dared not go into the Yard. I could only wait on the Embankment, wondering what to do." Her mouth trembled. "I was so afraid—for Michael."

Lawrence remarked with a question in his tone:

"But you gave the certificate to me."

Penny put out her hand impulsively. "I had to give it to somebody. And I felt I could trust you as a friend."

Lawrence felt a warm flush of pleasure. He squeezed her fingers gently. "Thank you."

He released her hand and said briskly:

"I shall have to surrender the certificate to the Chief Inspector. You knew that, of course."

Penny agreed reluctantly. "He'll have to know about the marriage."

Lawrence explained:

“It’s the certificate itself which is so important. I believe it was stolen from Lesley’s dressing-room last night.”

He told Penny about the attack upon Bailey at the Janus. When he had finished, the girl cried excitedly:

“But surely—this proves Michael’s innocence! He might have taken the certificate to destroy it. But he wouldn’t have put it into another man’s hands.”

“Least of all, Denzil’s,” agreed Lawrence. “That’s true. But Castle may not agree.” He paused, then said quietly:

“I think I see a way for Michael to prove his innocence. But it won’t be easy. And he’ll have to trust me completely.”

Penny said softly:

“I can persuade him to do that.”

Lawrence smiled, but spoke sombrely. “Penny—.”

“Yes?”

“I must warn you. In my modest way, I stand for the truth... I don’t think Michael is a murderer. But I’ve been wrong about such things before and I may be wrong again. And if I am—.”

He halted.

Penny finished the sentence. “You won’t protect Michael. Even for me.”

She smiled. “I knew, you see? You didn’t have to tell me.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Chief Inspector Castle spoke with grimly controlled relish. "This is it, Algy. The genuine article."

He thumped a stubby finger on the marriage certificate. "See that? One corner has been torn off. Do you know where that scrap of paper is now? It's already in our possession. We found it caught in the splintered frame of the portrait of Trent in the dead woman's dressing-room."

Lawrence rubbed his cheek. "So Lesley kept her marriage lines hidden behind the photograph of her husband. Somebody wanted that certificate urgently enough to break into the Janus and assault a policeman. Why?"

"Ask Michael Trent."

Lawrence studied his friend's expressive face. "Do you really believe he did it?"

Castle said. "Yes," a little too firmly.

Lawrence chuckled. "Then explain why he shoved the certificate into Denzil's letter box."

Castle looked unhappy. "How should I know what was in the fellow's mind? Perhaps he was playing an intricate game of double bluff."

"You don't really believe that, Steve."

"Maybe not. But I'm not going to abandon my theory until you provide me with a better one."

"All right, Steve. That's a bargain." Lawrence smiled seraphically. "But I shall expect you to co-operate. You'll have to release Michael Trent. You can't keep him here indefinitely. And you can't arrest him—you don't have enough evidence."

Castle relieved his feelings with a heart-felt curse. Then he asked unwillingly:

"What do you suggest?"

Lawrence explained....

Castle fingered his jaw. He mumbled:

"I can't say I like it. But if you can produce the right results—"

He stopped short. Penny Valentine had returned.

The girl said dully:

“I’ve made a statement and signed it. Now may I go?”

“Of course.” The Chief Inspector was polite.

“And Michael—may he leave, too?”

Castle hesitated. His eyes met Lawrence’s. Then he shrugged and said:

“Wait just a moment. If you please.”

He left his office and opened the door across the corridor. The police officers pushed back their chairs. Trent didn’t move. He sat slumped in his seat, looking pale and ill. A half empty teacup stood on the table at his elbow. The charred stump of a cigarette had been mashed soggly into the saucer.

Castle rested his fists on the table.

He said pleasantly:

“Well, sir. Have you completed your statement?”

Trent’s lips moved stiffly. “Ask your friends.”

Wemyss coughed discreetly. “Here it is.”

Castle took the paper-clipped pages from the Detective Inspector’s hand and leafed through them quickly. “Hmmm... Isn’t there anything you would care to add about your relationship with Miss Christopher?”

Trent’s words were pebbles dropped into a muddy pool of silence.

“I’ve told you everything.”

Castle’s eyebrows came together in a frown. Then he shrugged. “I don’t think we need detain you any longer. Thank you for helping us.”

He turned away.

Trent said:

“You mean—I can go?”

Castle spoke over his shoulder. “Of course. You’re not under arrest.” He went out of the room.

Trent followed slowly. When he saw Penny in the corridor, a faint flush crept over his cheek-bones.

He forced a smile. “Hallo, darling.”

“Michael!”

The girl put her hand on his forearm. He patted it gently. “It’s all right, Penny. I’m leaving with you.”

“And with Mr. Lawrence.” The Chief Inspector spoke from the doorway of his office. “He wants a talk with you.”

Trent’s mouth hardened. “Haven’t you finished with me yet?”

Lawrence said amiably:

“I have nothing to do with the police. I might even be able to help you.”

Penny said softly:

“That’s true, Michael. I think he’s our friend.”

Trent smiled at her eager, up-turned face. “If you say so, darling.” He nodded to Lawrence. “Shall we go?”

“Just a moment.” Stephen Castle spoke with deceptive mildness. “Before you leave—.”

“Well?”

“You might like to look at this.”

He held out the marriage certificate. Michael Trent took a swift step forward, then stood rigid. As he read the names, his hands clenched hard.

His gaze shifted to the Chief Inspector’s face. He seemed to be asking a wordless question.

Castle answered:

“That’s all for now. Goodbye, Mr. Trent. We may call you later.”

Michael Trent said thoughtfully:

“So that’s how Castle got hold of the certificate.”

“Yes.” Penny’s eyes were anxious. “You do understand, my darling, that I—that I—.”

“Couldn’t keep the secret? Of course.” Michael squeezed her hand. “But as for Denzil—.” His face set grimly. “By God, I’ll make him suffer.”

Algy Lawrence grinned lazily:

“You can kick Denzil’s spine through the top of his head, but”—his eyelids drooped sleepily—“it won’t solve any of your problems.”

Michael and Penny drew closer together.

They were in the actor’s flat. Lawrence was reclining in an easy chair, apparently on the point of falling asleep. He continued drowsily:

“Castle will arrest you if he can. He is still convinced that you murdered your wife.”

Trent murmured a shocked protest.

Lawrence shrugged. “You can’t blame him. You might have known the police would find out about your marriage. You should have confessed it at once.”

“It wouldn’t have helped them.”

Lawrence said gently:

“That wasn’t for you to decide.”

Penny had been watching the fair-haired young man closely. She asked quietly:

“Why do the police think Michael is a murderer?”

Lawrence answered:

“There’s one damning factor.” He spoke directly to Michael Trent. “You’ve asked us to believe that the real murderer put live bullets into the gun to make you his catspaw. But this man couldn’t have been sure Lesley would die. You might not have dealt her a mortal wound. There was only one man who could have been certain that the bullet would go crashing through her heart. And that was the man who aimed the gun and pulled the trigger.”

There was a brief, appalled silence.

Then Trent said in a tortured voice:

“It’s a nightmare. I can argue. But I can’t escape.”

Penny cried a pain-filled protest.

Lawrence avoided her eyes. “You might as well know the worst. There’s a case against Michael—I’ll state it point by point.”

Trent nodded mutely. Lawrence said:

“I’ll begin at the beginning. You weren’t exactly sober when you arrived at the theatre yesterday afternoon. Right?”

Michael stared. “I’d been drinking, certainly. Isn’t that a point in my favour? I would have needed a clear head to carry out a premeditated murder.”

“You might have needed Dutch courage, too.”

Penny cried:

“That’s monstrously unfair!”

Lawrence grinned wryly. “I’m not trying to be fair. I’m putting the case for the prosecution... Next! You told the stage manager: ‘

“‘This afternoon, I promise you, the audience will see a convincing murder.’ As indeed it did.”

Trent put his hand to his throat. “Good God, man! Do you think I’d have been mad enough to use those words if I had really been planning to kill her?”

“No, I don’t. You’d have been a fool to invite needless suspicion. But a jury would take your words at their face value.”

“But what I said—.” Michael paused helplessly. “It was quite innocent. We always talked of murder when we discussed that scene. We simply

meant the business on stage.” He licked his lips. “You can make any statement sound like a guilty admission when you quote it out of context.”

Lawrence shrugged. “You made another unfortunate remark.”

Trent had a hunted air. “When?”

Lawrence didn’t reply directly. He mused:

“Somebody sent the Chief Inspector two tickets for the show. Castle’s presence in the audience was therefore to be expected; but no one could have known he would invite me to accompany him. So my arrival backstage must have surprised the man who sent the tickets.”

“Well?” muttered Trent.

“When I told you my name,” said Lawrence gently, “your first words were: ‘You were in the audience too?’”

Michael bit his lip hard. “I meant nothing important. I knew your name and your reputation. You had already told me about the Chief Inspector. Then you disclosed your own identity. The remark I made—it was natural enough.”

Lawrence nodded. “I can accept that explanation. But there’s still—.”

“The damning factor.” Trent’s hands moved in an involuntary gesture of protest.

“Yes.” Lawrence rubbed his cheek. “You levelled the gun at Lesley’s heart. That’s something—it can be argued—an innocent man would not have done. You thought the revolver was loaded with blanks. But even a blank cartridge isn’t the harmless article it seems. It contains a heavy charge of powder which can burn and tear anyone in the line of fire. It also contains wadding in lieu of a bullet—and even that can be painful if it scores a hit. You must have known the golden rule: never point the gun at the human body. Even if you hadn’t learned the lesson by previous experience, your producer must have warned you of the danger.”

Strangely, Penny laughed.

Trent smiled too. He spoke with a return to his old, light-hearted manner:

“You’ve been giving the matter some thought. But there’s one point you’ve overlooked. Our producer is a whale on realism. That’s why we use a real gun with an unplugged barrel. And that’s why he made me level the gun at Lesley’s heart.”

He paused, then continued:

“At the first rehearsals, I behaved like every professional. I pointed the gun away from Lesley’s body. But the producer and the author didn’t

approve. They wanted the scene to be as realistic as possible. So I was told to sight the gun carefully.”

“Didn’t you object?”

“Of course. I said Lesley might get hurt. But we experimented and proved she was perfectly safe. You remember that I stood some way from Lesley when—when—.”

“You fired the revolver. Yes. Go on.”

Michael pulled himself together. “The powder grains from the blank never reached her. And the wadding always fell short of her body. At that distance, I could fire the blank safely, even though the gun was levelled at her heart.”

“As it was yesterday. But it wasn’t always so exactly aimed. Was it?”

“Wh—what do you mean?”

“I mean,” said Lawrence softly, “you were notoriously careless with that gun. You rarely bothered to sight it precisely. On Friday evening you aimed it so wildly that”—Lawrence seemed to be quoting—“if there had been a live cartridge in the chamber the bullet would have gone into the O.P. box. In other words, anywhere but Lesley’s body. But on Saturday afternoon, on the only occasion when there was a real bullet under the hammer, you aimed so carefully that the shot went through her heart.”

There was a terrible silence.

Then Trent said thickly:

“Oh, my God.”

He collected himself with an effort. “Look here, man. I admit I’d grown careless with the gun. That was partly due to my drinking and partly due to an instinctive return to the golden rule you mentioned. And it’s true I sighted the revolver with particular care yesterday afternoon. But that doesn’t make me a murderer! I was only obeying a stage manager’s order.”

Lawrence said coolly:

“I know that Austin told you to aim the gun before you fired it. He repeated the conversation in your dressing-room to us.”

“Then that puts me in the clear.”

“Not necessarily. You might have been deliberately careless with the gun at previous performances knowing that the S.M. must eventually tell you to follow the producer’s orders. Then you could have slipped live ammunition into the revolver. You had been told to aim carefully—who could blame you if Lesley died?”

“God Almighty!” Trent looked at Lawrence with horror in his eyes.

Penny’s voice shook. “You can’t believe Michael capable of such – such —.”

“Devilish subtlety?” Lawrence grinned crookedly.

He said:

“Let’s be frank. I haven’t made up my mind about Michael one way or the other. But if he is innocent—.”

“Yes?”

“There’s only one way to prove it.”

“Well?” Trent’s hand clenched. “Out with it, man, before you drive me crazy.”

“Michael.” Penny spoke in gentle warning.

She regarded Lawrence gravely. “Go on. Please.”

Lawrence addressed Trent. “The only thing that can save you now is complete and utter frankness. You’ve tried to conceal the truth about your relationship with Lesley Barre and you’ve failed miserably. Now, let’s wipe the slate clean and start again. I want to know everything about her.”

“But I’ve already told you—.”

“You’ve told us nothing. But don’t think we don’t know about you and Lesley and Richard Mervan.”

Trent caught his breath. “I don’t understand.”

Lawrence smiled. “I think you do.”

Michael looked at the girl, then turned back to Lawrence in mute appeal. Algy understood. He said amiably:

“Penny, my dear. You said you trusted me.”

She nodded. “I do.”

“Then do what I say. Leave us now. And don’t ask questions.”

The girl’s eyes widened. She stood up without a word.

Trent put out a restraining hand. “Penny! Don’t go.”

She bent over and kissed him lightly. “I must.”

“But—.”

“Call me when you’ve finished. I’ll be waiting by the ‘phone.”

She left.

Lawrence remarked:

“She’s a wonderful girl.”

Trent was angry. “Why did you send her away?”

“To save your face. She knows nothing of your criminal past.”

“Criminal!”

“You robbed a bank,” said Lawrence blandly. “That’s a crime, I believe.”

Trent tried to laugh. “You’re raving.”

Lawrence continued inexorably: “You took the loot and escaped with Lesley. Mervan was left to pay the price.”

Trent’s breathing had quickened.

Lawrence eyed him quizzically. “I hope you’re not going to bluster. It would only waste time.”

Trent regained his composure. He answered lightly:

“I’m not going to deny anything. I don’t have to. You can’t prove your accusations.”

Algy agreed equably. “I can’t. What’s more, I don’t want to. That’s why we’re going to work together.”

Trent was wary. “You’d better explain.”

Lawrence settled himself more comfortably in his chair. “I’m not trying to convict you of a seven year old robbery. I want to solve yesterday’s murder.”

“Then why—?”

“Am I pulling skeletons out of the closet? Well, now. Perhaps it’s because the essential clue to the mystery may lie somewhere in Lesley’s past. Or perhaps it’s because”—Algy grinned widely—“I’m humanly inquisitive. I don’t like unexplained mysteries. Don’t forget: Mervan could tell me only half the story of the robbery. I want to hear the rest from you.”

“You want to trap me.” Trent was bitter. “You’d like me to convict myself.”

“Don’t be an ass,” said Lawrence roundly. “I’ve sent Penny away. There are no witnesses. We’re alone.”

“You mean—.”

“I mean,” said Lawrence deliberately, “you can admit any crime without fear of punishment. You couldn’t possibly be put on trial. It would only be my word against yours. You could even sue me for slander.”

Trent eyed him suspiciously. He said cautiously:

“That sounds reasonable. But—.”

“There aren’t any buts,” said Algy Lawrence. “I give you my word I mean no trickery. Of course, you don’t have to believe me. You can search the flat for hidden microphones. But you’ll find nothing.”

Trent studied the young man’s lazy face.

He said abruptly:

“I believe you.”

“Thanks.” Lawrence rubbed his cheek. “Are you going to tell me the whole story?”

Trent hesitated. He asked bluntly:

“Where’s the catch?”

Lawrence answered frankly. “I shall report our talk to the Chief Inspector. That is, I shall repeat as much of it as I consider is necessary for him to hear.”

Trent’s voice was hard and angry. “Do you expect me to agree to that?”

“Oh, yes.” Lawrence was mild. “I think so. We know most of the story already. Telling us the details won’t make it easier to prove. Besides, Castle doesn’t want to arrest you for robbery. He wants you for murder.”

Trent swallowed. He lit a cigarette with a shaking hand. “You’re very frank.”

“I’ll be franker still. Castle knows my plan. That’s why he released you.”

“What?”

Lawrence laughed. “Don’t misunderstand me. Castle is convinced you’re a murderer; I’m not. Castle knows that. But he also knows I shall play fair with him. I won’t conceal a material fact.”

“So?” The word trembled out in a cloud of smoke.

“Castle thinks you’ll be eager to argue away his suspicions. So he thinks you will talk—too much.”

“I see.” Trent took the cigarette out of his mouth. “He thinks I shall out-smart myself.”

“Yes. And you probably will—if you’re guilty of murder. You won’t find it easy to walk along the dividing line between truth and falsehood.”

“It comes to this.” The actor’s voice was brittle. “I’m caught in a web of circumstantial evidence. The only thing that can save me is complete frankness. But if I’m guilty—.”

“You will almost certainly give yourself away.” Lawrence grinned crookedly. “So you’d be a fool to talk at all. Wouldn’t you?”

Trent met the challenge in the other man’s eyes.

He flung away the cigarette.

He said tightly:

“I’ll tell you everything you want to know.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

“I’m not going to make excuses.” Trent’s voice was low. He sat with linked hands, staring into his palms. “But you must understand the situation... Mine is one of the toughest professions in the world. It’s also the most over-crowded. There are about ten thousand actors and actresses in this country at the present time. Less than half of us can expect to earn our living on the stage; and we spend about five months in the year out of work.”

Lawrence nodded without speaking.

Trent drew a deep breath. “Well! That’s the situation now. It was worse seven years ago.

“I hadn’t been long out of the Navy. I thought I was going to take the Theatre by storm. But I couldn’t land a shop anywhere.”

“Land a—?”

“Theatrical engagement. I couldn’t even get a walk-on... Lesley was having the same trouble. We weren’t amateurs. We’d both had previous experience. But no management wanted us.

“Well! We had to eat. So Lesley took a temporary job in this bank. They were short of staff; and Lesley was a qualified typist. She had been trained for a business career by her guardian: he hadn’t approved of her theatrical ambitions. But the stage was Lesley’s life: she had to act or die... She meant to return to the theatre as soon as she could, but in the meantime—.”

He gestured.

“She didn’t talk about her real profession, of course; and nobody at the bank knew of her relationship with me.”

Lawrence asked:

“Was it something to be ashamed of?”

Trent grinned suddenly. “Respectable bankers would have considered it unconventional. We weren’t married then: that came later... Besides, Lesley was naturally secretive.”

“So?”

“We met when we could. We made love when we met... That’s all.”

Lawrence said:

“You made love. Were you in love?”

Trent frowned. He confessed. “I—don’t know.”

He groped for words. “Ours was a queer relationship. It’s hard to describe... Take Lesley, now. She was a cold fish, for all her seeming warmth and charm. Men found her attractive, but they meant nothing to her. She used them; she never liked them. And yet—.”

“Yes?”

“If she loved anybody at all she loved me. She could be passionate enough. And I was hers—with a great big ‘L’ branded on my back.”

Trent laughed rather savagely. Lawrence said dryly:

“We’ve been told she was a possessive woman.”

“She was,” returned Trent in a sombre tone. “I fooled around with other girls. But when Lesley whistled—I came running.”

Lawrence angled an eyebrow. “You didn’t protest?”

Trent shrugged. “She suited me well enough. I was younger then. And easy-going. I always took the line of least resistance. And there was a quality of—of steely determination in her which I found irresistible. She had the drive and force I lacked. So, in a dozen different ways, she made herself essential. I thought I prized my independence. But I couldn’t do without her.”

Lawrence nodded slowly. “I think I understand. But you haven’t explained why you turned to crime.”

Trent looked ashamed. He said unhappily:

“I was a damned fool. And I was having a hard time. I couldn’t land a shop. I began to drink and gamble... That made things worse. I got myself in the hell of a hole; so I went to Lesley for help.” He muttered:

“By God, if I’d known what was in her mind—.”

Lawrence grinned sardonically.

Trent flushed. He said sombrely:

“I know what you’re thinking. I’m not just a crook, I’m a coward as well. Lesley’s dead; she can’t defend herself. I can hide behind her grave... But—God help me—I’m telling you the truth. Hers was the brain behind the crime.”

Lawrence said:

“I’m inclined to believe you. She was the puppet-master. You were the doll.”

“Yes. Richard Mervan was another. Poor devil!”

“Poor indeed.”

Trent bit his lip. “I’ll never forgive myself for what we did to him. And yet—then—I hardly thought of him at all. He wasn’t a man. He was just a puppet.”

He relapsed into moody silence.

Then he continued:

“Lesley struck up a friendship with Mervan. A thug had attempted to rob him in the street: she told Mervan he deserved a reward for saving the bank’s money. When he didn’t get it, she played on his natural feelings of resentment. And, of course, she made him fall in love with her.”

Lawrence said mildly:

“We know how she trapped him. Let’s hear your side of the story.”

Trent muttered:

“I didn’t take any great part in the business. Lesley must have been planning it for months. An accountant named Spurling had given her the idea—unintentionally, of course. He had been pestering her. So she made use of him.

“She took him to her flat one night when he was holding the keys to the safes. She drugged a drink she gave him. When he passed out she struck an impression of the keys.”

“Impressions are useless in themselves,” said Lawrence. “Who cut the duplicate keys?”

“I did,” confessed Trent. “It wasn’t a hard job. And I had some amateur skill as a locksmith.” He added uncomfortably. “I wasn’t happy about it. But I always did what Lesley asked.”

Lawrence made no comment. He asked:

“Was there any trouble with Spurling?”

“No. He didn’t realise the keys had been copied. He didn’t even know he’d been drugged. And Lesley dropped him at once. He dared not protest.”

“No,” mused Lawrence. “Bankers pride themselves on their respectability. The directors would have sacked him if they had heard about his amorous adventures.”

“Right. Lesley was a fellow employee—she could have made things awkward for him.” Michael smiled reminiscently. “She could lead a man up the garden path. Then she would side-step neatly—and pitch him into a bed of thorns.”

Lawrence ignored the metaphor. “Lesley had one set of keys. Then she went to work on Mervan for the other.”

Trent nodded.

He said unhappily:

“He believed everything she told him. And she—she set him up like a clay pigeon. While I—.”

He halted painfully. “God, I’m so ashamed!”

He swallowed, then continued:

“I went to Lesley’s flat on the morning of the robbery. We waited till Mervan ‘phoned. Then—.”

He bit his lip. “Lesley was ready to leave. Mervan thought she was going with him. But when he arrived with the loot, she called him into the bedroom—.”

“And you were waiting behind the door with a bludgeon,” finished Lawrence coldly.

“Yes,” said Michael dully. “I struck him down from behind. We took the money and left.”

“Leaving Mervan to the police.”

Trent retorted:

“He could have saved himself! Nobody knew about that duplicate set of keys. The police couldn’t have proved that Mervan had ever had them. Lesley had taken them from his pocket before we left....

“The robbery would have remained an unsolved mystery if Mervan had kept his head. He could have gone back to the bank and bluffed it out. Instead, he gave himself away.”

Trent seemed to be arguing against his own conscience. Lawrence thought that the actor was too intelligent to deceive himself with sophistry. He said dryly:

“So Mervan had only himself to blame?”

Trent flushed. He said bitterly:

“I can’t pretend to be anything but a damnable scoundrel, can I? Maybe I should hang—for what I did to Mervan.”

Lawrence said amicably:

“That wasn’t technically murder. If you really want to salvage something from the wreck of Mervan’s life, you’ll have an opportunity to help him later. Meanwhile let’s concentrate on Lesley.”

Trent continued slowly:

“I’m just realising how little I really knew about her. She was always an enigma.”

“Let’s stick to the facts as you know them.”

“There’s not much more to tell.” Michael’s voice was low. “We took the money and left London at once. Lesley had to disappear for a while. We didn’t know what Mervan would tell the police: he might have put them on her track. But we weren’t seriously worried. Mervan couldn’t possibly trace us himself and we thought he would be too busy trying to save himself to implicate us.”

“You thought he would bluff it out?”

“Yes. I told myself—that is, I hoped—he would. But, as we saw from the newspapers, he threw in his hand at once.”

Lawrence said levelly:

“His whole world had collapsed.”

“Yes, I realised that.” Trent bit his lip. “I was—I am— very sorry.”

Lawrence made no spoken comment. He shrugged, then said quietly:

“Tell me about your marriage.”

Trent answered frankly. “It wasn’t much more than a legal formality. Our relationship didn’t change at all. It wasn’t that Lesley wanted to be my wife instead of my mistress. She was completely amoral. But—.”

“She was a possessive woman. And now you were partners in crime. Perhaps that gave her a feeling of insecurity,” suggested Lawrence. “She would want to make binding the tie between you. Marriage would give her a legal claim upon you.”

“I suppose that was it,” agreed Michael slowly.

“But why did you keep the marriage a secret?”

“Lesley,” answered Trent, “wanted to have her cake and eat it too. She was determined not to lose me, but”—he grinned cynically—“considered she would get further in the theatrical rat-race if she was thought to be unmarried. Of course,” admitted Michael, “the situation gave me certain advantages too.” He smiled reminiscently.

He responded to Lawrence’s questions with engaging frankness. They had cached the loot and gone into semi-retirement. Trent had found a temporary job and had stuck to it. They had followed the reports of Mervan’s trial attentively. His silence had puzzled but relieved them. When they were satisfied that the hue and cry had died down, they had returned to their chosen profession.

“We used the money as our stake in the great gamble. And this time we were lucky.”

A brave but short-lived venture in a 'little theatre' in the provinces had ended in financial failure, but their work had won critical esteem. This, plus a successful season in repertory, had served as a springboard to various engagements in London.

"We were still a long way from the top, you understand. But we were climbing the ladder."

Lawrence interposed a question. "You were in the public eye again. Weren't you worried about Richard Mervan?"

Trent nodded. "I was," he confessed. "Though Lesley hardly ever considered him. He had grown shadowy and unreal. It was as if the prison sentence had ended his life for her. She simply put him out of her mind."

Lawrence rubbed his chin. "You were safe, of course. Mervan would have no reason to connect Michael Trent the actor with the unknown man who had struck him down from behind. But Lesley—"

He shook his head. "Didn't she take any precautions?"

Trent shrugged helplessly. "Her ego blinded her to the danger. She had gone so far as to adopt 'Christopher' as her surname and to alter the style of her hair. But beyond that—nothing."

He hesitated, then added:

"Somehow, she believed that when she reached the top, nothing could pull her down."

"I think I understand." Lawrence's eyes were sleepy. "She might have argued that Mervan had lost his chance to harm her when he refused to expose her after being arrested."

"Yes. But she didn't guess that he meant to take the law into his own hands." Trent gave a short, uneasy laugh. "That was a fear that came later."

"It came, then?"

"Yes—a few weeks ago." Trent paused uneasily. "Hell!--I'm not proud of myself. I've failed everybody, even Lesley. She came to me for help. And all I could do was to reach for the bottle."

Lawrence was patient: "She knew Mervan had found her again?"

"Yes. She caught sight of him in the theatre. And again in the street. She told me about it. He just looked at her—and smiled."

"What did you do?"

"Nothing. What could we do? Mervan didn't approach Lesley. He just let his presence play on her nerves. That was a move which couldn't be countered."

“Did you try?”

“I,” said Trent with bitter self-reproach, “took refuge in alcohol. The strain was telling upon me, too. Don’t forget—I had other troubles as well.”

“You were in love with Penny.”

“Yes. I wanted to marry her. Yet I couldn’t get rid of Lesley. She would never have given me a divorce—I dared not ask her. I suppose I was afraid of her. Yet I was also frightened for her.”

“You thought Mervan would harm her.”

“I suppose so. But I never dreamed—The crazy fool! Yesterday afternoon—everything seemed to happen at once. You’ve heard that Lesley left a message with the stage door-keeper—.”

“That she wanted to see you? Yes.”

Trent frowned. “I never found out why she wanted to talk to me. Perhaps she wanted reassurance—all the moral support I could give her. For days she had had a premonition of danger. Yet she was determined not to run away. The play was our first big success, you see, and she couldn’t bring herself to abandon it...”

“You had advised her to stick it out?”

“Yes. I expect she wanted me to reassure her. But I wasn’t exactly sober, and I was late, and there wasn’t time to see her. We exchanged a few words in the wings, but—.”

He grimaced.

Lawrence asked:

“Did you know Mervan was out front?”

“No. Not till the beginning of the second act. I knew that something had given Lesley a shock, of course, because she had dived in Act One—I had to ad-lib to cover her. She had spotted Mervan in the box, though I didn’t know that then. She told me later, in the wings. But we weren’t alone and I had to shut her up.”

“We’ve been told about that,” murmured Lawrence.

“Not by Cotall,” said Trent with decision. “Old Ben is devoted to me. And he’s discretion itself.”

“Maggie Boyd,” drawled Lawrence, “was more communicative.”

Trent nodded. He continued:

“We couldn’t talk in front of the dressers. That’s why Lesley came to my dressing-room in the second act wait. But then—.”

“She found you with Penny.”

“Yes.”

Lawrence nodded. He quoted softly:

“‘You’ll be sorry for this. I promise you.’”

Michael’s face was pale. “That’s what she said. It— it scared me.”

“You were afraid of what she might do?”

“Yes. To me. Or to herself, perhaps. I had loved her once, you see.”

There was a pause.

Then Lawrence asked mildly:

“Did you murder her?”

Trent met his gaze squarely.

He answered firmly:

“On my honour—no.”

Lawrence grinned sleepily. “I’m inclined to believe you.”

Trent relaxed. He said with relief:

“Then it’s all been worth while.”

“Our talk,” returned Lawrence cautiously, “hasn’t been an unqualified success. I haven’t found the essential clue I was hoping for, though,” he admitted cheerfully, “I may have been too blind to see it. However! At least you’ve cleared up several minor mysteries. I hate loose ends; so that’s a relief.”

“But—.”

“What about you?”

“Yes. Have I proved my innocence?”

Lawrence grinned. He said frankly:

“No. But you’ve passed the test, so far as I’m concerned. I don’t think you put the bullets in that gun. And I’m going to do my best to prove it.”

Michael Trent nodded his thanks.

Then, as Lawrence rose to leave, the actor asked hesitantly:

“And—Mervan?”

For an instant, Lawrence’s lazy face was uncharacteristically stern. Then he said abruptly:

“Richard Mervan is going back to prison. He’ll stay there for a long time.”

Trent stared at the floor. “I’d like to help him.”

“You can.”

Trent looked up. “How?”

Algy mused sleepily. “Well, now. You’re doing well in your profession. You must be quite a wealthy man. Or will be soon.”

Trent’s face lightened. “So?”

“You owe that bank a lot of money. But they’re wealthy enough – and they’ve long since written off that debt as a dead loss. So—.”

“Mervan needs the money more,” finished Trent eagerly.

“Yes,” agreed Lawrence. He added engagingly:

“It’s a most immoral suggestion. But it holds an element of poetic justice. And I never cared much for the letter of the law.”

Michael laughed. Then his face clouded. “I couldn’t give Mervan the money without arousing his suspicions.”

Lawrence shrugged. “I’ll take care of the details.”

“You’ll see the money gets to Mervan?”

“Yes. I’ll be the go-between. You can let me have your cheque—but not,” Algy warned, “until the case is closed. I don’t want Steve on my tail.”

Trent laughed again. “I’ll pay the first instalment on the day the murderer goes on trial,” he promised.

He added uneasily:

“If I’m not in the dock myself.”

Lawrence said amiably:

“I don’t think you will be.”

Trent said awkwardly: “I was—I am—in a nasty hole. I can’t find the words to thank you.”

Lawrence replied:

“You don’t have to thank me.”

He was thinking of the tears in a girl’s lovely eyes.

He said, almost roughly:

“I’m not doing this for you.”

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

It was a gloomy Monday morning.

Algy Lawrence was emerging from his flat. He eyed the rain-misted street without enthusiasm, then flipped up the collar of his raincoat and pulled his hat forward over his brow.

Behind and above him, a bell began to ring.

“Blast that telephone!”

Lawrence banged shut the door and clattered up the stairs towards his bedroom. The 'phone's shrill summons ceased as he picked up the receiver. “Hallo!”

“Hallo... Mr. Lawrence?”

“Penny!” Pleasure tintured his voice.

“Hallo, Algy.” The girl paused briefly. “I didn't disturb you?”

“I was on my way to the Yard.”

“Oh.” Her breathing quickened. “To see the Chief Inspector—about Michael?”

“Y---yes.” Lawrence hesitated. He had reported to Castle immediately after leaving Trent the previous afternoon. He said cautiously:

“I've put Michael's case to the Chief Inspector. Steve won't commit himself—but I know he'll play fair. If Michael's innocence can be proved, then Castle will prove it.”

Penny said:

“I know Michael isn't a murderer. But if there's a doubt in your mind—I may be able to dispel it.”

“I'm listening.”

“I've been thinking about”—her voice flattened oddly—“the damning factor... You said that Michael was the only man who could have been certain that Lesley would die.”

“Yes.”

“That may be true. But you've overlooked something.” Penny's voice pressed triumphantly against Algy's ear.

“What?”

“The man who put the bullets into the gun was a murderer morally and legally. But he may not have cared whether Lesley lived or died!”

Lawrence said slowly:

“I don’t understand.”

Penny’s laugh was tinged with sadness. “You will—when you know us better.”

She rang off.

Lawrence went down the stairs and into the street with strange new thoughts working through his mind.

The young man found Castle in his office. The Chief Inspector appeared to have given himself up to gloom. He sat hunched at his desk, regarding a pile of papers with lack-lustre eyes.

Lawrence lowered his slim frame into a chair which had lately been occupied by Michael Trent’s dresser. “I saw Ben Cotall in the corridor. Have you been grilling him?”

“We’ve been questioning him,” returned Castle heavily, “yes.” He buried his face in a huge handkerchief and blew his nose lustily. He looked up with a scowl. “Michael Trent is a scoundrel. Why is everyone so anxious to protect him?”

Lawrence chuckled. “Stop making noises like a policeman. You can’t catch him now for a seven year old robbery. So forget about it.”

“And the attack upon Bailey—shall I forget about that, too?”

“You don’t really believe Trent knocked out Bailey.”

Castle was belligerent. “Somebody did. And he didn’t break into the theatre like an ordinary burglar. He must have used a key—a skeleton or a duplicate.”

“So?”

“Trent told you himself he was an amateur locksmith.”

“Steve—you’re catching at straws.”

“Perhaps.” Castle picked up a pen and began to doodle on his blotter.

He said:

“I’ve been thinking about the confession Trent made to you... I’m not saying that I wasn’t impressed by the man’s show of frankness. But though he told you a lot about his past life, he said very little about his movements on Saturday afternoon.”

“Oh, come now. You already have that information. You’ve made him account for nearly every minute of his time.”

Castle scowled. “Yes, dammit. And I’ve spent most of the week-end checking his story.”

“Searching for a flaw that wasn’t there?”

“Yes, I suppose so.” Castle stabbed the pen into the pad with a tiny show of violence. “Blast it! I was sure Trent was guilty of murder. He had both the motive and the means, but”— he stressed the word heavily—“he didn’t have the opportunity.”

A glimmer appeared in Lawrence’s eyes. “You’ve established his alibi.”

“Yes,” growled the Chief Inspector. “While you were persuading him to talk, I was checking on his movements. I wanted to discover exactly when he could have put those bullets into the revolver.”

Lawrence searched his memory. “Your starting point was—um—at five minutes past two on Saturday afternoon.”

“Right. That was when Austin and Wix went to load the gun with blanks. At that time, Trent wasn’t in the theatre. He was in a taxi.”

“Have you traced the driver?”

“Yes. He put Trent down at the entrance to the alley-way, then watched him go down to the stage door. When he saw the door-keeper take charge of Trent, he drove away. This was at ten minutes past two.

“Victor Friern confirms this. He met Trent at the stage door, then handed him over to Ben Cotall, the dresser, who helped his employer to his dressing-room. Trent stayed there until it was time for him to make his entrance in the first act.”

Lawrence commented:

“So he couldn’t have tampered with the gun before the play began.”

“No. I thought Trent must have had several opportunities to switch the cartridges during the actual performance. The double doors were closed on the ‘lobby’ a good deal of the time, you remember. But—.”

“Yes?”

“I was wrong.” Castle sounded angry with himself. “Trent wasn’t at any time in or near the lobby without a companion.”

“That’s definite?”

“Yes, curse it. Old Ben was Trent’s second shadow. He went with him to the stage and watched him from the wings. And nearly everybody else back-stage had their eyes on Trent as well. They all knew he was tipsy.”

“Didn’t he make any exits or entrances through the double doors masking the lobby?”

“Not unaccompanied.”

“Where was he during the black-outs at the end of each act?”

“On stage with Douglas Denzil during the first. The doors were closed then. There wasn’t time for either man—with or without the other’s knowledge—to reach the lobby and find the gun before the lights went on again. And one of the stage hands was actually standing at the mouth of the lobby at the time. He swears nobody went into it,” concluded the Chief Inspector mournfully.

“What about the second black-out?”

“At the fall of the curtain on Act Two? Trent was already in his dressing-room with Ben Cotall.” Castle paused, then finished gloomily: “So far as I can establish, Trent didn’t get his hands on that gun until he took it from Lesley Christopher in Act Three. And he couldn’t have filled it with bullets in full view of the audience.”

“So Trent,” mused Lawrence, “has been cleared.”

“I’m afraid so,” snorted Castle. “I’d like to believe that Cotall is lying about his master’s movements; but there’s too much corroboration from other sources... I’ve tried to find a loop-hole, mind! As I’ve already explained, Trent couldn’t have reached the gun while he was on stage or in the wings; but it’s barely possible he might have slipped back to the set while he was officially off stage and in his dressing-room with Cotall.”

“That’s hardly likely.”

“No,” admitted Castle. “It isn’t. Too many people were popping in and out Trent’s room to see how he was. He couldn’t have slipped out without being seen... Besides, I’ve been questioning Cotall closely – grilling him, if you like—and I don’t think he’s lying. He was genuinely worried about his employer and he was sticking to him like glue.”

“Then Michael Trent owes him a debt of gratitude.”

“Which is more than I do,” said Castle sourly. “His evidence wrecks my original theory. Hell’s bells! The inquest has been set for Wednesday. I have to present some kind of case to the Coroner—and I know damn all about the murder.”

“You’ve covered the ground.”

“And turned up nothing.” Castle scowled in disgust. “I’ve been proving a series of negatives. Trent couldn’t have done it. And neither could Victor Friern.”

“You’ve established his alibi, too?”

“Yes. I’ve questioned Austin, Maggie Boyd, Ben Cotall, and Short, the stage door-keeper. They agree that Friern had no chance to handle the gun during the period he spent back-stage.

“He went back to his office at the front of the theatre before the play began. He didn’t go back-stage again until after the shooting—Short confirms that.”

Lawrence said:

“There’s a pass-door in the proscenium arch.”

“Yes. But it’s always kept locked while the auditorium is open to the public. And to reach it you have to go through a box on the upper level—.”

“On the O.P. side.”

“Yes. And the couple in that box say that nobody went through the pass-door until Friern opened it for you after the killing.”

“That clears Friern, then.”

“Yes. But it hardly helps me. I need a new line to follow.”

“I might be able to suggest one when we’ve tidied some of the complications out of the way. But—.”

Algy paused to consider.

Castle eyed his friend hopefully. He picked up a stack of papers and showed it across the desk. “Would you like to study these reports?”

Lawrence selected a paper at random. It proved to be the autopsy report, with a detailed description of the dead woman’s physical characteristics and the nature of the wound which had killed her. It told him nothing he did not already know.

The next report was the fingerprint analysis. It was equally unrewarding.

Castle said:

“The revolver had been handled by too many people to retain tell-tale prints. Austin’s and Trent’s were the clearest, as you’d expect; and we developed some underlying impressions of Lesley Christopher’s. But the rest were too badly smudged to be distinguishable.”

Neither the bullets nor the blanks had retained any identifiable prints. Lawrence dropped the report. “I presume there were none on the card sent to Lesley?”

“‘We meet at Paddington Fair’? The dead woman’s and Victor Friern’s. That was what we expected.” Castle sighed noisily. “We can’t deduce much from those messages, Algy. Both the Paddington Fair cards were cut from a thin strip of pasteboard which can’t be traced. And the messages

themselves were rubber-stamped. They had been built up letter by letter on a child's printing block. You know the sort of thing I mean—you can buy it at any toy-shop."

Lawrence nodded. "And the tickets—."

"Which were sent with our invitation? We can't trace the buyer. They were bought from one of the busiest agencies in the West End – the staff sell hundreds every day. Nobody can remember the man or woman who bought those particular tickets."

Lawrence turned to the ballistics report. It merely confirmed what they already knew. The bullet in Lesley's heart had been fired from the Webley & Scott .32; the bullet in the bear's head and the bullet in the wall of the box had been fired from the Colt .25: both .25 bullets matched the ejected cartridge cases found on the floor of the box which Mervan had occupied.

Lawrence pushed the reports aside. "These tell me nothing."

Castle drew a malevolent caricature on the blotter. "I'm going to follow a new line. It's not strictly relevant, but I can't ignore it."

Lawrence looked a question.

Castle mumbled a name. "Albert Wix. The property man. He told us he got that damned Webley & Scott from the author of the play, a fellow named Herbert Windsor. I've got the chap's address. I think we should pay a call on Mr. Windsor. That blasted revolver was an unlicensed weapon. He has some explaining to do."

Lawrence nodded indifferently.

He asked suddenly:

"Have you interviewed Richard Mervan?"

"I have." Castle spread his fingers over his jowl. "He knows now that he failed in his bid for revenge. The news crushed him... He has thrown his liberty away for nothing. Poor devil!"

Lawrence's eyes were sleepy.

He murmured:

"I gave you two questions."

Castle grunted. "I put them both to Mervan." He looked puzzled. "The answer to the first disturbed me. But I don't see the point of the second"

Lawrence smiled. "Where," he quoted, "did you book for the box you occupied on Saturday afternoon?"

"Answer," growled Castle, "I reserved the box and paid for it at the box office in the foyer of the Janus Theatre."

“When?”

“A few days before the atinee.”

“Hmmm.” The amiable vagueness in Lawrence’s eyes deepened. “Now tell me the answer to my first question. How did Mervan identify Lesley Barre as Miss Christopher?”

Castle said immediately:

“He saw her photograph in a theatrical magazine.”

He paused, then finished gruffly:

“The magazine was sent by post. It was delivered in a large envelope to Mervan’s lodgings in London. The magazine had a front cover picture of Lesley Christopher. Mervan recognized her at once.”

Lawrence leaned forward.

Castle answered the question before he asked it.

“I don’t know who posted the magazine. It certainly wasn’t sent by the publishers—though Mervan thought it was. But they don’t send out complimentary copies in that way.”

“Then—.”

“Yes,” said the Chief Inspector. “It looks that way, doesn’t it? Someone meant to put Mervan on Christopher’s track.”

Lawrence’s face was grave .

He said abruptly:

“Somebody has been playing God, Steve. And I don’t like it.”

He whispered:

“I don’t like it at all.”

Trudy Ann said drowsily:

“Darling... Your beard. It tickles.”

Herbert Windsor replied indistinctly. “I’ll shave it off tomorrow.” He continued to nuzzle her neck.

Trudy Ann fondled his hair.

Windsor raised his head.

He said pleasedly:

“*Tu as les beaux tétons.*”

His fingers strayed. Trudy Ann smacked them gently.

She murmured:

“You may admire. But you mustn’t touch.”

“Dammit,” protested Windsor. “You’re not the Elgin Marbles.”

Laughter bubbled through her lips into his.

Then the door-bell rang.

“Oh, blast!” said Herbert Windsor.

He stood up. The divan gave a twang of relief.

Windsor stalked into the hall and wrenched open the door. “Well?” he roared.

Chief Inspector Castle teetered on the front step. Lawrence stood behind him. Both men stared at Herbert Windsor.

He was wearing an untidy beard which matched his tangled hair. His canary yellow shirt had lost most of its buttons and disclosed a broad chest. He wore corduroy trousers and open-toed sandals. The general effect was somewhat startling.

Castle fell back. Lawrence gave him an encouraging push from the rear.

The Chief Inspector cleared his throat. “Mr. Windsor... Mr. Herbert Windsor?”

That gentleman eyed him narrowly. “I am.”

“You are the author of a play—.”

“Never mind about me. Who the blazes are you?”

Castle produced his warrant card.

The result was alarming. Windsor’s roar rattled the windows. “My God, a policeman!”

“Mr. Windsor—.”

“A ruddy copper,” continued the playwright, driving the point home.

Castle continued doggedly:

“You are the author of a play entitled. THE FINAL TROPHY—.”

“You can’t put me in jail for that. It’s been licensed by the Lord Chamberlain. Go and bully someone else.”

Castle realised he was suffering for the sins of his colleagues. He protested:

“You’ve made a mistake. I have nothing to do with prosecutions for obscene libel—.”

“So I should hope,” said Windsor sternly. “Bloody lot of witch-hunters...” He added some pithy remarks about the Home Office.

Castle was perspiring gently. He said:

“I am conducting an enquiry into the death of Miss Lesley Christopher...”

“Oh.” Windsor’s face changed. He said: “Come in.”

He led the way into his study.

Trudy Ann was still seated upon the divan. She looked sleek and well-satisfied like a cat after swallowing cream.

Lawrence greeted her with a smile. She returned it demurely.

Castle squinted. "I didn't expect to meet you here."

Herbert Windsor said briefly:

"Trudy Ann is a friend of mine."

"A very close friend," agreed the girl. Her eyes glimmered with mischief.

Castle regarded her suspiciously. "You didn't tell me this before."

The girl rested a slim finger against her pretty chin. "You didn't," she said gravely, "ask me."

Castle snorted.

Windsor spoke impatiently. "I've known Trudy Ann, for quite a while. We're very good friends. And—if you're still curious—I wrote my play with the girl in mind."

Trudy Ann pouted. "The part you gave me was hardly a plum."

Windsor grinned at her affectionately. "Light of my life—your talents are obvious. But they are not necessarily those of a Bernhardt."

The pout became a smile. "At least," the girl murmured, "I have both my legs." She lifted her skirt to display them. "And they are rather nice. Aren't they?"

Windsor and Lawrence expressed unqualified agreement.

Castle breathed heavily.

He said in a grinding voice:

"Mr. Windsor! You appear to have helped in casting your play. Were you by any chance responsible for engaging Miss Christopher?"

The playwright stared. "Lord, no! I pulled a few strings for Trudy Ann; but the rest of the casting was out of my hands. You'd better speak to Victor Friern. He's the general manager."

"Hmmm." Castle thumbed his jowl. He said abruptly:

"You didn't like the prop gun which was used at the first rehearsals."

Windsor was not disconcerted. "It was ludicrous—an obvious toy. I told What's-his-name—Wix—."

"The property master."

"Yes. I told him that no ruddy pop-gun was going to spoil my third act. I asked him to produce a real revolver. He hemmed and hawed a bit, but in the end—"

"You provided one yourself."

“Huh?” Windsor’s beard bristled. “Where did you get that idea?”

“Wix told me so.”

“Then Brother Albert,” said the playwright, “is a flaming liar.”

Castle stared. “You didn’t give him the Webley .32?”

“Of course not.”

“But your initials are on the butt—.”

“Oh, no, they’re not. Windsor is only my pen name. I was christened Herbert Higgins. But,” he added ferociously, “breathe that to another living soul and I’ll have your guts for garters.”

Castle’s brow was furrowed. “But Wix said—.”

He broke off.

Windsor smiled.

His eyes were shrewd. He said softly:

“I believe that Props has a son named Harold.”

Castle swore.

His voice was hard. “Can I use your telephone?”

“It’s in the hall.”

Castle stamped out.

Lawrence followed. He caught his friend by the shoulder. “Don’t be hasty, Steve. Wix is on the hook. Now play out the line and land him gently.”

The Chief Inspector grunted. “What d’you mean?”

Lawrence smiled. “His lie about the revolver is comparatively unimportant. But we may be able to use it to break the case.”

Castle regarded him suspiciously. “You know something you haven’t told me.”

“No. But Wix does.”

Castle grabbed the ‘phone. “You can explain later. I’m going to contact Wemyss. He’s working at the Janus. Wix should be there with the rest of the theatre staff. If he is—.”

He broke off.

He snapped into the receiver. “Hallo! This is Chief Inspector Castle. I want to speak to Detective Inspector Wemyss....”

Lawrence turned away.

He went back to the study.

Windsor greeted him with a roar. “Great Godfrey! Isn’t it time you left me alone with Trudy Ann?”

Lawrence kept a straight face.

He said gravely:

“I’m not sure that I should. Your intentions may not be honourable.”

The girl smiled demurely.

Herbert Windsor replied with dignity. “They aren’t... I have a reputation to live down to.”

The Chief Inspector returned.

He said grimly: “I’m going to the Janus. Are you coming with me?”

Lawrence nodded. “Lead the way.”

“I’ll see you out,” said Trudy Ann.

Windsor sprawled on the sofa in mock disgust.

In the hall, Lawrence squeezed the girl’s hand. He murmured:

“It’s none of my business. But—.”

He hesitated.

She smiled with complete understanding.

She said softly:

“Don’t take Herbert too seriously.” Her mouth curved gaily. “He’s a lycanthropist.”

“A—what?”

Trudy Ann explained:

“He only thinks he’s a wolf.”

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

The Chief Inspector Stephen Castle stumped into the Janus theatre with a horrible scowl on his face. Glaring at the fresh-faced young constable who had been chatting desultorily with the stage door-keeper, he barked an enquiry.

As the constable stammered a reply, Algy Lawrence sauntered past and disappeared back-stage.

The young policeman was saying: "Y—yes, sir. Nearly all the staff are back-stage. The Inspector has been questioning them—."

"I know all about that." Castle was impatient. "Tell Albert Wix I want to see him. Quickly."

"Yes, sir." The uniformed man saluted and hurried away.

Castle glowered at Sydney Short. The door-keeper blinked uneasily. Perched on a stool in his cubby hole, he looked more than ever like an ugly old bird in its cage.

The Chief Inspector snapped:

"You know Mr. Lawrence—."

Short nodded quickly. "Yes, guv. He just went past."

"That's right. If he comes back this way, tell him I'm in the greenroom with the property master."

He strode away.

Short shook his head dolefully. To judge from that copper's manner, old Bert was in for it now.

He said aloud:

"I wonder what he's done."

An ugly suspicion formed in his mind. He tried to dispel it with a mumbled "No," then looked up guiltily as a long shadow fell into the glass box.

Castle glared round as the door of the greenroom opened behind him. "Oh, it's you," he growled.

"It is, indeed." Algy Lawrence seemed rather pleased with himself.

Castle eyed him suspiciously. "You've been up to something."
Lawrence grinned. "I've been talking to June Merritt."
"June—?"

“The A.S.M.”

“Oh, yes. What about her?”

“I asked her a question. And the answer was: ‘No, none that I know of.’”

“Well”—Castle was irritable—“what was the question?”

“Guess.”

Castle breathed hard. “Now, look here—.”

Lawrence stopped smiling. He said seriously:

“You ought to know, Steve. You’ve read the prompt script, too.”

Interest sparked in Castle’s shrewd grey eyes. “You’ve spotted something I missed?”

Lawrence said carefully:

“I had a suspicion which may soon be verified. You came here to grill Albert Wix. But be alert. You may discover more than you expect.”

Castle wore a puzzled frown. “He lied about the gun. But—.”

Lawrence interrupted without discourtesy. “It was the small, silly lie of a frightened man. Your questions had rattled him. And you had told him it was a crime to be in possession of an unlicensed gun. So he blurted out the first silly story which came into his mind.”

“But he must have prepared the lie,” objected Castle. “It came so quickly. We hadn’t even mentioned the author’s name.”

“No mention was needed,” smiled Lawrence. He pointed a long finger. “There’s his name—in big print—on that poster.”

Castle stared at the playbill on the wall. He muttered disgustedly.

Algy sprawled in the saddlebag chair. “I remember how Wix’s eyes shifted focus when you were questioning him. He must have caught sight of that poster. The coincidence of the initials ‘H.W.’ struck him suddenly—so he told you Windsor had given him the gun.”

“That’s plausible,” said Castle grimly. “But now—.”

“He’ll tell the truth.”

“He will indeed,” growled the Chief Inspector.

Lawrence said casually:

“I may ask a question. You won’t object?”

Castle regarded him with sudden suspicion. “What—?”

The question died on his lips as the door opened after a perfunctory knock.

Albert Wix hesitated on the threshold. His faded eyes flickered uneasily. “You wanted to see me?”

“I did,” said Castle quietly. “Come in and sit down.”

Wix obeyed, his lined face set in a sullen mask.

Castle swept his hands under his coat-tails. Standing over the property master, he glowered down. “I’m not going to waste time, Wix. You’ve been lying to me. Now you’re going to tell me the truth.”

Apprehension muddled the other’s eyes. “I dunno what—.”

Castle’s head went forward. “You told me the Webley & Scott came from Herbert Windsor. That was a lie. Wasn’t it?”

“I—I—.”

Lawrence had been watching the scene through half-closed eyes. Now he said gently:

“It’s no use denying it, old chap. We know you supplied the revolver yourself. Why bother to lie about it?”

The tired mouth quivered.

Then Wix cried:

“What the ‘ell did you expect? I’m the property master. I ‘ave to get the producer what he asks for. I didn’t think I’d be called a criminal—just ‘cause I brought him a gun!”

Lawrence said smoothly:

“You needn’t be afraid. Technically, it’s a crime to be in possession of an unlicensed gun. But you probably have a reasonable explanation—.”

“Yes, I have.” Wix was pathetically eager.

“Well, then. Let’s hear it.” Algy gave his friend a meaning stare. “The Chief Inspector won’t be vindictive. I’m sure he doesn’t want to make trouble for you.”

Castle’s grunt was non-committal. “I’m waiting for an explanation.”

Wix interlaced his bony fingers. “I told you before. The producer and the author—they both wanted a real gun for the play. So I brought ‘em one from home.”

“You kept the revolver in your home?” asked Castle sternly.

“It—it wasn’t mine,” Wix answered sullenly. “It was my son’s. It was part of a collection he once had.”

“Your son’s?”

“Yes. Collecting guns—that was an ‘obby of his. He was in the Army.” Pride gleamed momentarily in the sullen eyes. “He was a good lad. Saw

service in some rough places, I can tell you.”

“Was?” interposed Algy gently.

“Yes. He—he died in Korea.” Wix faltered, then continued:

“He’d got rid of most of his collection ‘fore he went there, you understand. But he liked that Webley & Scott; he’d had his initials engraved on it. ‘H.W.’—Harold Wix.”

“I see.”

Wix nodded miserably. “Yes. He’d left the gun with me ‘mongst his other things. Then, when I heard he’d been killed, I kept it as a kind o’ keepsake.”

“I understand.” The Chief Inspector was not unkind. “But”—he stressed the word heavily—“that’s no excuse. You should have surrendered the revolver at once. Even if your son had had a right to it—which he hadn’t—you weren’t entitled to retain it after his death. Illegal possession of a firearm—.”

Lawrence shot his friend a warning glance.

He said smoothly:

“That’s not important now, Steve. You don’t want to bring charges—.”

“Bring charges!” Alarm sparked the faded eyes. “Gawd!” Then Wix whined:

“Now you know why I made up that story about Herbert Windsor. I didn’t want trouble—and he was to blame anyway. Nagging me about that blasted gun—.”

“All right, man.” Castle was brusque. “Don’t whine! I’m not going to hound you.”

Wix looked relieved.

Then Lawrence said gently:

“You see? I told you the Chief Inspector wouldn’t be vindictive.”

Castle jerked his head sideways, impatiently. Interpreting this as a gesture of dismissal, Wix rose hopefully. Then Lawrence’s amiable smile brought him to a sudden halt.

Algy asked mildly:

“But aren’t you going to explain the other lie?”

Something rasped in the property master’s throat. He repeated painfully:

“The other lie?”

“Yes.”

“I—I don’t know what you mean.”

Lawrence said casually:

“I think you do.” His eyelids drooped lazily. “You told us the stage manager loaded the revolver with blanks—.”

“That’s right! I watched him do it!”

“Oh, no.” Lawrence shook his head. “You filled the cylinder yourself... With blank cartridges—or bullets?”

The property master’s body jerked uncontrollably.

He cried:

“With blanks, I sw—.”

The word died in his throat. In the silence that followed, he could hear the thumping of his heart.

He sank into the chair, his thin lips quivering. For a moment, he seemed on the verge of tears.

The Chief Inspector was startled. He turned a questioning gaze on his young friend, but Lawrence was concentrating on the forlorn figure of the property master.

Algy said sympathetically:

“You see? You’ve given yourself away.”

Wix tugged at his collar, fingering his neck as though it were bruised. He whispered with stubborn weakness:

“You’re twisting me up—confusin’ me... “

Lawrence smiled:

“You’re confusing yourself. I knew you were lying from the first.”

He rubbed his cheek reflectively. “We questioned you on Saturday. You were a little too anxious to confirm the stage manager’s evidence – before you knew what it was. And then you asked the Chief Inspector if he was trying to make out you put bullets instead of blanks into the gun... Remember? And I pointed out—.”

“That nobody had suggested that Wix had put cartridges of any sort into the revolver,” finished Stephen Castle. He glared at the property master. “That was Austin’s job, not yours. But the inference was—.”

Wix strangled a cry. “I never done nothing!” He drew a sobbing breath. “Maybe I said—what you say I said. But it was just a slip o’ the tongue.”

Lawrence grinned a negative. “No. We gave you the benefit of the doubt then. But you made a similar mistake a short while later. We were questioning you about the box of blanks. You produced it and said: ‘That’s the box I took the fresh cartridge from this afternoon.’ But you had previously confirmed Austin’s version of the story. Which was that you had

merely handed him the box—leaving the extraction of the fresh blank to the S.M. himself.”

“I— I—.”

Wix floundered helplessly.

Castle’s heavy face set grimly.

He said:

“Albert Wix, I—.”

“Hold on, Steve.” Lawrence was deliberately informal. “We know Props loaded the gun himself. We know that with Austin’s help he concocted a lying story to cover up. But we don’t know why. Do we?”

Castle grunted. “The conclusion’s obvious.”

“And probably wrong.” Lawrence was gentle. “I don’t believe Mr. Wix is a murderer. Do you?”

Wix flailed the air with a bony hand. “I swear—.”

“Calm yourself, man!” Castle clapped a heavy hand on the property master’s shoulder. “I’ll give you one last chance. Tell the truth now, or—.”

“I will, I will!” Wix was frantic.

The Chief Inspector released him. “All right. Begin.”

Wix dabbed his face with a grubby handkerchief. “I didn’t mean any harm. It was just my filthy luck—the only time I ever loaded the gun—an’ then the woman got shot—.”

Castle studied the frightened face. “Are you telling me that you made a mistake? That you put live bullets into the gun?”

“No, no!” Wix sobbed hysterically. “They were blanks—same as always. Only I can’t prove it ‘cause I was alone—.”

“You were alone? Then where was Austin?”

“I don’t know.” Wix struggled for calm. “I’d already told him I ‘ad the blanks for him. That was our routine, you see. I always brought him the box half an hour ‘fore the show began—.”

“Yes. We know.”

Wix continued sulkily:

“Mr. Austin’s a ruddy old woman ‘bout those cartridges. He’d never trust me to load the blasted gun myself. But just this once he wasn’t there, see? I’d already reminded him, but he’d told me never mind now—that was at two o’clock.” Wix squeezed his palms. “So I went to the set and waited. Come quarter past two, Mr. Austin still hadn’t turned up. I couldn’t see the

A.S.M. about either—not that Miss Merritt ever had anything to do with the gun, you understand.”

Castle nodded impatiently. “Go on.”

“Well, you see how it was.” Wix pouted. “I had the blanks in my pocket and there was the gun on the pegs. I couldn’t see no sense in waiting, so I loaded it myself.”

He had lifted the Webley & Scott from the “wall” and had broken open the cylinder. He had emptied the chambers, removed the exploded blank, taken another from the box in his pocket, then had refilled the cylinder with the six cartridges.

Castle asked:

“You’re sure they were blanks and not bullets?”

“Of course.” Wix was indignant. “I’m not stupid. I did just what Mr. Austin always did—even tested the action first.”

“Did you tell the stage manager what you’d done?”

Wix responded with a sulky negative. “No. I went back to the prop room.”

“Hmmm.” Castle scratched his jowl. “That’s a reasonable story, but”—he pointed an accusing finger—“why the devil did you lie about it?”

The slack mouth quivered. “Ow d’you think I felt when I heard Lesley Christopher hadn’t been shot by the crazy bloke in the box. It was the gun I had loaded which had been used to kill her! And I’d been alone. I couldn’t prove I’d filled the cylinder with harmless blanks.”

“So you persuaded Austin to lie for you.”

“It wasn’t my idea,” said the property master weakly. “S’welp me, it wasn’t... Mr. Austin had a word with me after that there demonstration o’ yours—.”

Lawrence nodded.

“—an’ he said he was afraid you might suspect me ‘cause I’d been alone with the gun. He said it was a pity I hadn’t stuck to the usual routine ‘cause then he’d have been with me and I would have had an alibi. And then he said he wouldn’t mind stretching a point to help me out...”

Castle snorted. “So you faked your evidence.”

“I didn’t want to, I tell you! I told Mr. Austin I didn’t wish to lie to the police.”

“But you did.”

Wix responded sullenly. “That was Mr. Friern’s fault.”

“Friern’s?” Castle’s eyebrows went up.

“Yes. I heard what he told you ‘bout me and Lesley Christopher – how I was supposed to be holding a grudge against her.”

“Wait a minute.” Castle’s voice was sharp. “How and when did you hear this?”

“It was just before you herded us all into the wardrobe room.” Wix stared at the floor. “You were on stage with Mr. Friern, talking about the revolver. I was out of sight behind the set, so I stopped to listen.”

Castle clicked his fingers. He remembered the vague figure he had glimpsed as it disappeared back-stage. “You were standing in the ‘lobby’?”

“Yes,” Wix admitted. “I scarpered when you came through the double doors. But I’d heard what Mr. Friern had told you. And I was afraid you’d think I had a motive for murdering the girl, ‘specially when you found out about me and the gun.”

The man’s eyes, like his speech, became muddled.

“So I told Mr. Austin I’d made up my mind.”

“To lie to the police?” Castle was stern.

Wix avoided his eyes. “I had to.”

A knock sounded on the door. Detective Inspector Wemyss came in. He said quietly:

“I hope you weren’t discussing confidential matters.”

“What’s that?” Castle spoke in mild surprise. “Why not?”

“Someone was listening at the door.” ‘

Castle muttered a curse. “Who?”

“Douglas Denzil, sir. He walked away when he spotted me. But I’m sure he was eavesdropping.”

Algy Lawrence laughed. “He must be playing the amateur detective again.”

Castle said a rude word. Then he snapped:

“I’ve stood enough nonsense. Now I’m going to put my foot down.”

Taking Wemyss by the arm, he gave him a rapid but precise summary of the discoveries they had made. Then he turned back to Albert Wix. He said grimly:

“I’m handing you over to the Detective Inspector. You’re going to make another statement. And this one is to be true in every particular. If it isn’t —.”

He left the threat unuttered “Take him away, Wemyss.”

Wix retreated with a chalky face. Castle glared at the door as it closed behind him. “Curse him!”

Lawrence chuckled. “Don’t be so savage, Steve. You can’t complain. You’re unravelling the skein.”

Castle scowled. “You’re not much help. You knew Wix and Austin were lying—.”

“I suspected it.”

“Then why the devil didn’t you say so?”

“Be reasonable, Steve. You wouldn’t have listened to me before. When we left the theatre on Saturday night, you were already convinced that Michael Trent was the guilty party. Subsequent events merely confirmed your first impression. I had to demonstrate Trent’s innocence before we could proceed.”

“Don’t lecture me, confound you!”

“I’m sorry,” grinned Algy. “But I had to tackle things in their order. We’ve tidied several complications out of the way. Now we know what we’re doing.”

“Do we?” Castle seemed doubtful.

“I think so. Wix has helped us considerably. Once we’ve settled Austin’s part in the affair, then—“

“We’ll reach the solution?”

“Perhaps not. But at least we’ll know the problem.”

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

“Greetings, gentlemen.”

Douglas Denzil strolled across the threshold without visible qualms. He rested one buttock on the table top and grinned at Castle insolently. “Friend Wemyss says you want to see me. It seems I’ve been a naughty boy.”

“Sit down!” barked the Chief Inspector. “And don’t play the fool.”

Denzil shrugged, then lowered himself into a chair, striking an exaggerated pose of humility.

Castle said accusingly:

“You were listening at the door.”

“I suppose I was.”

“Why?”

“My dear chap! The answer’s obvious. I was humanly inquisitive.” Denzil made a pyramid of his fingers. “I came into the theatre at your heels. I heard you storming at the stage door-keeper and I questioned him discreetly. Then Lawrence and Wix joined you in the greenroom. Things seemed to be happening; so I succumbed to my baser instincts and took up my post at the door.”

“You heard—.”

“Everything.” Denzil smiled maliciously.

Lawrence said: “You mustn’t be cross with him, Steve. He fancies himself as an amateur sleuth.”

Douglas murmured:

“I hope you’re not reproaching me.”

“On the contrary.” Lawrence was gracious. “I remember our conversation in Lesley’s dressing-room. You were quite right. Sometimes a clue is too obvious to be seen”—his voice flattened—“by clever fellows like us.”

Denzil’s eyes hooded. “I wonder what you mean by that.”

Lawrence grinned. “You seemed to be referring to the photograph of Michael Trent. We know now that an important document lay hidden

behind that picture. And somebody smashed the frame—and Bailey’s head—to get it.”

“Ah, yes. Friend Bailey. I hope he’s well?”

“He’s recovering. But let’s talk about that document. It was a

marriage certificate. It was taken from its hiding-place. And it next appeared”—Lawrence smiled politely—“in your possession.”

Denzil was not put out of countenance. “An odd coincidence.”

“Yes. If it was—a coincidence.”

Denzil said coolly:

“I didn’t attack Bailey, if that’s what you mean. And I didn’t steal the certificate.”

“But you did know it was hidden in the portrait?”

“As a matter of fact—I didn’t. But to save you the trouble of making any more clumsy suggestions”—Denzil’s tongue was sharp—“I’ll make an admission. I did have my suspicions about that picture. And if I hadn’t been disturbed in Lesley’s dressing-room, I would have had it off the wall to examine it.”

Castle asked: “What made you curious about the picture?”

“Lesley seemed to have an exaggerated regard for it. I wondered why.”

“Hmmm.” Castle eyed Denzil suspiciously. “Can you explain why the certificate was delivered to you?”

Denzil said blandly:

“No.”

Lawrence laughed. “You don’t question a gift from the gods.”

“I’m sure,” said Douglas virtuously, “I don’t know what you mean.”

Algy was quizzical. “You may not have known where the certificate came from. But you were ready to make use of it.”

Denzil bared his teeth in a savage grin. “You’ve been talking to Penny.”

“And you,” hazarded Lawrence, “have been talking to Michael Trent. Uh—that is a bruise beneath your eye?”

Denzil fingered the faint discolouration ruefully. Then, surprisingly, he laughed.

“Michael did,” he admitted, “become distressingly physical. I couldn’t restrain him. Penny—sweet girl—had been telling him stories.”

He paused, then added pointedly:

“Fairy stories.”

“You mean the—uh—bargain you proposed—.”

“Existed only in Penny’s imagination,” finished Denzil sardonically.

“I don’t believe,” said Lawrence politely, “that you’re telling the truth.”

“Perhaps I’m not,” returned Denzil carelessly. “But you can’t prove it.”

Lawrence grinned. "Tell us your version of the interview."

"I showed the certificate to Penny without comment. Michael wasn't available, you remember. Penny said she'd surrender the certificate to the police. So I left it with her."

"That's not a convincing story."

"It doesn't have to be," sneered Douglas.

The Chief Inspector rumbled:

"You claim—"

"I claim nothing," interrupted Denzil. "I found the document in my letter cage on Sunday morning. I know no more than that. I've had two of your detectives on my door mat looking for clues—let them explain the mystery. If they can."

"You can't help us?"

"I can only suggest," said Denzil spitefully, "that you check up on Michael Trent."

"We've done that," said Algy Lawrence, "as you probably know. We can't prove he didn't steal the certificate. But we can prove he's not a murderer. Right, Steve?"

Castle looked down his nose. But he grunted an affirmative.

Denzil bit his lip.

Then he shrugged philosophically. "Oh, well. I—"

He was interrupted.

The fresh-faced young constable, after knocking cautiously, came into the greenroom. He saluted. "The stage manager's outside, sir. Do you want him now?"

Castle nodded testily. "Wait five minutes. Then send him in."

The constable withdrew.

The Chief Inspector returned to Denzil. "Now then—"

Douglas said swiftly:

"Don't dismiss me. I have a fancy to remain."

"Eh?" Castle was monetarily disconcerted.

Lawrence had been watching Denzil with a lively interest. He was wondering if the actor knew more than he had admitted. If so....

Algy said smoothly:

"Let him stay Steve. He can't do any harm."

"Thank you," said Denzil waspishly.

"I think—yes?" murmured Lawrence. He indicated a screen in the corner.

Denzil nodded. He settled himself in a chair behind the screen.

Lawrence turned back to Castle. The Chief Inspector had been following his young friend's activities with growing exasperation. "Look here, Algy."

"Hush, Steve." Lawrence's lips framed the words: his voice was barely audible. "I'm playing a hunch."

Castle blew out his cheeks. Then he smacked his hands together and stumped to the door.

Dragging it open, he roared into the corridor. "All right! Send him in."

He glanced at Lawrence, adding sotto voce:

"And Heaven help you both."

Jack Austin was obviously ill at ease. His voice wavered perceptibly. "You—you wanted to see me?"

"I did." Castle was dangerously calm. "Sit down, Mr. Austin."

The stage manager obeyed, licking his dry lips nervously. The Chief Inspector regarded him with a level stare. Then he put out a big hand and drew his brief-case towards him. Withdrawing some stapled sheets of paper, he looked from the typescript to the stage manager.

"Do you know what this is?"

"N-no."

"It's a copy of your statement. Listen."

Unhurriedly, the Chief Inspector began to read aloud. Austin shifted uneasily as Castle, in a dry and emotionless tone, recited the S.M.'s testimony from beginning to end.

Silence fell.

Castle looked up.

"This is your statement?"

Austin nodded without speaking.

Castle smiled savagely. He tore the papers across and dropped the torn leaves into Austin's lap.

"And that," he growled, "is what it's worth."

Austin flushed, then paled.

He cracked his knuckles nervously. "I—."

Castle slapped his open palm against the brief-case. "Don't bother to lie. We've been talking to Albert Wix. He has told us the truth at last."

Pitilessly, he outlined the substance of the property master's story. He concluded ominously:

“Wix is rather stupid. He doesn’t appear to have wondered why you were so ready to suppress the truth. No, don’t tell me it was mistaken altruism. You wanted to mislead us for reasons of your own. And I want to know what they were—and are.”

Austin opened his mouth. But no words came.

Castle said:

“I’m waiting.”

The stage manager croaked:

“Chief Inspector—I—.”

The mumble died away.

Lawrence asked unexpectedly:

“Mr. Austin, do you read the Gentleman’s Magazine?”

Castle shot his friend an angry glance. But the very incongruity of the question loosened Austin’s tongue.

The stage manager said faintly:

“I don’t quite understand.”

“More exactly,” continued Lawrence, “do you know this particular volume?”

He lifted a book from the shelves and brought it across to the stage manager. Austin shook his head. “I don’t believe I do.”

“I always look into books,” mused Lawrence. “And I found this volume here, amongst others, on Saturday.”

Austin looked puzzled. “It’s part of the library. There’s nothing important about it, surely.”

“It’s old,” said Algy mildly. “Which is interesting in itself. But that’s not what I meant. I was only browsing. I doubt if I would have given it a second glance if I hadn’t noticed one intriguing item.”

He put down the bound volume and allowed it to fall open, then looked up with a smile. “A marker had been slipped between the leaves. I wondered why.”

“Get to the point,” said Castle gruffly.

Lawrence shrugged. “That’s how I found this particular item. Somebody had evidently been studying it.”

“What is it?” asked Austin.

Lawrence answered:

“It’s an account of the last public execution at Tyburn in November, 1783. The final month of Paddington Fair. But that wasn’t what caught my

attention. It was the coincidence of the name.”

“The name?”

“Look for yourself,” said Algy Lawrence. “The man who was hanged was called—.”

“Yes?”

“John Austin.”

There was a moment’s silence. Then the stage manager gave a puzzled laugh. “That’s interesting. But it doesn’t really mean anything. Does it?”

“No,” agreed Algy. “But it suggests—.”

“What?” Austin seemed more at ease.

Lawrence continued slowly:

“I’m trying to get into the murderer’s mind. He brought Paddington Fair to the stage of this theatre. And I think he hoped we would find this article. Which might mean—.”

“Yes?”

“He’s trying to direct our attention towards you.”

“I don’t see that,” commented Austin in genuine surprise. “You can hardly suspect me of murder just because a namesake of mine was executed a hundred and seventy years ago.”

“No?” Lawrence’s eyes glimmered. “Well, perhaps not. But if this is just a red herring—as I think it is—then you don’t want to play the killer’s game. In other words, don’t complicate the case by lying.” His voice hardened. “You were lying, weren’t you?”

Austin passed his hand over his mouth.

He said wearily:

“Yes. I didn’t tell you the truth about the gun.”

Castle broke in with an accusation. “You meant to mislead us from the very beginning.”

“No!” The denial came promptly.

Austin continued with a rueful smile:

“Friern misled you originally. Not intentionally, though.”

“Friern?”

“Yes. Before you questioned me, he had already described my usual routine.”

“That’s right. He had,” muttered the Chief Inspector. “But—.”

“You repeated it to me for confirmation.” Austin chose his words carefully.

“And you said: ‘Yes, that’s my normal routine.’”

“Which sounded like confirmation. But I was about to add: ‘I didn’t follow it this afternoon, though’ when—.”

“We were interrupted,” groaned Castle. He swung round on his friend. “Algy! That was your doing!”

“I’m afraid so, Steve,” admitted Lawrence. “I was having my friendly argument with that stage-hand about raising the curtain.”

“And then,” recalled Castle, “we set about reconstructing the crime. You found the bullet in the bear’s head and—.”

He halted, then finished softly:

“And you, Mr. Austin, decided to lie. I want to know why.”

Lawrence saw the furtiveness creep into the S.M.’s face. He said quietly:

“First things first, Steve. Let’s hear why Mr. Austin didn’t load the gun himself.”

Castle lifted his shoulder.

“Well?” he grunted.

Austin said wretchedly:

“I always attend to that job myself. But on that afternoon, I forgot about it. Wix reminded me, but my attention was on other things. Michael Trent hadn’t turned up, and I was worried about that. I had to warn Denzil to be prepared to take the part over—and I had to get into contact with Douglas’s own understudy by ‘phone.’”

Lawrence hazarded:

“You were also worrying about Lesley Christopher.”

“Yes.” Austin bit his lip. “I—I was anxious to talk to her. You know about that.”

Castle said impatiently: “Let’s hear about the gun.”

“Yes. Well.” The stage manager hesitated. “I had a talk with Victor Friern —.”

“At what time?”

“About five minutes past two. As I told you. I left him at the entrance to the dressing-room passage.”

“But you didn’t go back-stage to load the revolver.”

“No. I was worrying about Michael Trent. I wasn’t so certain as Friern that he would turn up. So—as Victor had suggested—I went to see Denzil.

Friern didn't see me go into his dressing-room—he had already gone into Lesley's. After I had warned Douglas he might have to deputize for Trent, I went to 'phone Denzil's own understudy. I couldn't contact him—that didn't restore my peace of mind. Fortunately, Trent himself arrived on the quarter call. Friern informed me of his arrival—and something Victor said reminded me about the revolver. But I went to see Michael first, and then I had that row with Lesley” he flushed and fingered his wrist—“and that drove everything from my mind.”

He paused to collect himself.

He continued.

“I was on the prompt book and I forced myself to concentrate on that. I might have remembered about the gun in the first interval—I went on stage to check the set before raising the curtain on the second act. But Penny made some casual remark and distracted my attention once more.”

He smiled humourlessly and added:

“I still wasn't myself, you understand.”

Castle had been following him closely. “Go on.”

Austin's eyes seemed to lose focus. “There—there isn't any more to be said. I forgot about the gun completely. Until—until—.”

“Until after the tragedy?” supplied Lawrence.

“Y-yes.” Austin drew in a sobbing breath.

Castle put in a question. “Then you cooked up a story with Wix after you'd witnessed the discovery of the .25 bullet in the bear's head?”

“Yes “ Austin's tongue flicked over his lips. “Props had told me about the revolver after the show—how he'd loaded it himself. It didn't seem important then. But after Mr. Lawrence had shown us how it must have been used to kill Lesley....”

He fell silent.

Lawrence said sleepily:

“You saw that he had no alibi. So you manufactured one.”

“Yes.” Austin spoke with difficulty. “I didn't want him to be accused of the murder.”

Lawrence angled an eyebrow. “But how did you know that he hadn't put real bullets into the gun?”

Austin's voice grew fainter. “He couldn't have.”

Lawrence was gently insistent. “But how could you know?”

“I—I—.”

Lawrence rubbed his cheek thoughtfully. “Did you touch the gun at all before Trent handed it to you after the tragedy?”

“No—no—.”

“You didn’t go into the ‘lobby’,” suggested Algy, “after the curtain went up on the third act?”

“No. I was on the prompt book—.”

“But you left it for a while,” smiled Lawrence. You told us so. You put your A.S.M. on the book.”

“Yes, that’s right.” Austin was breathing quickly. “I wanted to check on a special effect that was due to be given in the last scene—the one you didn’t see—.”

“Ah, yes. That special effect. You know, I was curious about that. I checked the prompt script for it. And oddly enough, I couldn’t find it.”

Austin’s face was pallid. “I—I—.”

“What’s more,” continued Lawrence benignly, “I made an enquiry. I asked June Merritt if there was any special effect in the final scene. And her answer was—.”

“No, none that I know of!” The Chief Inspector broke in with a roar.

Austin’s stocky frame seemed to shrink.

“She’s mistaken—.”

Castle’s face was thunderous. “You’re lying! You went into the ‘lobby’ to get the gun—.”

“No, no, I swear I didn’t!”

Castle bit back another reckless accusation. But he clenched his fists menacingly. “Out with it, man!”

Austin was weak but stubborn. “I didn’t touch the gun—I didn’t....”

There was a long moment of silence.

Then somebody chuckled reprovingly.

Denzil’s voice sounded from behind the screen.

“It won’t do, Jack,” he said with malice and mockery. “Really, it won’t.”

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Douglas Denzil reappeared with an insolent gleam in his eyes. Pushing aside the screen, he gave Austin an unpleasant smile.

“You could say,” the actor remarked, “‘Lady Teazle, by all that’s damnable!’ But I suppose it wouldn’t really be appropriate.”

“No,” said the stage manager coldly. “I see you more properly as Sir Benjamin Backbite. Or Mr. Snake.”

Denzil’s smile broadened into a grin without humour. “Touché,” he murmured.

The Chief Inspector had been following the exchanges with growing impatience, but Lawrence kept him silent with a tiny gesture of warning. Behind the mask of indolence, the young man was keenly alert.

Austin and Denzil faced each other like duellists. Then the actor turned away with slight shrug. “I’m sorry, Jack,” he said without noticeable regret. “But I can’t let you tell such naughty fibs.”

“You yourself,” said Austin thinly, “have such a high regard for the truth.”

“Oddly enough,” agreed Denzil, “I’ve told no lies to the police. Though I haven’t been entirely frank.”

Castle could stand no more.

He roared:

“If you’ve something to say, for God’s sake say it!”

Denzil winced. “My dear Chief Inspector! You’re putting me off.”

Lawrence interposed:

“I think we should let Mr. Denzil tell his story in his own way.”

“Thank you,” said Douglas ironically. “I propose to do so.”

Lawrence grinned. He extended his silver case in mute invitation. Denzil selected a cigarette and lit it. The centre of attention, he moved with deliberate and irritating slowness.

He blew out a cloud of smoke.

He said softly:

“You questioned me after the killing. My statement was true. But it wasn’t complete.”

He leaned against the wall. “I didn’t have much to do in the first

scene of the third act. It was Michael's and Lesley's, of course. But you may remember that Penny appeared with him, too, in quite an effective passage."

The detectives nodded. The S.M.'s face was devoid of expression.

Denzil continued:

"That's not important in itself. But it explains my presence in the wings at the time. I was waiting for Penny to make her exit. I wanted a word with her—."

"About what?" Castle interrupted gruffly.

Denzil replied coolly:

"Personal matters. Oh, well"—he grinned wryly—"I needn't make a mystery of it. I wanted to question her about that little contretemps in Michael's dressing-room. Discreetly of course," he added sardonically.

"And did you?"

"No. At least, not then." Denzil paused, as if to marshal his thoughts. He gave Austin a sidelong glance. He said* "Something distracted my attention."

"What?" Castle was impatient.

Denzil was not to be hurried. "I came out of the dressing-room passage. I saw somebody going into the 'lobby' at the rear of the set—."

"What's that?"

Douglas lifted a finger. "Patience, my friend. Well, now! I'm naturally inquisitive. I sauntered into the wings and glanced idly along the 'lobby'. And I saw this particular somebody take the revolver from the 'wall' and break it open."

Something rattled in Austin's throat. Denzil threw him a mocking glance and continued:

"I watched this somebody empty the cylinder and refill it. I won't say that made me suspicious; but it made me thoughtful. I decided not to wait for Penny in the wings. I went back to the dressing-room passage."

"And Penny joined you there," remarked Algy Lawrence.

"She did," agreed Denzil. "I turned on the charm and detained her. She wasn't very communicative, though. I was still trying to pump her when we heard that Lesley had been shot."

"And who," rumbled the Chief Inspector, "was this...somebody?"

Denzil threw away the line.

“You tell them Jack,” he suggested.

Austin said hopelessly:

“I didn’t know you’d seen me.”

Then anger animated his dead face. “Why didn’t you speak before? Do you like to play cat and mouse?”

“Now that,” mused Lawrence, “is a good question.” He looked at Denzil. “What’s the answer?”

“Guess,” invited Douglas.

Lawrence smiled. “I think I know.”

Denzil was feline. “I think you do, too.”

He added in a whisper:

“But you can’t prove it. And it wouldn’t help if you could.”

Algy’s eyelids drooped. “There it is, Steve. Mr. Denzil has misled us. But he hasn’t lied to us and he hasn’t made a false statement on oath. So perhaps he’s telling the truth now.”

Castle grunted. “Mr. Austin hasn’t denied it.”

The stage manager shook his head. His voice was weary. “I was a fool to lie about the gun. But I was frightened.”

Castle began: “You admit—.”

Then he checked himself and said in a flat voice:

“Give us your own explanation.”

Austin moistened his lips. He spoke with difficulty. “I told you I had forgotten about loading the revolver. That was true. But when we reached the scene in which it was to be used—after the curtain had gone up on the third act—I suddenly remembered.”

He rubbed his palms nervously. “I was on the book. I handed it over to my A.S.M. June’s a good girl—she doesn’t ask tiresome questions...

“I didn’t have time to find Props and get the box of blank cartridges from him. But at least I could examine the gun and see it was in order. The double ‘doors’ were closed, you see; I could move about the ‘lobby’ quite freely. I took down the gun and broke it open—.”

Castle frowned. “But why? You had no fresh cartridges.”

“No. But even if the gun hadn’t been touched since the previous performance, there would still have been five unexploded blanks in the cylinder. I intended to rotate it if necessary and make sure that the hammer would fall on an unfired cartridge. It would be a simple precaution—enough to put my mind at ease.”

Castle nodded. "I see. Go on."

Austin cracked his knuckles. "I examined the gun and found I had been worrying needlessly. Wix had obviously seen to it himself. It was in perfect working order and held a full load of six blank cartridges. I replaced it on the pegs and went back to the prompt corner. I didn't know anyone had seen me." He regarded Denzil with dislike.

"Everything was in order?" Castle seemed dubious.

"Yes." Austin nodded emphatically. "I didn't think about the revolver any more until the live bullets were discovered inside it. And then—after Mr. Lawrence's demonstration—"

"Yes?" Castle's voice was steely. "What then?"

Austin swallowed. "I realised what a horrible position I was in. You would be looking for the person who had taken the blanks out of the revolver before Lesley carried it on stage in the third act. And I had handled it myself."—he choked—"a few minutes before. You were bound to suspect me."

Algy Lawrence said sleepily:

"You had quarrelled with Lesley before the show."

Austin nodded jerkily. "I felt I was in a trap. I had to escape."

"So you went to Wix," said Castle grimly.

"He was my only chance," the S.M. whispered. "I told him how Lesley had been killed. He got scared too. I played on his fears...."

"You implied he would be suspected of tampering with the cartridges."

"Yes. He—he didn't know I had handled the gun myself."

"So you persuaded him to lie." Castle's jaw jutted accusingly. "He thought he was protecting himself. But he was really shielding you."

"I didn't want to fool him." Austin spoke with painful intensity. "But I —-had to."

"You fabricated," rumbled Castle ominously, "an ingenious and effective alibi. Was that the action of an innocent man?"

"I swear—"

Austin choked on the protest.

Algy Lawrence asked mildly:

"Didn't your conscience bother you?"

"No." Austin emphasised the negative with a blow from his fist on his knees. "Props had loaded the gun with blanks. I had examined them and

replaced them in the gun. Neither of us knew anything about the bullets—but now could we prove it? If only we'd been together....”

“As you usually were.”

“Yes. If we could only make you believe that we'd followed our usual routine, then you would have no reason to be suspicious of either of us.”

“And you were prepared to wreck the entire structure of the case to divert attention from yourselves.” Castle was dangerously calm. “We've been proceeding on the assumption that the substitution of bullets for blanks could have taken place at any time between five minutes past two and the moment the gun was carried on stage: Now we must confine the investigation to narrower limits.”

The Chief Inspector's voice sharpened. “You say that the gun was still loaded with harmless blanks when you replaced it on the pegs.”

“Yes, yes!”

“Very well,” glowered Castle. “But it was—by your own story—only a few minutes before Miss Christopher herself carried the gun on stage. In that brief interval”—the Chief Inspector's words were hammer blows—“could any one have tampered with the ammunition?”

Austin cried:

“The murderer must have got to the gun somehow! Before—before Lesley went into the ‘lobby’ – “

There was a brief, incredulous silence.

Then Douglas Denzil said flatly:

“I'm sorry, Jack. That just won't do.”

He turned to the Chief Inspector.

He continued:

“I have something more to tell you. I had decided not to wait in the wings —.”

“So you returned to the dressing-room passage.” Castle nodded impatiently. “I remember.”

Denzil said:

“Yes. I was still thinking about that little scene in the ‘lobby’. At the entrance to the passage, I looked back. Austin was just leaving the set on his way back to the prompt corner. At that same moment—.”

He paused with calculated effect.

Then he finished softly:

“Lesley passed me on her way to the stage. I made some casual remark; she mumbled a reply and went into the ‘lobby’ to wait for her cue.”

“Wait a minute!” Castle was excited. “That means—.”

“It means,” said Denzil dramatically, that Lesley went into the ‘lobby’ almost on Austin’s heels. And nobody could have reached the gun after he had left it!”

Castle scanned the stage manager’s frightened face. “Well, Mr. Austin?” he grunted.

The stocky man gasped. “I—I—.”

The Chief Inspector was pitiless. “Miss Christopher was waiting in the ‘lobby’ for her final cue. When she made her last entrance, she went through the double ‘doors’ and took the revolver with her. It was loaded with live ammunition—yet you say you left it filled with blanks. How was the substitution made?”

“I don’t know!” Austin searched desperately for an explanation. “Perhaps somebody joined her in the ‘lobby’—.”

“And switched the cartridges before her very eyes?” asked Castle with portentous scorn.

The stage manager seemed on the point of collapse. “My God. I— Wait!”

Hope lit his eyes. He stood up and grabbed Denzil’s arm. “Tell them, Douglas. You were watching. You must have seen!”

The actor seemed amused. “Don’t gabble, Jack,” he murmured.

Austin clutched harder. “You saw me empty the gun. You saw me examine the blank cartridges and replace them in the cylinder. You saw me, Douglas. Tell them!”

Denzil disengaged his sleeve and smoothed it delicately.

He said lightly:

“I saw you empty the gun and palm the cartridges. But then you turned your back and your body obscured the movements of your hands. You may have replaced the blanks. But you could also have refilled the cylinder with bullets.”

Nobody moved.

Then Castle said gently:

“I think we should go the Yard. Then you two gentlemen can make your statements in the proper manner.”

His hand fell like a father’s on Austin’s shoulder.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Lawrence had just finished breakfast on the following morning when a sharp buzz announced the arrival of an early visitor. Pausing by a mirror in the hallway, he eyed his reflection quizzically and murmured: "I wonder?"

Then he clattered down the stairs and opened the front door of his flat. He smiled delightedly. "Penny!"

The girl said gravely:

"Hallo , Algy. May I come in?"

"Of course." He stood aside, glancing quickly along the quiet street outside.

Penny smiled. "I wasn't followed. Perhaps the reporters were looking for me. But—what you called my disguise—it fooled them."

She was wearing the same simple costume he had admired on Sunday. He thought again: She's beautiful.

They went up the stairs together. Algy took the girl into a room crammed with books. She turned and faced him gravely. "I want to talk to you. It's rather important."

Lawrence nodded. "Please make yourself comfortable."

Penny stripped off her beret and shook out her tresses. A fugitive gleam of sunlight from the window behind her touched golden highlights in the dusty blonde of her hair; she was very lovely.

Lawrence caught his breath. He helped her out of the raincoat; her nearness made his fingers tremble.

When he came back from the hallway, he found her gazing round the room with a tiny smile on her red lips. He looked a question.

She answered:

"I was thinking: this room—it's you."

"It certainly lacks a woman's touch."

She studied him curiously. She said softly:

"You're lonely, aren't you?"

"Well..." Lawrence temporized. "Let's say—."

"Yes?"

“I’m still looking for my lady.”

Penny’s eyes softened. “You’ll find her soon,” she murmured sympathetically.

Lawrence looked at the girl with a pang of regret. “How’s Michael?” he asked abruptly.

Her face grew bright with love. “He’s himself again,” she replied. “Thanks to you. But—.”

Her eyes clouded.

Lawrence dropped into a chair opposite hers. “But what?”

“I didn’t come here to talk about Michael.” The girl hesitated, then asked suddenly:

“Is it true about Jack—has he really been arrested?”

Lawrence rasped his thumb against the angle of his jaw. He answered carefully:

“Austin has not been arrested. But...”

He shrugged eloquently.

Penny breathed quickly. “He can’t have had anything to do with Lesley’s death.”

Lawrence hunched his shoulders. “I’ll tell you what we’ve discovered. You can judge for yourself.”

He began to describe the events of the previous day. Penny listened attentively.

“So you see,” he finished at length, “if what Denzil says is true, we seem to have proved that nobody could have reached the gun after Austin had left it. Which means....”

He left the conclusion unspoken.

Penny frowned. “But—.”

She bit her lip.

She repeated slowly:

“If what Denzil says is true... But why shouldn’t Douglas be lying? You know how unscrupulous he can be.”

“Austin doesn’t deny handling the gun,” replied Lawrence.

“But you’ve only Douglas’s word to prove that Lesley went into the ‘lobby’ as Jack left it.”

“True,” said Algy. “But we’ve talked to the A.S.M. and we’ve examined the time sheet and the prompt script. We know when Austin returned to the

book; we know when Lesley made her last entrance. The times very nearly coincide.”

The girl was mutinous. “I don’t care. You can’t trust Douglas—.”

She broke off.

She seemed to be making an appeal. “If his story is true, then why didn’t he speak before?”

“Ah.” Lawrence grinned sleepily. “That’s a question I’ve asked myself. Denzil won’t explain. But I think I know the answer.”

“Yes?”

Lawrence put the tips of his fingers together. “He told us once that he didn’t have any special feelings about Lesley Christopher. Her death didn’t distress him. He wouldn’t protect her murderer. But—.” He gestured. He continued:

“Denzil has a devious mind. And he’s an unscrupulous opportunist. Do you agree?”

Penny nodded.

Lawrence said slowly:

“He had two ambitions. One was to take over the starring role in THE FINAL TROPHY from Michael Trent. The other—ahem—.”

Penny’s eyes twinkled.

She said solemnly:

“I know what you mean.”

Lawrence laughed. “Good. Now here’s my theory. Denzil didn’t care who had murdered Lesley Christopher. But he meant to use her death to further his own plans.”

Penny frowned. “He hoped that Michael might drink himself out of the part. And then, after Lesley died—.”

“He told you that Michael would be arrested. That was wishful thinking.”

“I made it clear to him that Michael was in no danger. But Denzil was determined to push Trent out of the play, even if he had to get him charged with murder.

“So he said nothing about the stage manager. But he told the police about that little scene in Michael’s dressing-room—.”

“When Lesley interrupted us.”

“Yes. Denzil was doing his best to make us suspicious. He didn’t want Trent to be hanged—.”

Penny caught her breath.

“—but he did want to see him taken into custody. He longed for that starring role. Denzil was going to be an overnight sensation,” finished Lawrence sardonically.

“Go on,” breathed Penny.

“You know what happened next. Someone broke into the theatre and stole Lesley’s marriage certificate. Michael was taken to the Yard.

“Douglas found himself with the certificate. He used it in an attempt to further his other ambition. He went to see you.” Lawrence paused delicately.

Penny remarked, with a glimmer of humour:

“You don’t have to elaborate. We know what was in his mind.”

“We do,” agreed Algy. “Well, now! You turned him down. But he probably consoled himself with the reflection that the revelation of Lesley’s secret marriage would clinch the case against Michael Trent.”

“And so it would,” said Penny warmly, “if it hadn’t been for you.”

“Perhaps.” Lawrence shrugged his shoulders. “Anyway, Castle could find no flaw in Michael’s alibi. Denzil’s scheme had come unstuck. He realised this—.”

“Michael hammered home the lesson,” interrupted the girl, “with more force than charity.”

Lawrence nodded. “I saw Denzil’s eye,” he murmured.

He continued:

“Douglas had been unable to oust Michael from his leading role. He had also been frustrated—uh—in his designs upon your person. He had sense enough to admit defeat. So there was no longer any advantage to be gained by keeping Austin’s secret... And though his ruthless ambition may have blinded him to the dangers, he knew he was concealing important evidence. He didn’t want to become an accessory after the fact; so when he found we were on the S.M’s track—.”

“How did he discover that?”

Lawrence grinned. “Douglas fancies himself as an amateur sleuth. I encouraged him. His sense of the dramatic did the rest.” Algy rubbed his cheek. “He may also have developed a conscience. But—whatever his motives—you may be certain of this. He has told the truth at last.”

Penny bit her lip. “Even so,” she faltered, “I can’t believe that Jack is a murderer.”

Lawrence said flatly:

“The evidence is damning.”

Then he grinned ruefully. “But I think he’s innocent.”

Penny sighed with relief.

“Why?” she demanded hopefully.

Lawrence hesitated. He said slowly:

“Well, now. I remember a remark Austin made after I had shown him how Lesley had died. I said that somebody had taken the blanks out of the revolver before Lesley had carried it on stage. Austin began: ‘But I—,’ then stopped. I think he was going to say: ‘But I examined it myself a few minutes before she took it.’ That’s the remark of an innocent man.”

Penny looked disappointed. “But that’s only guess-work.”

“True. But there is something else... Austin didn’t know Denzil had seen him going into the lobby. That’s a point in his favour. As an innocent man, a stage manager concentrating upon his professional duties, he would have been thinking only about the job in hand—the inspection of the gun. He would have no reason to conceal himself or cover up his actions. But a guilty man plotting a murder—.”

“Would have been on the watch!” cried Penny.

Algy nodded. “Austin would have been looking round to see if his movements were being observed. He wouldn’t have dared to tamper with the gun if he had known there was a witness about; and he would have spotted Denzil if he had been on the alert.”

Penny began: “That proves—.”

“It proves nothing,” said Lawrence quietly. The Chief Inspector won’t listen to arguments like that. He wants facts.”

“Facts!” The girl was scornful.

Lawrence hunched his shoulders. The stage manager was the last person to handle the gun before Lesley carried it on stage. Austin says it was loaded with harmless blanks. If that were true....”

He gestured eloquently.

Penny said stubbornly: “It is true.”

She added in a small voice:

“If Jack says so.”

Lawrence shrugged. “Then how did the bullets get into the gun—by black magic?”

Penny’s hands clenched. She voiced a challenge. “You’re not afraid of impossible crimes. You’ve met them before.”

“I can’t ask Castle to think of this as a ‘miracle’ murder. He has his explanation.”

“But...”

Lawrence said flatly:

“You have to state a problem before you can solve it.”

“I see.” Penny’s eyes were downcast.

She asked:

“Then what will happen now?”

Lawrence pulled his ear thoughtfully. “The inquest has been fixed for tomorrow. Castle will present his evidence to the Coroner; and the jury will bring in a verdict. It may be murder by person or persons unknown. Or—.”

“Jack Austin may be accused.” Penny’s voice trembled.

“Yes,” said Lawrence without evasion.

Penny looked up.

She spoke with decision. “It isn’t too late. We may still be able to save him.”

“How?”

Penny didn’t reply directly. Instead, she murmured:

“I trusted you once. And you asked me to do what you said, without asking questions.”

“Yes.”

“I’m asking the same favour from you.”

Lawrence sighed imperceptibly. “Very well.”

“You have influence with the police.” The girl’s voice was steady and clear. “They won’t interfere. I want you to call the company together.”

“The—?”

“Yes.” Penny’s gaze was sombre. “I know every line, every move of Lesley’s role. I shall play ‘Marilyn’. And tonight at the Janus we will stage the third act of’ THE FINAL TROPHY.”

“But—.”

“You promised not to ask questions,” the girl said gently.

“Yes, but—.”

“I can’t explain now.” The girl spoke urgently. “But this I can promise you. If you do as I say, I may be able to clear Jack’s name and—and state your problem.”

She met his gaze squarely.

Lawrence felt his pulse skip. Then he laughed and reached for the telephone. “You win, Penny. I’ll call Steve now.”

She smiled warmly.

Lawrence paused with the receiver in his hand. He grinned at her wryly.

An answering glimmer of mischief showed in her cerulean eyes. “What are you thinking?”

“That I’d like to kiss you,” he replied.

“You can if you like,” the girl said equably. “But it wouldn’t mean anything. Would it?”

He laughed rather sadly. “To you? No. Ah, well.”

He turned back to the telephone with a sigh.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

The Chief Inspector and his young friend were making their way through the gathering dusk towards the Janus Theatre.

Castle was grumbling mechanically. "I can't see what you hope to prove by this reconstruction."

Lawrence said mildly:

"It's Penny's idea, not mine."

Castle leered incredulously. "Come off it," he growled. "You have plans of your own, I wager."

"No," returned Algy. "I'm waiting to hear from Penny. But I'm glad she wants us to re-enact the crime. It may give me a lead."

Castle continued an old argument. "You're creating a bogey-man. You can't accept the simple explanation. You'd rather go chasing a faceless phantom—a black magician who can change blanks into bullets without handling the gun."

He snorted contemptuously.

Lawrence replied unhappily:

"I can't accept your simple explanation because I don't believe Austin is guilty."

"He must be." Castle was belligerent. "This was no 'miracle' murder. It was the impulsive crime of a jealous and frustrated man."

"No, Steve. It wasn't." Lawrence objected quietly. "This was a coldly planned, premeditated crime. The Paddington Fair cards prove that."

Castle growled like a disappointed dog.

Lawrence continued:

"I don't know who murdered Lesley Christopher. But"—he tapped his head—"a picture is growing in my mind. It's shadowy and indistinct. But one day soon"—his voice dropped—"I shall recognize the features in the portrait."

Castle grunted. "Meanwhile...."

Algy's tone lightened. "Meanwhile," he said more cheerfully. "I can sketch the outlines."

Castle's gaze sharpened. "I'm listening."

"The person we want is a special kind of murderer—a man with a devious mind. He stays behind the scenes and lets others do the dirty work."

Castle agreed cautiously. “So?”

“He was also well acquainted with the circumstances of his victim’s past. He knew all about Lesley’s part in the robbery and her relations with Michael Trent—if the theft of the certificate is anything to go by. He knew about Richard Mervan—.”

“Huh?”

“Someone sent her photograph to Mervan. He might never have found her otherwise.”

“You think—.” Castle’s eyes gleamed. “By God!” he muttered. “There’s only one man who meets those qualifications. And that’s Michael Trent.”

Lawrence tut-tutted reproachfully. “Don’t go off half-cocked, Steve. You’ve forgotten—.”

“Yes?”

“Lesley herself “

“Eh?” Castle’s mouth opened in an O of astonishment.

Lawrence grinned. “This is only speculation. But it’s a working hypothesis.

“Let’s suppose that Lesley had some secret confidant—a man with whom she was having an affaire, perhaps. In an unguarded moment, she let slip something about her past.

“The man remembered. For some reason, he later decided that she had to die. But he didn’t want to kill her himself—oh, dear me, no. He wanted a catspaw.

“He thought of Mervan and went to work. He had patience and cunning and a clever brain. He checked up on the robbery. He went through the files of old newspapers—.”

“And found my name!” Castle spoke with unwilling interest.

“And your former rank of Detective Inspector,” agreed Lawrence. “He traced Mervan after his release from prison. That wouldn’t have been hard to do—he could have engaged a private detective.

“He was, of course, gambling on Mervan’s having a lust for revenge. He took great care not to approach him in person—that would have given the game away—but he sent the photo to put Mervan on Lesley’s track. When the man began to haunt her, our unknown friend must have hugged himself with glee.

“But Mervan was too slow. He seemed to have no homicidal intentions. Our devious friend was disappointed.

“So he looked around for another catspaw. Michael Trent was made to order; and when Lesley died by his hand, he would almost certainly be suspected of murder.”

Castle looked uncomfortable.

Lawrence continued blandly:

“Our man had also discovered that Mervan had booked a box for Saturday’s atinee. So he fixed on that date for the murder.”

“As another red herring?”

“Yes. Lesley would die and Mervan would be discovered in the audience. Any detective might be pardoned for assuming cause and effect.”

Castle grunted. “If Mervan was identified.”

“The Paddington Fair cards took care of that. One was despatched to Lesley to bolster up the revenge theory; another was sent to you—apparently from Richard Mervan.”

“It wasn’t signed,” objected Castle.

“That would have been too obvious. Our unknown moves subtly. He sent it to Detective Inspector Castle and posted it near Mervan’s lodgings.”

“In the S.E.1 district. Jove, yes!” The Chief Inspector breathed hard.

Lawrence nodded. “He probably reckoned you would spot Mervan in the box. Then, after the shooting, you would be too busy investigating either Mervan or Trent or both to bother about anyone else back stage.”

Castle mumbled disgustedly.

Lawrence paused, then continued:

“The strength of this plan lay in the safety it gave to the real culprit who was in the happy position of a puppet master, alone and unseen, who was manipulating the strings of his dolls. And even the dolls didn’t know they were being used.”

“Never mind the metaphor,” jerked Castle.

Lawrence continued imperturbably:

“Mervan’s belated attempt on Lesley’s life complicated the situation without materially affecting it. Like us, our mystery man may not have known at first by whose hand the girl had actually died. But dead she was, and by his manipulations. So he cut the strings—.”

“And left his dolls to our tender mercies.” The Chief Inspector was sarcastic. “You argue persuasively. But I’m not convinced.”

The two friends had reached the Janus Theatre. A constable stood guard outside. Returning the uniformed man's salute, Castle stumped past him into the foyer. Lawrence followed.

Castle said:

"You've made no attempt to explain Austin's part in the affair."

"That may yet explain itself."

"Perhaps." The Chief Inspector grunted disconsolately.

Lawrence smiled mysteriously.

Castle returned to the attack. "There's another flaw in your theory."

Lawrence paused by the box office. "Yes?"

"You say that the murderer knew Mervan was coming to the atinee performance."

"Yes." Lawrence leaned against the ticket window. "Mervan hadn't advertised his plans. How could our man have discovered them?"

Lawrence smiled. "I put two questions to Mervan. Have you forgotten his reply to the second?"

Stephen Castle considered. "No. It was—."

"Chief Inspector!"

Castle turned to find Victor Friern behind him. The manager had just emerged from his office. His appearance was something of a shock: he seemed to be aging rapidly.

Castle eyed him sympathetically. "Hallo, sir. Is everything ready?"

"It is." Friern spoke with an effort. "The company has been assembled. But ---."

He swallowed.

Castle's brows became circumflex accents. "But what?"

The manager bowed his greying head. "This reconstruction—can it serve any real purpose? It seems so—so grisly."

Castle pursed his lips.

Lawrence interposed gently:

"We believe it will help us to find Lesley's murderer."

Friern's mouth tightened. "That's all that matters, of course." He squared his shoulders. "Very well, gentlemen. I shall do all I can to help you."

"Thank you." Castle's bluffly determined face betrayed none of his inward uneasiness "And now—."

Lawrence said smoothly:

“Steve, you were going to superintend operations back-stage. Mr. Friern and I”—he smiled at the manager politely—“will go into the auditorium.”

The Chief Inspector grunted. “Right.”

He waved a meaty hand. “I know where the pass-door is.” He left them in the foyer and stamped up the stairs to the Dress Circle. Lawrence and Friern continued on their way through the entrance to the stalls.

The auditorium presented a somewhat ghostly and forlorn appearance. Dust sheets covered the seats like so many shrouds about corpses.

Lawrence shrugged away the macabre thought. He led the way down the centre aisle towards the stage.

The curtain was up. The set itself was illuminated by a single working light—the pilot. Two people were already on stage. With the light behind them they looked shadowy and unreal from the auditorium. Then they moved back from the setting line and assumed character and substance.

Trudy Ann was saying in her clear, candid voice:

“But Douglas, I can’t see what it’s for.”

Denzil put on a mocking smile. “Angel child, you should use your pretty head. The Dogberry and his assistant have gone back to the Bard for precedent.”

The girl looked a question, charmingly. “?”

Denzil explained:

“Hamlet. Act Two, Scene Two.” He quoted:

“I have heard, that guilty creatures sitting at a play,
Have by the very cunning of the scene,
Been struck so to the soul, that presently
They have proclaimed their malefactions.
For murder, though it have no tongue—.”

“Will speak,” concluded Algy Lawrence, “with most miraculous organ.” He added mildly: “I never quite knew what that meant.”

Denzil turned. “It’s Shakespeare,” he said sarcastically. “It doesn’t have to mean anything.”

Lawrence and Friern had by this time reached the orchestra well. The manager frowned. “Don’t be flippant, Denzil. This is serious business.”

“I’m sorry,” said Douglas without noticeable regret. “I was merely explaining to Trudy Ann the most probable reason for our presence here today.”

Lawrence grinned. "I agree," he murmured, "that the play's the thing. But you shouldn't assume we're here to catch the conscience of a king."

Denzil smiled with cynical disbelief.

"I," said Trudy Ann atineeously, "I don't know what anybody is talking about."

Denzil blew her a kiss.

Victor Friern said abruptly:

"We're ready to begin. You have only to say the word."

Lawrence nodded. "Thank you. The Chief Inspector should be with us soon."

They waited in silence. Lawrence noted with inward amusement that Denzil's air of detachment was less convincing; he seemed to be finding it difficult to maintain his pose of the sardonic, amused observer. And even Trudy Ann appeared more subdued and less volatile than usual.

Presently the Chief Inspector emerged from the wings. Michael and Penny followed. Like Douglas and Trudy Ann, they were wearing full make-up and costume.

Algy paid Penny no special attention. The role she had played behind the scenes was to remain a secret until after the reconstruction.

Castle lumbered towards the footlights. "I've posted my men," he grunted. "Now"—he swept his hands under the tail of his raincoat—"it's up to you."

Lawrence nodded. "Right-ho, Steve." He raised his voice. "Mr. Austin! Miss Merritt! Will you come on stage, please?"

The stage manager and his assistant, pale-faced and ill at ease, entered from the prompt side. Clasped in Austin's hand was the Webley & Scott .32.

Trudy Ann drew in her breath with a little hiss. Her perfect teeth made momentarily bloodless indentations in her pouting lower lip.

Lawrence said quietly:

"The Chief Inspector has released the gun for this experiment. But there's no need to worry. All the tests have been completed. And now it's loaded with harmless blanks."

Austin agreed huskily. "That's so."

June Merritt did not speak. Her pudgy face was anxious.

Lawrence said: "Good! Now you probably know what's been happening back-stage. The company and staff have been assembled. Everyone is at his

post: the door-keeper, the property master, the dressers—.”

He gestured. “Everybody.”

Castle nodded agreement. “They all have their instructions.”

“Yes.” Lawrence explained: “While you are re-enacting the third act of the play, your colleagues back-stage will be retracing their steps behind the scenes. We are putting the clock back to last Saturday afternoon.”

Denzil laughed. “Everyone will co-operate—.”

“We hope so.”

“Save the murderer,” finished Douglas wickedly.

Lawrence gave him a tranquil smile. “The Chief Inspector has stationed his men at strategic points back-stage. They will be watching. And waiting.”

Friern moved sharply. Algy continued:

“Here, on stage, the situation is rather different. Mr. Trent and Mr. Denzil are playing their original roles. As for the ladies—.”

He spread his hands. “Lesley Christopher is dead. Her part will be played by Miss Valentine, and Miss Valentine’s”—he bowed slightly—“by Trudy Ann. Fortunately the role originally played by Trudy Ann isn’t featured in this particular scene—.”

“I think,” said that young lady engagingly, “Mr. Windsor made a bad mistake there.”

“Hush, child,” grinned Denzil. He took her hand and patted it.

“So,” finished Lawrence, “no problem arises. Well, now! We’re ready to begin. Mr. Austin, you can place the gun on the ‘lobby’ wall—.”

Footsteps sounded in the aisle behind them. Lawrence saw Trudy Ann’s smile widen and turned to discover its cause.

Herbert Windsor was striding briskly towards them. The playwright was wearing suede shoes, corduroy trousers, and an enveloping duffle coat. A homburg hat was crushed over his cheerfully tousled hair.

He waved a salute. “Greetings, souls!”

“Hallo, pet.” Called Trudy Ann in a proprietary tone.

Windsor regarded her with undisguised admiration. “Light of my life,” he announced, “you are bewitching. In that get-up you could seduce an anchorite.”

Trudy Ann was demure. “As that,” she murmured, “you hardly qualify.”

Douglas Denzil intervened. He said unpleasantly:

“These exchanges may be interesting. But they hardly concern the evening’s business.”

“True,” admitted Windsor, with a maddening air of condescension. “But I don’t yet know what the—ah—business is.” He appealed to the Chief Inspector. “I obeyed your summons. May I now know why you called me to the theatre?”

Castle jerked an open hand. “It’s your show, Algy,” he growled. “You explain.”

Lawrence said smoothly:

“We are re-staging Act Three of THE FINAL TROPHY. It’s just an experiment. But we hope it may help us solve the mystery of Lesley Christopher’s death. So we’ve invited all interested parties. You, as the author—.”

“I see.” Windsor removed his hat and crushed it thoughtfully. “But....”

“Yes?”

“I’ve been following the case. And I thought you knew the identity of the man”—Windsor did not look at Austin—“who put the bullets into the gun.”

The stage manager paled.

Lawrence replied:

“That’s the crux of the problem. But perhaps we’ve been too preoccupied with the question of opportunity. What’s that without motive?”

Windsor’s gaze sharpened. “Go on.”

Lawrence said dreamily:

“The man with the best opportunity had the weakest motive.” He didn’t miss the expression of relief which appeared on Austin’s face. He continued: “There were others who had a more direct interest in removing Lesley from the stage.”

“You mean—.”

“I mean,” said Lawrence, “that we may have made a serious mistake in assuming that the murderer wanted Lesley to die!”

“What?” roared Castle.

Lawrence grinned apologetically. “It’s a new conclusion, Steve. And one I might never have reached.” He gave Penny a fleeting smile, acknowledging her help.

He explained:

“The murderer used Michael Trent as his catspaw. That gave him personal security. But it also made the crime itself a chancy business. The

bullet Trent so unwittingly fired might not have hit a vital organ and Lesley might not have died.”

Windsor said eagerly:

“But she was almost certain to be wounded.”

“Yes. And even a minor wound would have secured her withdrawal from the cast.”

Trent said angrily:

“Oh, my god.”

He put his hand on Penny’s arm and squeezed it protectively. She responded with a sad little secret smile.

Lawrence continued:

“That might have suited the unknown’s book. He—or she—might not have cared whether Lesley lived or died so long as she was unable to play ‘Marilyn’.”

Douglas Denzil said quietly:

“Penny, my sweet. Your protector is turning against you.”

Lawrence continued imperturbably:

“It’s true that Miss Valentine was Lesley’s understudy. And she would certainly be the next to play the leading role. But Penny’s own part was a good one—and Lesley’s removal would also effect a promotion for Miss Valentine’s own deputy.”

Denzil chuckled. “He means you, Trudy Ann.”

“Why, Douglas. You pig,” said Trudy Ann with more amusement than irritation. She turned her disarming gaze on Algy Lawrence. “It’s true I wanted the second lead. But I wouldn’t have killed either Lesley or Penny to get it.”

“Why, thank you, dear,” said Penny with the ghost of a laugh.”

“I mean it,” announced Trudy Ann.

“I’m sure you do.” Lawrence smiled at her. “And you’re not the only suspect. Lesley’s death set off a kind of chain reaction which nearly resulted in the arrest of Michael Trent.”

“Which,” supplied Herbert Windsor with satanic relish, “would have secured his withdrawal from my play. H’m! You are Michael’s understudy, aren’t you, Douglas?”

Denzil flushed angrily. “Look here—.”

He broke off and steadied himself with a laugh. He said more coolly: “This is rather ridiculous. Follow the argument to its logical conclusion and

you suspect my understudy—and he doesn't figure in the case at all.”

Lawrence said amiably:

“I was merely suggesting a line of enquiry. But now we can abandon theory for experiment. Let's get to work.”

His suggestion was adopted with a general air of relief. Castle disappeared into the wings. Victor Friern seated himself in the front row of the stalls. Windsor made to accompany him, but Lawrence caught his arm.”

Algy said amicably:

“I have a role for you to play.”

“Eh? I'm no actor.”

“It doesn't matter. Come with me.”

Lawrence led Windsor out of the stalls into the corridor giving access to the stage box on the prompt side. “This is the box Richard Mervan occupied.”

“Mervan? That's the fellow who took the boss shot at poor Lesley.”

“Yes.” Lawrence opened the door. “He missed her and hit the bear. You can see where.”

Windsor went into the box and stared at the stage. “I can see something like an outsize toothpick sticking out of the animal's mouth.”

Lawrence smiled. “We calculated the bullet's angle of flight and marked it with twine. But we had to remove it this evening to allow the actors free passage about the stage. So we fixed that rod instead, to remind us of the shot. That stick represents the exact path of the bullet as it entered the bear's head.”

“Oh.” Windsor was dubious. “What am I supposed to do about it?”

“Nothing.” Lawrence was casual. “Mervan is in jail. You're his stand-in.”

“Eh? D'you want me to take a pot-shot at Penny?”

“That won't be necessary.” Algy's voice was dry. “Just sit there. And watch.”

He closed the door behind him gently, leaving Windsor alone. He glanced along the corridor.

A policeman was standing with his back to the exit doors. Lawrence signalled silently. The uniformed man gave a nod of understanding and moved quietly towards him. Lawrence left him at a new post—facing the door of the box.

When Algy returned to the auditorium, he found the Chief Inspector in the seat which he had occupied at the fatal atinee. Lawrence settled himself beside his friend. He murmured tritely:

“Here we are again.”

Castle grunted. “I wish I knew what you had in mind.”

“So do I.”

Castle covered an exasperated squawk. He raised his voice. “Mr. Austin! We’re ready.”

The stage manager cracked his knuckles nervously. But he slid without difficulty into his customary role. Standing with his back to the footlights—the curtain had not been lowered—he looked round the set, making a final check. Then he went to his post in the prompt corner.

His voice boomed hollowly:

“Clear, please!”

Then—

“Stand by!”

And finally—

“Curtain up!”

The last performance began.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

Lawrence stared moodily at the stage. He felt vaguely unhappy and a little scared. It was as if he had set into motion forces he would be unable to control—and yet.

Resolutely, he focused his attention on the play.

“We are putting the clock back to last Saturday afternoon.” His own words recurred with frightening force: he could almost believe they were literally true.

Wearing an exact duplicate of the dead girl’s costume, Penny Valentine had brought both ‘Marilyn’ and Lesley back to life. Every word, every gesture was Lesley’s. Lawrence knew this was not unusual: an understudy is always expected to follow his or her principal. Nevertheless, the illusion was scarifying.

He glanced quickly to his right. Victor Friern was leaning forward in his seat. The manager’s face was white, and the hand on his knee was clenched in a tight fist. His breathing was harsh and irregular.

The play progressed...

Trudy Ann made her exit on the O.P. side leaving Michael Trent alone on the stage.

Lawrence tensed. This was the climax.

The double doors opened. Penny came out of the “lobby” with the revolver in her hand.

Lawrence felt a constriction in his throat. He watched the players, hardly daring to breathe.

Michael and Penny made the most of their final duologue. Their acting was faultless.

“Marilyn” threatened “Regan” with the revolver. Then he grabbed her wrist and the struggle for the gun began. “Regan” wrenched it from her hand, then backed slowly away, covering her with the revolver.

“Now it’s my turn, baby.”

Penny whimpered.

She backed away. The huge stuffed bear seemed ready to seize her.

Once again, Lawrence watched with fascinated revulsion as Trent thumbed down the hammer of the Webley & Scott. The gun in his hand steadied.

Penny's heels were touching the dais and her body was nearly within the animal's grasp. She was watching the gun in Michael's hand.

She whispered. "No.... "

Lawrence followed her gaze. Trent was smiling tightly. His finger was about to squeeze the trigger...

Somebody moved in the stage box behind him. Herbert Windsor rested his clasped hands on the ledge. His eyes reflected greenly, like a cat's.

Lawrence's glance went back to the girl. The rod in the bear's mouth was brushing lightly over the top of Penny's head and pointing like an accusing finger at the figure of the playwright....

The clasped hands parted. Something metallic glinted bluely against Windsor's palm....

Lawrence half-rose in his seat. His mouth shaped a call but the sound was lost in the sudden, shocking blast from Trent's revolver.

Penny's body jerked. She swayed back then forward. She fell to the floor. Slowly, the curtain descended...

"Algy!"

The Chief Inspector's voice was alarmed.

There had been no black-out, and in the glow from the foot-lights he saw that his young friend had left his seat and was running towards the box on the prompt side.

Lawrence was moving blindly, without conscious thought. Fear had gripped him.

He lurched past Victor Friern and scrambled over the low partition into the orchestra well. A long stride brought him to the box. He put his hands on the ledge and pulled himself over. He crashed against a chair and half-fell to the floor.

Windsor had bounded up in alarm. "What the—."

In the face of Lawrence's head-long arrival, he pressed himself back against the wall. The metallic object dropped from his hand on to the carpet.

Lawrence grabbed for the fallen prize. It was shaped like a miniature gun....

Algy stood erect, his chest heaving painfully.

A voice sounded behind him. "Mr. Lawrence! What—."

Algy answered tiredly:

"All right, Mr. Friern. It's over now."

The manager stared into the box. His gaze was on Lawrence's fist. "Wh—what's that in your hand?"

Algy replied:

"It looks like a gun."

Windsor had recovered his composure. Amused understanding appeared in his eyes. He drawled:

"It's shaped like a pistol. But its contents are hardly lethal. Ah—allow me."

He took the gun out of Lawrence's hand and squeezed the butt... A cigarette popped out of the muzzle.

Algy stared at it stupidly.

Windsor smiled. "I have a fondness for gadgets."

Lawrence found his voice. "And for melodrama."

The playwright grinned. "It was merely playing my part as Mervan's deputy. This cigarette case was a useful prop." The mockery deepened. "However, I didn't expect you to enter into the spirit of your own role quite so thoroughly. Er—you were acting? You didn't really believe...."

He looked at the "gun" and laughed.

Lawrence flushed.

He said abruptly:

"It's finished."

A cool voice called his name. He turned.

The curtain had been raised again. Penny Valentine, alive and unhurt, was smiling contentedly. She had taken the Webley & Scott from Trent's hand; crossing the setting line, she proffered the gun. "Here, Algy. You'll want this."

Then in an undertone, she added swiftly:

"Come to my dressing-room. Bring the Chief Inspector."

Lawrence looked into her luminous eyes and realised that the experiment had been a success.

When they reached the dressing-room they found the girl in her dressing-gown. She had removed most of her make-up.

Her skin was almost translucent. She was glowing with an inner excitement; and she was very beautiful.

Lawrence regarded her gravely. She smiled happily in return. "Come in, please."

Maggie Boyd was attending her. Chief Inspector Castle indicated the dresser with a sidewise glance.

Penny took a small towel from the plump woman's hand and said politely:

"Thank you, Maggie. Be a dear and leave us now."

Maggie eyed the two men suspiciously and sniffed. "Very well, m' dear. Call me if you want me."

She left the room with a twitch of her beefy shoulders. As the door closed, Lawrence spoke with unusual formality. "Your portrayal of 'Marilyn' was superb."

"Thank you," smiled Penny. "But you didn't come here to discuss my acting ability."

"You have something to tell us?" grunted Castle hopefully.

"I think so." Penny dropped the towel on the dressing-table and studied herself in the mirror. "But first you must answer some questions. I—."

Someone tapped on the door. It opened to disclose Michael Trent.

Penny turned and smiled. "Come in, Michael. This concerns you, too."

Lawrence and Castle exchanged glances. The Chief Inspector's hand opened in a tiny gesture of assent.

Trent crossed the room and squeezed Penny's shoulders. "Darling, you were wonderful."

She patted his fingers and laughed. "Sit down, my love. This is serious business." She sobered. "It may mean Jack's salvation."

The three men studied her with keener interest. Lawrence was the spokesman. "Go on."

Penny said slowly:

"You saw the scene as Michael and Lesley played it. And you saw how we played it today. Was the interpretation identical?"

Lawrence nodded agreement. "Every move, every action was the same."

"Good." Penny seemed pleased. "Now think of the business with the gun. I had taken it from the lobby 'wall'—."

Lawrence said quietly:

“You threatened Michael. He grabbed your wrist and wrenched the revolver from your hand. He backed away, thumbed down the hammer, and fired.”

“Just as he did last Saturday?”

“Exactly.”

Penny drew a deep breath. Her voice shifted tone. “Think carefully now. Think of the day Lesley died. Would you swear—.”

She faltered.

Lawrence pressed her. “Yes?”

She finished quickly:

“That the gun he fired was the one he took from Lesley’s hand?”

“What!”

“In plain terms,” said the girl, “could he have pocketed the gun he took from Lesley and fired instead another loaded with live ammunition?”

“Penny!” Michael’s voice was shocked and reproachful.

“Trust me, Michael. Please... Well, Algy? What’s your answer?”

Lawrence grinned broadly. He passed the question to Castle. “You tell her, Steve.”

The Chief Inspector considered the suggestion wistfully. Then he shook his head and grumped.

“I wish I could say yes! But I can’t.”

“I agree,” said Lawrence quietly. “Like the rest of the audience, I was watching the struggle closely. And now—I have a clear mental picture of it. Michael took the gun from Lesley’s hand and held it in full view of the audience till the moment he fired it. He couldn’t have tampered with the gun in any way. Nor could he have switched revolvers.”

Castle nodded. “Anyway,” he growled, “such a theory would make nonsense of the ballistics report.”

Penny closed her eyes. She said gratefully:

“I knew it. But I had to hear you say so.”

Lawrence leaned forward. “And now?”

“And now,” said Penny tranquilly, “I have something to tell you.”

She turned to the Chief Inspector. “Last Saturday I was playing the second lead. Just before Lesley died. I made an exit.”

Castle inclined his head. “I remember. You went off, leaving Trent alone on the stage. Miss Christopher made her entrance from the ‘lobby’ and they played the final scene.”

“That’s right.” Penny was speaking coolly and confidently. “I made my exit on the O.P. side. That meant that to get back to my dressing-room I had to cross the stage behind the set to reach the entrance to the passage.”

“Yes?”

“As I passed the flats which make up the lobby ‘wall’ I heard an odd sound. I don’t want to be melodramatic, but”—Penny hesitated briefly—“it seemed to be a sob of fear.”

The girl paused.

She continued softly:

“I knew that Lesley would be there, waiting for her cue. I was curious. I looked round the flats into the lobby.

“Lesley was standing by the double doors. She was holding the Webley & Scott in her hand. She seemed over-wrought.”

“As I watched, she broke open the revolver and extracted the blanks. She examined them quickly, then—.”

Castle snapped:

“And then?”

“She replaced them in the gun.”

“But—.”

Penny was firm. “She seemed strangely relieved. I wondered what was in her mind. I might have spoken to her, but before I could do so, she opened the doors and made her last entrance—with the gun she had just examined.”

Silence. Then—.

“Good God!” roared the Chief Inspector. “Do you realise what that means?”

Lawrence gave a short, harsh laugh.

“Of course she does,” he answered wryly. “It means we must solve the mystery of yet another crime which couldn’t possibly have been committed.”

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

“This case,” said the Chief Inspector gloomily, “will probably drive me insane.”

Lawrence chuckled.

The two men were alone in the greenroom. They were waiting for Penny to finish changing.

Castle felt spiritually battered. He had been unable to find any flaws in the girl’s story and, impossible though it seemed, he had had to accept her evidence as the truth.

Lawrence said:

“You may not like it, Steve. But Penny’s story rings true.”

Castle nodded glumly.

His friend continued:

“Emotionally, Lesley Christopher was near collapse. She had been living on her nerves for weeks. Her role was emotionally exhausting; she was jealous of Penny’s talents; she had quarrelled with Austin; and her past was threatening her once more.

“Mervan’s presence in the audience had given her a nasty shock; and the discovery of Michael’s infidelity had come as the final blow. She felt wretched and alone, plagued by jealousy and fear. She was waiting in the ‘lobby’ for her cue with the revolver in her hand. And then—.”

“And then,” said the Chief Inspector, “she remembered what Denzil had told her.”

“Douglas?”

“Yes.” Castle thumbed his jowl. He quoted slowly: “Lesley passed me on her way to the stage. I made some casual remark; she mumbled a reply and went into the ‘lobby’ to wait for her cue.” He squinted thoughtfully. “That casual remark was rather important.”

“Uh huh?”

“Yes. I’ve questioned Denzil. He can’t recall his exact words but he admits it was a—a jocular warning about the gun.”

“Of course!” Lawrence ran his hands over his smooth blond hair. “He had just seen Austin handling the gun. A furtive suspicion was in his mind. It wasn’t his way to take direct action. But he soothed his conscience—.”

“If he has one,” snarled Castle.

“By dropping a hint to Lesley,” finished Algy with a smile. “It fits, Steve! Lesley had quarrelled with Austin—and now her attention had been drawn to the gun he had loaded. She broke open the revolver and examined the cartridges. She discovered to her relief that they were harmless blanks and put them back into the cylinder. And then—.”

“She died,” said Castle grimly. “By black magic.”

“It’s a dark miracle,” agreed Lawrence. His voice was hard. “Lesley knew the gun was harmless. She brought it on stage herself. And from that moment it was never out of the audience’s sight. Yet when Trent wrenched it out of her hand and fired it—.”

“The blanks had been replaced by bullets,” mumbled Castle. “And the harmless load was suddenly lethal.”

He finished in an awed whisper:

“It’s impossible.”

“But,” said Lawrence, “it happened.”

“I’m ready now.” Penny Valentine was standing by the open door.

Michael Trent was with her. He clasped the girl’s arm protectively, then frowned at the Chief Inspector. “Where are you taking her?”

“To the Yard,” replied Castle forbiddingly. “I have to present this blasted case to the Coroner tomorrow and there’s a lot of paper work to be done. We must put Miss Valentine’s statement into proper form.”

“But—.”

“Don’t fuss, darling.” Penny smiled affectionately. “Go home now. I’ll ‘phone you later.”

“I’ll be waiting.” Michael’s voice was soft.

They kissed.

Lawrence looked away.

Castle grunted. He prepared to leave. “Coming, Algy?”

Lawrence shook his head. “The problem has been stated. Now I must find the solution. That requires thought—and tobacco.” He grinned faintly. “I might as well stay here.”

“Call me,” growled his friend, “if you have any useful ideas.”

There wasn’t much hope in Castle’s command. He stumped out of the greenroom, ushering Trent away.

Lawrence called Penny's name. She turned back with a smile. "Yes, Algy?"

"I want to ask you a question."

"Yes." She closed the door.

Lawrence asked:

"Why did you tell us about Lesley and the gun?"

"To save Jack." Penny was tranquil.

"You've cleared Austin," agreed Lawrence. "His story has been proved to be true. But why didn't you speak before?"

Penny's eyes glimmered. "Don't you know?"

"Tell me, please." Lawrence regarded her with peculiar intentness.

She sighed. "I had seen Lesley examining the gun. I knew it must have been loaded with blanks. And Michael was the only other person to handle the revolver before it was fired."

Lawrence nodded gently. The implication was clear.

Penny clenched her hands. "I didn't doubt Michael myself. You understand? I knew he was innocent. But I knew the police would be bound to suspect him. They might suggest he had palmed a bullet which he slipped into the breech after taking the gun from Lesley—."

Lawrence laughed. "That's quite impossible. The audience was watching his every move. Even a skilled illusionist couldn't have pulled off a trick like that."

Penny smiled faintly. "I thought that too. But I could guess what the police would think next."

"They would say that Michael had switched revolvers."

"Yes. But he would have to have done it on stage. And I knew the scene well—he would have had no opportunity. But the police—would they be satisfied? Or would they perhaps...."

She bit her lip.

Lawrence said without reproach:

"You didn't trust them. You thought they might force an arrest."

Penny nodded. "I suppose there was some such fear in my mind. I thought it best to keep silent. But then—."

"Austin fell under suspicion."

"Yes. And only my evidence could clear him. But what would happen to Michael? When the Chief Inspector heard my story, he would be bound to suspect him again."

Her mouth trembled. “I could see only one way out. I would have to force the police to admit that Michael could not have tampered with the gun. Then—and only then—would I tell them what I knew.”

Lawrence drew a long breath. “I see... You left them no escape. This was, as you claimed, an impossible crime. And you made them admit it.”

She nodded. “I set the stage. I recreated the past—.”

“And stated the problem.” Lawrence grinned ruefully. “But you didn’t provide the solution.”

She laughed gently. “I leave that to you.”

She turned to go.

Lawrence straightened. There was a query in his lazy eyes.

“Penny—.”

“Yes?”

“One thing puzzles me.” He ran his hands over his smooth blond hair. “You knew Austin was innocent—.”

“I did.”

“But you wouldn’t speak until Michael was in the clear. Now supposing—just supposing—your plan hadn’t worked... Suppose Castle had answered: ‘Yes, Trent could have tampered with that revolver.’”

Penny’s eyes clouded.

Lawrence asked softly:

“Would you have told us about Lesley then?”

“No.”

Lawrence pressed her hard. “But Austin was an innocent man. Only your evidence could save him from arrest.”

Penny hesitated. Then she said clearly:

“You could have taken him to the scaffold. I would still have been silent.”

Lawrence looked blank. “You would have done even that for love of Michael?”

She recognized the question as a protest.

She answered defiantly:

“All that. And more.”

“Oh.”

Lawrence seemed bewildered.

Penny was suddenly a stranger.

Then she smiled. Her cool fingers brushed over his cheek in a fleeting caress.

She whispered:

“Poor Algy! You’re awfully clever. But you don’t know much about women, do you?”

With a laugh, she was gone.

The reader is respectfully requested to
PAUSE FOR REFLECTION---
and play the great game of
WHODUNIT? and HOW?

PART THREE
THE CURTAIN FALLS

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

The theatre was almost deserted.

Alone in the auditorium, a man was sprawling limply in a gangway seat in the stalls. He seemed to be sleeping; but his eyes were open. They were vacant and lifeless, serving only as mirrors reflecting the light from the stage.

At last, the man stirred. He fumbled with a silver case and slipped a cigarette between tired lips. Flame spurted; he inhaled deeply. Blue smoke drifted sluggishly in the cloud above his head.

Then, with a sigh, he crushed the cigarette into the ash-tray fixed to the back of the seat before him. The tray was already full: stubs had fallen to the floor.

Lawrence licked parched lips.

He asked aloud:

“What shall I do?”

He felt sick and lonely.

And afraid...

He knew the truth at last.

“Hallo, Algy.”

He turned his head slowly.

“You,” he said hoarsely.

Penny Valentine nodded. “Yes.”

The soft carpet had muffled the girl’s footfalls; he had had no warning of her approach.

He asked:

“How did you get in?”

She shrugged the question aside. “It doesn’t matter.” Her face was taut; her eyes were fever-bright.

She gazed around. Interpreting her thoughts, Lawrence said gently:

“We’re quite alone.”

“I’m glad.”

She seated herself in the row behind him.

She said flatly:

“You’ve solved the problem.”

He stared moodily at the stage. “I think so.”

Her mouth slackened. Her fingers pressed hard on the handbag in her lap.

Then, as he turned, she composed her face and spoke calmly:

“I’ve solved it, too.”

Something stirred behind his eyes. “You have?”

“Yes.”

Lawrence twisted in his seat. “Tell me.”

Penny said painfully:

“There’s only one way to explain the crime—.”

“This ‘miracle’ murder.” Algy’s voice was hard.

Penny seemed to gather her strength.

She said coldly:

“It wasn’t murder.”

Lawrence said nothing, but his gaze was watchful.

Penny continued:

“You didn’t know Lesley. I did. She may have thought she loved Michael. But it wasn’t really love—it was a selfish passion which could turn in an instant to hate.”

“Perhaps.”

Penny said urgently:

“Lesley had been driven to the point of collapse—by herself and by others. This crazy man Mervan was a constant threat to her peace of mind. And she was jealous of me as a woman and as an actress. And then—.”

She faltered.

Lawrence said gently:

“She found out about you and Michael.”

Penny nodded. “It must have been the final blow. She knew she had lost everything. She had nothing to live for.”

“You mean—?”

“She decided to die.” Penny was breathing quickly. “Don’t you see? It’s the only explanation. She put the bullets into the gun herself.”

Lawrence admitted:

“She may have had a motive for suicide. But why should she choose such a crazy method?”

“She was jealous and vindictive.” Penny’s colour was high and her voice was excited. “She wasn’t satisfied with suicide alone. She meant to take Michael with her.”

“Michael?”

“Of course! It would be the perfect revenge. She meant to die by his hand, to brand him a murderer. I was to lose him too. She could hit at us both from beyond the grave.” She paused triumphantly.

Lawrence considered. “The mystery of Lesley’s death isn’t the only problem we have to solve. You haven’t explained the attack upon Bailey.”

Penny clenched her fists. “That had nothing to do with the shooting. It was Douglas—.”

“You’re accusing Denzil?” Lawrence sounded surprised.

“Yes! Nobody else wanted the marriage certificate. Only Douglas could use it.”

“To blackmail you... Hmmm.” Lawrence mused. “That’s reasonable. But there are flaws in the suicide theory.”

Penny’s knuckles were white. “No.”

Lawrence contradicted her gently:

“Yes. Remember your statement. You watched Lesley break open the gun, extract the blanks, examine and replace them in the cylinder.”

The girl responded to the challenge. “I made a mistake. I described what I thought I saw. But now I realise it must have been bullets she was putting into the gun.”

Lawrence asked mildly:

“She made her entrance immediately afterwards. How did she dispose of the blanks? You were watching her. How could she hide them in the fire bucket?”

Penny bit her lip. “There must have been a way. I—.”

“No, Penny.” Lawrence gave her no quarter. “The theory’s a fantasy. The suicide could not have been premeditated—yet the means were magically at hand. Where could Lesley find live ammunition? Did she conjure the bullets out of thin air?”

“I—I—.”

The girl faltered miserably.

Lawrence watched her gravely. His eyes were sombre.

Penny's lips were trembling.

She spoke in a whisper. "Very well. The theory is a fantasy—a last desperate attempt to explain the impossible. Why can't you accept it? It will satisfy the police. Isn't that enough?"

"No."

"What, then?" The question was a cry of pain. "If you reject this---what remains?"

Lawrence said sadly:

"The truth."

Silence settled like dust.

Penny spoke at last. She said hopelessly:

"You know it all."

"Yes."

The word was a knife-thrust. Penny closed her eyes in a spasm of pain. Open again, they were misted with tears.

She whispered:

"It isn't too late. Forget it all."

"I can't."

She was beautiful in her distress. His heart swelled with pain.

She said desperately:

"For pity's sake don't tell them. If you have any regard for me at all—"

"Oh, my God." He could no longer bear to watch her. He turned abruptly, gazing once more at the stage. "Can't you see this is as difficult for me as it is for you? Do you think I want to hurt you?"

"Then why—"

"Listen, Penny." His voice was muffled. "I warned you once. I can't be stopped; I go on to the end. I stand for the truth—because truth can't be denied."

"Algy—"

"It's no use, Penny. It's too late to protest. I wish I'd never solved this case. And I pity you." His shoulders slumped. "Believe me. But I won't cover up a murder. For you—for anybody."

A solitary tear streaked Penny's cheek.

Her lips moved silently.

Then her hands seemed to move of their own accord. She opened her bag and groped within...

Her voice was a breath. “You leave me no choice.”

The muzzle of the gun touched Lawrence’s neck.

The girl said dully:

“I have to kill you now... “

There was sourness in his mouth. It might have been the taste of fear. But his voice was steady.

“Shoot if you must. You will silence me. But destroy yourself.”

He heard her sob. “The secret must be kept.”

He said quietly:

“Castle will know why I died.”

Her voice was tremulous. “You’ve told him nothing yet.”

“That’s true.” His head was aching.

He continued tonelessly:

“But he won’t need me now. You’ve already given him the key to the problem. He has only to turn it. As I did.”

Penny spoke with dreadful decision. “I may not escape. That’s the chance I have to take... Good-bye, Algy.”

She whispered:

“Forgive me... “

Lawrence closed his eyes.

This is it, he thought. This is how it ends. The cold kiss of metal; a blasting roar; a moment’s unimaginable pain. And then—

“Penny! Stop!”

“Michael—keep away!” Her cry spiralled into a scream.

Lawrence could no longer feel the touch of the muzzle against his neck. He threw himself sideways out of the seat.

No shot came.

There were the sounds of a scuffle, abruptly terminated. The crack of a fist against bone...

The gun thudded to the floor.

Lawrence picked himself up, retrieving the revolver. “A .32,” he murmured. “Of course.”

His gaze focused upon the initials...

Then, for the first time, he looked at the man who had intervened.

Michael Trent was gazing with haggard eyes at the girl he loved. Penny lay slumped in the seat. Despair lingered on her unconscious face.

A bruise was forming on her jaw.

Trent said dully:

“I had to hit her.”

Lawrence passed a weary hand over his mouth. “You saved my life,” he muttered.

Trent laughed harshly.

“And what,” he demanded, “will be my reward?”

Lawrence shivered.

“The hangman’s rope,” he answered sadly.

CHAPTER THIRTY

It ended, as it began, in Richard Mervan's cell.

Algy Lawrence said sombrely:

"You, if anyone, have the right to know the whole truth of the matter."

Mervan nodded slowly.

The flesh of his face seemed to have shrivelled away, leaving only the skin stretched over his skull; but his eyes were alive and strangely hungry.

He muttered:

"Tell me."

Lawrence stared at the floor. "You don't have to speak. I want you to listen. That's all."

Mervan nodded again. "I understand."

There was a pause.

Then Lawrence spoke in a muted voice:

"Michael Trent was a man of violence. Bailey was one of his victims. You were another."

Mervan clenched his hands.

Lawrence said:

"Trent was the thug who first tried to rob you in the street."

Mervan's voice was husky. "Trent was the man who attacked me?"

"Yes. It was a foolish and clumsy crime which failed as it deserved. But Lesley turned it to her advantage. You expected a reward for saving the bank's money. When you didn't get it, she played upon your feeling of resentment---."

Mervan said painfully:

"I don't want to talk about that."

"Very well." Lawrence squeezed his palms together. "You know how Lesley trapped you. Trent's plan had ended in failure. But Lesley's schemes were subtler—and they succeeded. Trent was content to follow her orders."

Mervan's knuckles were white. "I'm thinking about that fight in the street. I saw the robber's face. Why didn't I recognize Trent when I saw him again?"

Lawrence's voice was toneless. "Trent was an actor. He could have been wearing a disguise."

"Yes." Mervan relaxed. "He could have powdered grey into his hair, grown stubble on his chin—."

He broke off. He said:

"This may be true. But how do you know what happened?"

Lawrence replied:

"Trent told me many things."

He paused, recalling that last sombre talk in the darkened theatre. Trent had thrown away his last chance of escape. He had saved Penny from becoming a murderess. It would cost him his life.

Lawrence said:

"He no longer had any reason to remain silent."

Mervan's eyes were glassy. "But you already knew—Trent had murdered his wife?"

"I knew how the crime had been committed. Trent didn't have to tell me anything about the murder."

Lawrence stared at the floor.

His voice was low. "I had already realised my mistake. I had been looking at the case through a distorting lens. Trent appeared to be the killer's catspaw: an innocent man who had been tricked into slaying his wife. But Penny knocked away the lens—and then the picture was very different."

He looked up.

He said:

"Michael Trent was the murderer's accomplice. And he will hang. But he didn't kill Lesley Christopher."

Something rattled in Mervan's throat.

Lawrence studied him curiously.

He said distinctly:

"You shot her, Mervan... "

The walls of the cell enclosed the silence. It was thick, oppressive and suffocating...

Mervan spoke at last.

He said tightly:

“That’s ridiculous.”

Lawrence shook his head. “I wish it were.” His face was shadowed. “Castle tried to save you years ago. But you wouldn’t let him. And now you’ve destroyed yourself.”

Mervan’s jaw-line hardened. “Go on.”

Lawrence looked away. “You loved Lesley once. But she cheated and betrayed you. Then there was no longer love—only hate. You wanted your revenge.”

Mervan said thickly:

“I needed it as other men need air to breathe.”

Lawrence sighed. “You served your sentence, treasuring your hatred. Lesley was going to die by your hand. But you meant to cheat the hangman—that was the essence of your plans... You waited. You were released. You began the search for Lesley. And you found her at the Janus.”

Mervan began:

“Someone sent me a magazine containing her photograph—.”

Lawrence shook his head. “That isn’t true. You lied to set us on a false trail... No one helped you to find Lesley. You traced her yourself. And with her you found—another.”

Lawrence paused, then continued:

“You recognized Michael Trent. You identified him as the man who had attacked you in the street. You knew him, too, as Lesley’s accomplice. You must have caught a glimpse of him before he knocked you out in her flat...

“You knew him. But you didn’t hate him as you hated the girl. You probably thought of him as a dupe of Lesley’s like yourself. So you decided not to kill him. But you meant to make use of him.”

Lawrence smiled sadly. “You contacted Trent secretly. You told him what you knew about his part in the bank robbery. You threatened to inform the police, unless—.”

“Unless?” repeated Mervan.

“Unless,” finished Lawrence, “he agreed to help you murder his wife.”

Lawrence went on: .

“Trent agreed. He was by no means an unwilling accessory. He loved Penny and he wanted to marry her. But he dared not break with Lesley. In a jealous rage, she might have lost all sense of caution. She could have gone to the police and ruined them both.

“Trent had become a success. He was prepared to do anything to safeguard his position in the theatre and to escape from the past. He wanted Penny and a new, clean life. You showed him the way.”

Lawrence hunched his shoulders. “The basic plan was yours; Trent contributed his inside knowledge of the theatre and its staff. You plotted the crime together. It wasn’t meant to be a ‘miracle’ murder—you just wanted unbreakable alibis. But—.”

He gestured.

He continued:

“We now know that Trent had access to the Janus at any time. He had made a friend of Purrett, the night watchman; and he had struck a duplicate key to an outside door. He could enter the theatre whenever he wished, with or without Purrett’s knowledge.

“Meanwhile, you were using the underworld contacts you had made in prison. You had already obtained a .25 self loading pistol. Then you located a .32 Webley & Scott revolver.

“Trent showed you the revolver which was used in the play. You examined it carefully, then set about turning your own .32 into an exact duplicate.

“You filed off the registration number, you had the initial ‘H.W.’ engraved above the butt, and you copied from the original that long jagged scratch on the barrel. At last you were satisfied. The forgery would pass muster. Only the rifling inside the barrel could betray the duplicate.”

Lawrence rubbed his cheek. “The day of the murder came at last. Lesley was to die in the afternoon. But much work had to be done first, in the early hours of the morning.

“Trent had approached Purrett the previous evening. He had handed him a bottle of beer—a casual gift which old Tom accepted unsuspectingly. He counted himself a friend, he was used to such small favours.

“Saturday morning. The night watchman made his rounds at one o’clock. Then, as always, he retired to his cubby-hole for a drink. The beer had been drugged—and he fell asleep.”

Mervan’s eyes were wary.

Lawrence continued:

“You went with Trent to the theatre. Michael crept into Purrett’s room and found him dead to the world. If there was any of the drugged beer left, Trent must have emptied it away. He wouldn’t want it to be discovered

later. But there was no real danger. Old Tom might realise that the beer had made him unusually sleepy; but he wouldn't realise that he had been doped...

"Trent reported that all was well. The coast was clear, you set to work.

"You were probably wearing rubber gloves. The .32 revolver was in its usual place on the lobby 'wall'. Taking care not to obscure any existing fingerprints, you emptied the cylinder and transferred the load—five unused and one exploded blank cartridge—to the duplicate revolver you had prepared. It was time to make the substitution. You placed the second Webley & Scott on the pegs fixed to the flat. The original gun was not going to be used in the play that afternoon—you needed it for deadlier work."

Lawrence paused, then said quietly:

"You had your .25 Colt. You went into the box you had booked for the atinee. You levelled the .25 at the stuffed bear and put a bullet into the animal's mouth."

In the silence that followed, Lawrence lowered his head. He said wearily:

"You didn't need a silencer. The building was deserted. And the night watchman was insensible. You were safe enough.

"But it was tricky work. You needed all your skill as a marksman. You had to place the shot exactly. Its presence must not be detected until after the murder. The bullet hole had to be invisible: safe from passing eyes."

"An error now would force you to abandon the plan. But—." Lawrence opened his hand, then closed it. "You made no error. Lesley's fate had been decided. You could say she died then—many hours before you murdered her."

He paused, then continued:

"The night's work was quickly finished... You removed all traces of your presence.

"The .25 was a self-loading pistol—a so-called automatic. You had fired one shot and a cartridge case had been ejected. You picked up the empty shell and pocketed it. You had a final conference with Trent, then you left the theatre. You took the two guns with you—your .25 and the original .32.

"The substitute Webley had been left in its place on stage. Wix, Austin, Lesley herself—they all handled the duplicate without suspicion. It seemed to be the same revolver they had used every day since the play began.

“But, of course, the original gun was now in your possession. And when you brought it back to the theatre, there were six live bullets in the cylinder.”

Lawrence shaded his eyes.

He said bitterly:

“You needed a stooge. You picked on Stephen Castle. Trent had already obtained two tickets from an agency: you sent them to Scotland Yard. You baited the hook with an enigmatic message.

“Who thought of Paddington Fair? Trent, I fancy. He had been browsing through an old volume in the greenroom and he had chanced upon a description of the execution of the stage manager’s namesake. It was a pleasing coincidence which might serve as a red herring.

“And the messages themselves were apt enough. Lesley was to be executed in public... You had posted the cards on Friday night. One was addressed to Castle. The other went to Lesley.”

Lawrence sighed. “The stage was set. Trent prepared his alibi. He stayed clear of the theatre, then made a belated arrival on Saturday afternoon. He was feigning drunkenness. He meant to attract attention and keep it focused upon his movements.

“The plan worked well. Ben Cotall, his dresser, became a second shadow. And everyone else was watching Trent closely. He would be able to account for every second of the time he spent in the theatre. And the police would have to admit that he could not possibly have tampered with the revolver.”

Mervan smiled emptily.

Lawrence’s face hardened. “You were ready for the kill. You arrived at the theatre with your two guns and the empty cartridge case.”

“You dropped the spent shell on the floor of the box. You took the .25 pistol out of your pocket and placed it on the chair beside you.

“The curtain rose on Act Three. You withdrew the .32 revolver from another pocket. You thumbed down the hammer. And waited.”

Mervan’s eyes gleamed savagely. His fingers crooked into talons.

Lawrence looked away. He said:

“Trent fired his Webley & Scott—the duplicate gun which you had so carefully prepared. It contained harmless blanks. But at the same moment, you fired the original revolver—and sent a .32 bullet crashing through Lesley’s heart.”

A sick cry squirmed in Mervan’s throat.

Then he said hoarsely:

“Go on. Damn you! Go on.”

Lawrence was sombre. “The scene ended with a black-out. As the curtain fell, you tossed the revolver on to the stage. The cylinder had not rotated; the gun wasn’t cocked. There was only an exploded cartridge case in the chamber under the hammer, so there was no danger of an accidental shot.

“As you threw the gun, you laughed crazily. You meant to cover the sound of the revolver’s fall. And you wanted to attract attention to yourself: you meant to be caught. You hoped the Chief Inspector would arrest you.

“You snatched up the .25 pistol and turned to the door of the box. You weren’t trying to escape. You were waiting for Castle or for some other foolhardy member of the audience to make a bid to capture you.” Lawrence grinned wryly. “I came for you myself. You fired your .25. You weren’t trying to injure me: you intended the shot to go wide.”

Mervan muttered:

“Then why did I fire?”

Lawrence smiled tightly. “The weapon was cold. A routine test would have shown that it had not been used that afternoon. But you shot again—and then there was nothing to prove that the first bullet had in fact been fired into the bear’s head in the early hours of the morning.”

Mervan bit his lip.

Lawrence continued greyly:

“Meanwhile, Trent was playing his part well. He had fired a blank cartridge from the substitute revolver. That gun had to be hidden at once. As soon as the lights went out, he jammed the Webley into his pocket. You tossed the murder weapon on to the stage at his feet. He bent to retrieve it.

“That must have been a nasty moment. It was completely dark: he could see nothing. I can imagine him groping about in the blackness, fighting a rising panic. Then he put his hand on the revolver and clutched it by the butt, calling for the lights...”

Lawrence added reflectively:

“The S.M. might have put up the lights before Trent found the gun. But Michael could have claimed to have dropped it in a moment of fright...”

“His frantic scramble across the stage towards Lesley’s body was probably a cover-up for another task. A tell-tale piece of wadding had been blown out of the blank he had fired—it had to be found and hidden. It went into his pocket with the duplicate gun.

“The original Webley remained in his hand. You had handled the gun with care. It still retained some of Lesley’s prints. You had been wearing gloves which left only unidentifiable smudges. Trent covered those with his own prints, then passed the gun to Austin. There was nothing to show that it had ever been in your possession.

“Sooner or later, the revolver would be identified as the murder weapon. Meanwhile, Trent could use the delay to advantage.

“He had to dispose of the duplicate .32. No one must know what was in his pocket. That’s why he drove his dresser away with a curse. And that’s why he locked himself in his dressing-room and pretended to be sick.

“He found a temporary hiding-place for the gun in his dressing-room. It was safe enough. But he had to prevent an exhaustive search.

“That’s why six blank cartridges were planted in the fire bucket. Trent was perhaps over-cautious, but he reasoned like this: the police will think that the blanks were removed from the Webley to make room for the bullets. Therefore they will search for the blanks in the hope of finding them in the murderer’s possession.

“And a search, if prolonged, might uncover the hidden gun. So the missing blanks had to be easy to find.

“He planted six in the fire bucket. He need not have taken them out of the revolver. He could have taken them from the property room long before planting them that morning.

“But he still had to dispose of the gun. He dared not smuggle it out under the noses of the police. He decided to return to the theatre during the following night.

“It seemed the safest course. But he had bad luck. He recovered the gun from his dressing-room, but he was interrupted by the man we had left on guard. He clubbed Bailey with the revolver to save himself from identification. But he knew that danger still threatened.

“The police would assume that the murderer had returned to the theatre. They would probe for a motive. Trent had to keep our suspicions from turning in the right direction.

“He improvised brilliantly. He knew that his wife had hidden their marriage certificate behind his photograph in her dressing-room. He smashed the frame and deliberately left a scrap of the document behind. The rest of the certificate was to reach us by a roundabout route.

“You see, he didn’t have to keep the marriage a secret from the police. So long as we knew nothing of his partnership with you, it didn’t matter what other suspicions we entertained. Trent had an unbreakable alibi to protect him.

“He went to Denzil’s flat and pushed the certificate through the letter box. That was a clever move.”

Lawrence rubbed his cheek. “The next problem was to dispose of the gun and the key to the theatre. Trent didn’t know he had dropped his comb by Bailey’s body but he did know that he had to be ready for an instant investigation. He dared not hide such incriminating evidence in his flat. So he had to go elsewhere”

The young man sighed. “He had another—and secret—apartment. He was Penny’s lover; he had taken this other flat for her. But they were no longer using it: they had had to give up their secret meetings... It was quite deserted. Trent went there to hide the gun and the key. Then at last, he returned to his home. A policeman was waiting to take him to the Yard.

“Trent had only to play the part of an innocent man caught in a trap. His dupes—Penny, Denzil, and myself—went hurrying to his rescue.”

Lawrence laughed grimly. “Douglas thought he was working against Michael. Unwittingly, he was playing Trent’s game...”

“Denzil delayed matters with a clumsy attempt to blackmail Penny, but the marriage certificate reached us eventually—as Trent had expected. The burglary had been ‘explained’—and Denzil had brought suspicion upon himself.

“Trent was well content. His alibi would soon be proved and meanwhile he could win my confidence with a pose of frankness.” Lawrence’s mouth was hard. “He could afford to be completely frank about his part in the old bank robbery. There was no longer any evidence against him. And no witnesses: Lesley was dead—and you were silent.”

He scanned Mervan’s face. It was set like a mask.

Lawrence muttered:

“Together, you had plotted a murder. It was almost the perfect crime. You had invited suspicion in order to dispel it. The detectives themselves had established your alibis.”

He laughed harshly.

He continued:

“Trent would escape scot-free. As for you....”

Mervan stirred. He croaked:

“As for me?”

Lawrence shrugged. He said abruptly:

“You had had your revenge. And you were escaping the gallows. You didn’t care how long you had to spend in prison now. It was the safest hiding-place in the world.”

He paused, then went on: “And, of course, one day you would be free again. But—.”

“But?” The word was a whisper.

“Chance was to betray you. Chance—and a girl’s generous heart.”

Lawrence paused. He continued more briskly:

“You hadn’t intended to frame Jack Austin. But he had fallen under suspicion. And only Penny Valentine could clear him.

“But Penny wouldn’t speak until she was sure of Michael’s safety. She believed him innocent—and she meant to prove it. That’s why she persuaded me to stage a reconstruction of the crime. And once the police had been forced to admit that Michael couldn’t be guilty, she was ready to save Austin too.

“But she had made a tragic mistake. Unwittingly, she had betrayed her lover.”

Lawrence bit his lip. He said sombrely:

“Once the problem had been fairly stated, I was bound to find the solution. And Penny herself gave me the essential clue.”

Lawrence shook his head. He said with regret:

“I should have seen the answer before. I ought to have wondered why you were still at the door of the box. You could have escaped minutes before—under cover of the black-out—through a nearby exit to the street. And a man who knew something about Judo should have been able to counter my attack. I should have realised that you wanted to be captured.”

Mervan smiled faintly.

Lawrence went on:

“And nothing could really explain the monstrous coincidence of two independent attempts on Lesley’s life. Oh, I tried to rationalise it—as you meant me to. I created a phantom—a master-mind—a puppet-master.” He grinned wryly. I spoke of such a man to Castle on our way to the theatre last night. And I was thinking of Victor Friern: he could have seen you at the

ticket window from his office when you were looking your box for the atinee. Ah, well!” He sighed ruefully. He continued:

“That theory was soon forgotten. Penny herself showed me the truth.

“She took Lesley’s place in the reconstruction. I watched her back away from the gun in Trent’s hand. Like Lesley, she stood with her back to the stuffed bear, her body almost within the animal’s grasp. The rod which marked the passage of the .25 bullet into the bear’s mouth was brushing lightly over the top of Penny’s head...

“And that was the essential clue! Penny is five feet three inches tall. The dead woman was five feet seven.

“Lesley could not have been standing in front of the bear when you fired the .25 automatic. Those extra inches would have brought her into the path of the bullet. Instead of passing harmlessly over her head, the bullet would have crashed into her skull.”

Defeat showed greyly in Mervan’s face. He closed his eyes.

Lawrence said sadly:

“Once I realised that, the whole crime was within grasp. Sitting in the deserted theatre, watching an empty stage, I peopled it with phantoms. You and Trent and Lesley: you all played your parts.”

Incredibly, Mervan smiled. “A command performance.”

He brooded, then asked:

“The Valentine girl—what made her return?”

Lawrence replied:

“She had learned the truth, too.”

“In God’s name—how?”

Lawrence sighed. “Michael had taken another flat—I told you about that. Penny still had a key, of course. She left the theatre and went to their apartment. She ‘phoned for Michael. She was deliriously happy. She wanted her lover. And then—.”

“Yes?”

Lawrence said dully:

“She found the key to the theatre. Some ammunition. And the .32 Webley & Scott.”

He shuddered. “I don’t like to think of that moment. It was the end of the world for Penny. She saw the truth at last. Michael was a murderer. And she had put the rope around his neck.

“I was the man she feared. She knew I must inevitably discover the truth. But she meant to save Michael if she could.”

“She crammed some bullets into the revolver and hurried back to the theatre. She made a desperate attempt to persuade me that Lesley had committed suicide—the only other possible solution to the crime. She failed. When she realised I knew the truth, she made her final bid to save her lover. She tried to kill me.”

Lawrence shaded his eyes. “I can’t blame her for that. She loved him, you see.”

He looked up. His voice grew stronger. “But Michael loved her too. And he wouldn’t let her risk death—or damnation...”

“Trent had reached the flat to find her gone. The gun was missing. So was the key to the theatre. He guessed she had gone to the Janus. He followed.

“I can find it in my heart to admire him. Penny was about to send a bullet crashing through my neck. Michael must have guessed why she wanted to kill me. But he wouldn’t let her destroy herself for his sake. He knocked the revolver out of her hand.”

Lawrence lifted his shoulders. “Finis.”

The travesty of a smile distorted Mervan’s lips. He said tonelessly:

“You have yet to prove your theory.”

Lawrence shrugged again. “I leave that to the police. They have the duplicate revolver. And Trent will probably confess to protect Penny. Nothing will be said about her attempt on my life. I shall see to that.”

Mervan’s voice was emotionless. “And Trent will implicate me.”

Lawrence smiled humourlessly. “And we have your own confession. It omits important details. But it’s true enough for all that.”

Mervan showed his teeth in a death’s-head grin. “It will be an interesting trial.”

Lawrence opened his hand.

He said dully:

“That’s all, then. I may as well go.”

But he made no move.

Richard Mervan said slowly:

“I suppose I ought to hate you. But I feel only a sensation of mild curiosity.”

He gazed at Lawrence squarely. “This is an unofficial visit—one that breaks all the rules. You didn’t come here to trap me into a confession.”

“No.”

“Why, then?”

Lawrence licked his lips. “There’s something—I want to know...”

His voice faded.

He stumbled on. “I thought perhaps—you could tell me....”

“Yes?”

Lawrence finished in a whisper:

“What makes a killer kill?”

Mervan’s face was a mask.

He muttered:

“The spirit of murder sleeps in everyone’s heart. Once awakened—.”

He gestured emptily.

He said, more strongly:

“I can tell you this. I destroyed myself before I killed.”

Darkness gathered in the cell. Mervan’s voice was a flickering flame. “I had to have my revenge. But then I was left with—nothing.

“I was no longer a man. I was just an empty shell.”

He said hollowly:

“Revenge isn’t sweet. It’s only futile.”

He added strangely:

“Remember that.”

Lawrence inclined his head. He stood up slowly, easing cramped limbs. He went to the door and called for a warder.

He left the cell without looking back.

APPENDIX

Hidetoshi Mori on Derek Smith
Tony Medawar on Derek Smith
Nigel Moss on Derek Smith

Hidetoshi Mori on Derek Smith

I met Derek Smith for the first time in June 1994 at the antiquarian book fair held in the Hotel Russell in London. I had been talking to a book dealer specialising in mystery fiction, who told me about Derek, who lived in London and would be attending the fair later. He introduced us, and Derek and I discussed our favourite topic—locked room mysteries—over coffee. When I told him that I had quite enjoyed his locked room novel (*Whistle up the Devil*, 1953), he informed me that there was another Algy Lawrence novel which had not been published, entitled *Come to Paddington Fair*.

It became customary for me to visit that same book fair every year, up to and including 1997. After that year, my workload in Japan became heavy; I've never been abroad since and I doubt that I ever shall (I must read and review more than 200 books every year for various magazines.) It was in 1996, I think, that Derek gave me a Xerox copy of *Come to Paddington Fair* and also a copy of a Sexton Blake novel *Model Murder**, which had never been published either. At the time, he expressed his hope that *Come to Paddington Fair* would be published some day. After I returned to Japan, I read the manuscript and thought it a masterpiece—even better than his first book. I wrote to Derek to say that I would like to publish it in Japan if he could not find a publisher in England or USA. Thus the book was published in the spring of 1997 by Susumu Kobayashi, who edited and created the layout of the book, and myself. The production was limited to 80 copies because publication costs were very expensive here in Tokyo: 45 copies were sent to Derek (which went to his friends and fellow collectors) and 35 copies remained in Japan (which went to fellow locked room fans here.)

Towards the end of May of that year, he sent me a letter saying: "You and your friend S. Kobayashi deserve the highest praise for the way you have produced my book. It's almost exactly the way I visualized in my daydreams of a private publication these last forty years—"Thirties style but with modern improvements: slightly larger than usual paperbacks, but easy and comfortable to hold. The paper is excellent, the binding sturdy, and the print size fine for smoothly easy reading. The pagination (270 plus) is just right, the stiff paper binding fine and intriguingly decorated and your paper

jacket nicely designed with a appropriately drawn "Curtain" motif. Altogether a splendid piece of work. I can only hope readers find the story as intriguing." I myself designed the paper jacket he mentioned and was happy to hear that he liked it.

After the book was published, Derek remembered that I had suggested a Queen-style Challenge to the Reader, and regretted that he hadn't inserted one at the end of Part Two of the book. He suggested it be worded: "The reader is respectfully requested to PAUSE FOR REFLECTION—and play the great game of Whodunit? and How?"

Readers may wonder why we did not publish *Model Murder** at the same time as *Come to Paddington Fair*. It was simply because the novel was based on a character not created by Derek Smith! Although it would have been quite easy to get permission to publish from Derek, we weren't sure whether we had the right to publish a novel based on a character not created by the author (You may imagine the situation of Sherlock Holmes or Hercules Poirot parodies and pastiches these days.)

Hidetoshi Mori

Tokyo, June 2014

**Editor's note:*

There is some question over the precise title, see page 616

Tony Medawar on Derek Smith

I met Derek Howe Smith at Bouchercon XXI, at London in 1990, where our mutual friend, Bob Adey, was the Fan Guest of Honor. Derek was an absorbing companion, full of anecdotes about the many famous detective story writers with whom he had corresponded or met and gifted with the ability to recall in precise detail the many, many books in the genre he had read, however well-known or obscure. Though some 40 years apart in age, we quickly established a shared enthusiasm for John Dickson Carr, the American writer so aptly described as the “King of Misdirection” by none other than Agatha Christie, and Derek revealed that he had had the good fortune to see the original production of one of Carr’s wartime stage plays, “Inspector Silence Takes the Air.” I had recently discovered the script of this and three other plays by Carr in an obscure archive at the British Library so I was able to give Derek a copy of the script of the play which he told me he had thought about “for nearly fifty years”. It was Derek’s idea that the scripts should be collected together and published, as they eventually were by Douglas Greene’s company Crippen and Landru. Sadly Derek did not live to see what he had rightly envisaged would be received by Carr’s many enthusiasts as “a magnificent treat”.

Derek was absolutely delighted to have the opportunity to read once more the script of “Inspector Silence Takes the Air” and, in return, he generously gave me a copy of the first edition of his own novel “Whistle up the Devil,” an ingenious locked room mystery that was Derek’s homage to our favourite writer. Ever the perfectionist, when he gave me the novel, Derek pointed out a corrigendum he had tipped in clarifying one aspect of the solution, which he had realised was ambiguous only on reading the published text. He did the same thing some years later when giving me a copy of the 1st edition of his novel *Come to Paddington Fair*, in which he had marked a number of minor typesetting errors and included a Challenge to the Reader of the kind made popular by Ellery Queen. Derek’s interest in the construction of plots made him an ideal person to discuss ideas with and in the mid 1990s he advised me how to handle a key element of the plot of a locked room mystery I was then writing, indeed still am writing. Like many fans of detective fiction, I carry numerous plots in my head—truly

ingenious problems with even more ingenious solutions. But, like many fans of detective fiction, I have not yet committed any of these self-judged masterpieces to paper. We can therefore be grateful that Derek was able to do what so many of us find difficult and not only thought up delightful problems, steeped in the Golden Age, but found the time to turn those thoughts into words with the result that today, many years after his death, Derek Smith is still able to challenge us to play “the great game of Whodunit? and How?”.

Tony Medawar

London, June 2014

Editor's note: The dedication to Tony Medawar's copy of *Come to Paddington Fair* reads:

“To Tony Medawar—incomparable finder of lost treasures—this surviving trifle from the vanished world of the early Nineteen Fifties—from a fellow devotee of the Master

(signed) Derek Smith”

Nigel Moss on Derek Smith

I was first introduced to Derek at a book fair in London in the late 1990's by Mori-san, a prominent Japanese collector. It was around the time that Mori had published *Come to Paddington Fair* in the Japanese private press first edition. Below is a letter to me from him, dated September 1998:

“Dear Nigel Moss,

I hope you will forgive my long delay in replying to your letters. I have no real excuse – it’s just that my winter blues seem to have lasted through the summer, and I have neglected everything.

However, here at last are the bits and pieces for you to add to your copy of COME TO PADDINGTON FAIR. There are only thirty to forty copies of the book in the Western half of the world—who knows, they may become collector’s items! I shall be eternally grateful to Mr. Mori and his friend S. Kobayashi for recuing the novel from obscurity.

I personalized all the copies that went through my hands – all signed, and most with individual inscriptions. The enclosed should do the same for your copy.

(one) the title page, to be inserted before the dedication to John Dickson Carr

(two) the inscription page, to go opposite the CONTENTS leaf, with a specially composed piece of doggerel which I hope will amuse you, and

(three) a polite “challenge to the reader” which goes before Part Three, page 252.

In addition, I sealed up that portion of the book, following JDC’s own practice with his earliest novels.

With some hesitation, I enclose a further fragment from my youth: circa 1948, on my first typewriter, when I was happily hammering out any story that popped into my head for the fun of it. Needless to say, none were published, and most have vanished, though fragments sometimes appear in my old personal papers, mostly of yarns I thought might be revised or

expanded. Paradoxically, this one has survived in near pristine condition because I thought it too feeble to send anywhere! I thought it might amuse you now as a curiosity—the carbon has long since disintegrated, so the item may be awful, but at least it's unique.

With very best wishes,

(signed) Derek Smith

P.S. I'm keeping an eye open for the books on your wants list, but so far without success. I'll keep looking. D.S.”

Nigel Moss

London, January 2014

Editor's note: The “fragment” alluded to in the letter is a short story entitled “The Imperfect Crime,” which appears on page 617. The dedication to Nigel's copy of *Come to Paddington Fair* reads:

“To Nigel Moss—with many thanks for his kind interest in my stories.

(signed) Derek Smith

Miracle murders, well designed
May drive a sleuth out of his mind!
So turn the key in puzzle's lock—
The truth may tease, surprise or shock:
When night's black agents shroud the way
Then Reason pure will light the day”