

Dolores GORDON-SMITH

*A Jack Haldean
Mystery*

Off the
Record

"Glamour, romance, suspense, style, and charm - sure to appeal."
Booklist Starred Review on *A Hundred Thousand Dragons*.

A FETE WORSE THAN DEATH
MAD ABOUT THE BOY
AS IF BY MAGIC
A HUNDRED THOUSAND DRAGONS *
OFF THE RECORD *

** available from Severn House*

OFF THE RECORD

A Jack Haldean Mystery

Dolores Gordon-Smith



This first world edition published 2010
in Great Britain and in 2011 in the USA by
SEVERN HOUSE PUBLISHERS LTD of
9–15 High Street, Sutton, Surrey, England, SM1 1DF.

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Gordon-Smith, Dolores.

Off the record.

1. Haldean, Jack (Fictitious character) – Fiction.
2. Murder – Investigation – Fiction. 3. Detective and mystery stories.

I. Title

823.9'2-dc22

ISBN-13: 978-0-7278-6974-6 (cased)

ISBN-13: 978-1-8475-1304-5 (trade paper)

ISBN-13: 978-1-7801-0001-2 (e-book)

Except where actual historical events and characters are being described for the storyline of this novel, all situations in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to living persons is purely coincidental.

This ebook produced by
Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire, Scotland.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

In 1877, the thirty-year-old American genius, Thomas Edison, recited the nursery rhyme, *Mary Had a Little Lamb*, into a mouthpiece attached to his new invention, a tinfoil covered cylinder he called 'phonograph'. He finished the nursery rhyme, rotated the cylinder – and his own voice spoke back to him. Edison had invented recorded sound.

The early tinfoil phonographs had many limitations. The foil ripped easily and was impossible to copy. What *could* be copied – what, in fact, started the recorded music industry – was the gramophone and record, invented in 1887 by Emil Berliner. Berliner's gramophone records were simple to play, cheaper to make and much louder than Edison's cylinders.

Oddly enough, had Berliner's gramophones not been so spectacularly successful, tape recording might have become the norm much earlier. Valdemar Poulsen, a Danish inventor, made the first 'tape machine' (he actually recorded on to fine wire) in the 1890s, but it was the gramophone, with its boxy wind-up handle and horn, that became one of the iconic objects of the early twentieth century.

The gramophone was seized on by literally hundreds of manufacturers and it's virtually impossible to say how many different types, from the tiny MikiPhone, the size of a large pocket watch, to luxurious models in lavishly-made wooden cabinets, were produced. It seemed impossible that anything could replace the gramophone in the home.

Then, in the early 1920s, came radio. Records, which were recorded by a refined version of the method Edison had worked out forty-odd years earlier, suddenly sounded flat, tired and outdated. To survive at all, gramophone manufacturers had to face the challenge and radically improve the sound. The challenge was met by electrical recording and reproduction, and the race to produce a workable electrical recording system is what lies behind the story of *Off the Record*.

It was the summer of 1899 when Charles Otterbourne first came to Stoke Horam. Charles Otterbourne was thirty-six years old, an earnest, if rather humourless man, with a great deal of money and a strong philanthropic urge.

He walked through Horam Woods, crossed the stepping-stones over the river Lynn at the bottom of the valley and up the gentle slope to the unremarkable Hertfordshire hamlet of Stoke Horam. Neither the village, with its twenty-two agricultural labourers' cottages, or the green with its grazing geese pecking beneath the washing hung out to dry, had anything to detain him, so Charles continued up the slope to the thirteenth century and mercifully unrestored church of St Joseph of Arimathea.

The church itself made little appeal to him; Charles had strict Evangelical views and found no pleasure in ancient stones, but the view from the churchyard changed his life.

St Joseph's stood on a knoll, some distance from Stoke Horam, commanding a view of hedged-rolling fields of grain and pasture and stands of trees. An occasional line of smoke and a distant whoosh of steam marked out the line of the Eastern Counties Railway.

Sitting on that windswept gravestone, sandwiches from his knapsack uneaten in his hand, Charles Otterbourne had a vision. He had visited Thomas Edison's famous Invention Factory in New Jersey, a vast scientific complex of laboratories, factories and buildings. He couldn't do anything on that scale of course, but he could do *something*. His own village supported by his own factory, could easily be connected to the world by a branch line to that railway. New century, new railways, new roads, new beginnings . . .

By 1924, Charles Otterbourne's transformation of Stoke Horam was so complete, it was difficult to remember life before he arrived.

Otterbourne's New Century Works produced scientific and optical instruments, typewriters, telephones, dictating machines and gramophones but, perhaps dearer to Charles Otterbourne's heart than the factory, was the village.

The farm labourers' cottages – picturesque but insanitary – were hemmed in by Ideal Home complete with plumbing, gardens and – a stunning innovation – electricity from the Otterbourne generator. The tiny post office which, in Stoke Horam's previous incarnation, had also acted as a general store, tobacconists and sweet-shop, had expanded into separate establishments in a new parade of shops along the High Street and had been joined by a grocer's, a butcher's, an ironmonger's, haberdasher's, a draper's and a fishmonger's.

There were allotments and a non-conformist chapel. There were tennis courts, a sports field, Workman's Institute for lectures and concerts and the Otterbourne library. The library boasted a marble bust of Charles Otterbourne himself, complete with laurel leaves and an off-the-shoulder toga erected, so the plaque underneath it said, by his grateful employees. If the gift of the bust was not quite as spontaneous as the plaque indicated, it was, nevertheless, sincere.

An innovation Charles Otterbourne had not planned was the War Memorial, listing, among the dead, his two sons, Alfred and Robert. A tombstone in the chapel graveyard covered the grave of his wife, Edith, who had died soon after her sons.

If life in Stoke Horam under Charles Otterbourne's benevolent rule had a fault it was, perhaps, that all this undoubted well-being came at the expense of a certain amount of liberty. Charles Otterbourne saw this as a virtue, not a failing. People needed to be organized. He applied this rule impartially

his own family and his employees alike.

When his daughter, Molly, had shown a worrying interest in an unsuitable man (Justin Verewood, workshy Bloomsbury poet) he had organized her marriage by forbidding Verewood and heavily approving of Stephen Lewis, a fair-haired, grey-eyed, intelligent man with an engaging smile and a wicked sense of humour. Mr Otterbourne, who hadn't registered the smile and was oblivious to the humour, only knew that Captain Lewis, lately of the Queen's Royal West Surrey's, had an outstanding war record and good grasp of business. The marriage was, of course, a success. Molly said as much when he asked her.

One common feature of English village life – the local pub – was missing. Charles Otterbourne had been very early on, identified betting and alcohol as twin evils. Drink and any form of gambling earned instant dismissal. There was no redress. For those workers who did conform to his philanthropic tyranny, there was a well-paid job, a decent home, a doctor on call and provision, in the form of the compulsory pension fund, for their old age.

The pension fund. Hugo Ragnall, Charles Otterbourne's secretary, looked uneasily at the eggs and bacon on his plate. Why on earth he had taken eggs and bacon from the dishes on the sideboard, he didn't know. Habit, he presumed. Fried bread, too, he realized with a twist of revulsion. The smell made his stomach churn and he abruptly pushed his plate away.

'Are you all right, Hugo?' asked Molly. 'You don't seem quite yourself this morning.'

Not quite himself? That wasn't a surprise. *She doesn't know about the pension fund.* 'I'm fine,' he lied, forcing himself to drink his coffee. Molly heard the break in his voice and her puzzled look changed to concern.

She was a kindly soul, thought Ragnall, seeing the look. His heart sank as he thought of Molly. She would be caught up in the whole stinking mess and there was absolutely nothing he could do. 'I didn't sleep very well last night,' he said, knowing he had to respond somehow or other.

And that was true. It had been past one o'clock before he had finished work last night and what he had found hadn't made for a restful night.

Steve Lewis, Molly's husband, rustled the newspaper. 'That's too bad,' he remarked over the top of the *Daily Telegraph*. 'Mr Otterbourne wants you to enthuse to this Dunbar chap today. Tell him how wonderful we are and all that sort of thing. I still think Dunbar's someone to treat with caution,' he added.

Oh, good God! Ragnall had forgotten about Dunbar. It could have been the war or increased taxes or cheap foreign imports or simply the fact that philanthropy on a grand scale cost far more than it used to, but the stark fact was that Otterbourne's New Century products weren't the money-spinners they once were. They needed to expand and Charles Otterbourne had approached Andrew Dunbar, a gramophone manufacturer from Falkirk, with useful connections in Scotland and the north of England. It made good commercial sense for the two companies to come together and Dunbar, as far as Ragnall could make out, was interested. The price he had quoted though was pretty hefty, far more than the size of his firm justified. He had, to summarize his letter, something up his sleeve, something that would change the whole future of recorded sound. Steve's advice had been to look elsewhere. Dunbar, he said, had a reputation as a very tough customer indeed.

Charles Otterbourne was intrigued, however, and asked for more details. The something up Dunbar's sleeve turned out to be Professor Alan Carrington.

And that, tantalizingly, was as much information as Andrew Dunbar was willing to commit to a letter. He was arriving that morning, complete with Professor Carrington and the Professor's son Gerard.

‘Professor Carrington?’ Steve Lewis had said with interest, when he had been told of the proposed visit. ‘Dunbar may be on to something after all. Professor Carrington’s a relative of mine. Our families quarrelled years ago, so I’ve never actually met him, but he’s something fairly fruity in the science line. As far as I can gather, the Professor’s a genius, or next door to it, at any rate. I’ve run across his son, Gerry, a few times. He’s a scientific type too, but quite human. I don’t know what either of them are doing, tied up with a second-rate outfit like Dunbar’s.’

Lewis folded up his newspaper, scraped his chair back, and felt in his pocket for his pipe.

‘Not in here, Steve,’ pleaded Molly. ‘It makes the room smell so.’

Lewis laughed. ‘All right.’ He inclined his head towards Ragnall. ‘D’you fancy a pipe outside, old man?’

Ragnall stood up, grateful for a chance to escape the breakfast table. The two men walked out on to the terrace and down the steps into the garden.

‘What’s wrong?’ asked Lewis quietly, taking out his tobacco pouch. ‘You look done in.’ He hesitated. ‘You haven’t come unstuck on the horses again, have you? You needn’t worry, Ragnall. I’ll see you’re all right. You know I’ll always give you a hand.’

Ragnall very nearly smiled. ‘No, it’s nothing like that. It’s damn good of you though, Lewis. I do appreciate your help, but it’s nothing to do with horses or cards or anything like that.’ He swallowed. ‘It’s a lot more serious than that.’

Steve Lewis’s eyebrows shot up. ‘*More* serious? What the devil is it?’

‘I can’t tell you here,’ said Ragnall with a glance back at the house. ‘Let’s get further away.’

Lewis looked surprised but said nothing until they reached the sundial. Ragnall took a deep breath and, gripping the bowl of the sundial, braced his arms. This was going to be hard.

‘Do you like Mr Otterbourne?’ he asked eventually.

Lewis looked startled. ‘Of course I do.’ He glanced towards the house. It was a solid Edwardian building, long, low and comfortable in the sunshine. Ranged along the terrace, which ran the length of the house, were French windows, opening on to the various rooms. The room at the end was Charles Otterbourne’s study and, brief against the glass, a dark movement showed them Charles Otterbourne himself. ‘Besides that you’d be on to a hiding to nothing if you started finding fault with the man. There was a cynical twist in his voice. ‘The marble bust of him in the library was erected, so the plaque says, by his grateful employees. That tells you something. He’s universally beloved.’

‘Why?’ asked Ragnall quietly.

‘Why?’ Steve Lewis raised his eyebrows again. ‘You know as well as I do.’

‘Just tell me.’

‘You’re being very mysterious about this, Ragnall,’ Lewis complained. He shrugged. ‘All right since you insist.’ He put a match to his pipe. ‘He’s a good man.’ Ragnall’s silence invited further comment. ‘OK, I admit it. I find him a bit hard to take sometimes. He knows what’s good for us and makes sure we get it, good and strong, but I’ll say this for him. He practises what he preaches.’

‘Are you sure?’

Lewis looked puzzled. ‘Yes.’

It was no wonder Lewis looked puzzled, thought Ragnall. He drew a deep, juddering breath. ‘He’s a crook.’

‘He’s a *what*?’

Ragnall swallowed. ‘I’ve been going through the accounts.’ He ran his hand through his hair. ‘I’ve been meaning to sort them out for months. That old dodderer who was here before me left things in a dickens of a mess. I don’t think they’ve ever been properly tackled.’

‘What’s the problem?’

‘It’s the pension fund,’ said Ragnall wearily. ‘I don’t know how to tell you, but it’s a fact. I know the company’s gone through a rough patch, which probably explains it, but Mr Otterbourne has been taking money from the pension fund.’

There was a moment’s shocked silence. Steve Lewis froze, his eyes wide, then swallowed a mouthful of smoke the wrong way and broke out in a fusillade of coughing. ‘You old devil,’ he said, gasping for breath. ‘You had me going for a moment there. You looked so damn serious I nearly believed you.’

‘It’s true.’

‘Drop it, won’t you?’ said Lewis, glancing uneasily round the garden. ‘I know you’re pulling my leg but it’s not really very funny, you know.’

Hugo Ragnall sighed deeply. ‘I’m serious. The pension fund isn’t Mr Otterbourne’s money. Everyone who’s ever worked here has contributed to it and the fund is virtually empty. There’s enough in it to pay the weekly outgoings, but that’s it. The capital behind it, the capital built up over years has vanished.’

‘You must be mistaken.’

‘I’m not!’ Ragnall lowered his voice urgently. ‘I tell you, Mr Otterbourne’s embezzled the fund. His signature’s on the cheques. I believed in him, you know?’ he said bitterly. ‘And he’s nothing but a hypocrite. A damned, white-haired, pompous old hypocrite.’

Lewis was pale. He was obviously finding it hard to speak. ‘It’s unbelievable,’ he said eventually. ‘Have you said anything to him? What’s his explanation?’

Ragnall looked horribly uncomfortable. ‘I don’t know. I took the accounts into the study before breakfast. I said there was a matter I needed to discuss but I simply couldn’t bring myself to speak. He was sitting there, looking – oh, looking so blinking *saintly* – that I just couldn’t find the words. He said, “Ah, Ragnall, the accounts,” and that was more or less it.’

Lewis put his hand to his mouth. ‘We’ll have to talk to him this evening,’ he said after a while. ‘Both of us. We can’t do anything before then, not with Dunbar and the Carringtons coming.’

Ragnall winced. ‘No, we can’t. If he could pay it back, then perhaps it’ll be all right, but there’s nearly seventeen thousand pounds missing and I know he hasn’t got that sort of money spare. The firm’s in a bad way, Lewis. Since the war, it’s hardly broken even. It looks prosperous, but it isn’t.’ He was silent for a few moments. ‘I don’t know how I’m going to get through today. I can’t bear the thought of facing him with this hanging over us.’

Lewis sank his hands in his pockets. ‘It’s tough, isn’t it?’ he said after a pause. ‘I wish I could disappear for the day. You too, of course. You haven’t any ideas, have you?’

‘There’s always your Uncle Maurice,’ said Ragnall slowly.

Lewis snapped his fingers. ‘That’s it! Uncle Maurice! Of course! He’s still ill, ill enough to warrant a visit.’ He looked up with a relieved smile. ‘Well done. I’ll think of something for you.’ Lewis glanced towards the study. ‘I’ll have to tell Mr Otterbourne what we’re doing. Go round to the garage and get into the car. I’ll drop you off at the station.’

Lewis went up the steps into the study. Charles Otterbourne looked up as he came into the room. ‘Ah, there you are, Stephen. I’ve been studying an article by Professor Carrington.’ He tapped the papers on the desk in front of him. ‘Did I understand you to say the Professor is a relation of yours?’

‘Yes, that’s right,’ said Lewis. His glance slid across the room to where the accounts lay in a manila file on the table. Did Charles Otterbourne have the slightest idea of what they contained? ‘As I said before, I’ve never actually met him. There was a family disagreement, you understand?’ His voice wavered.

deliberately casual. 'I've run across his son, Gerry, a few times. According to Gerry, the Professor is nothing short of a genius. Apparently he's a real absent-minded scientist and has the dickens of a temper.'

Mr Otterbourne looked startled. 'That sounds rather alarming. I trust we will get on well enough. Mr Dunbar hasn't given me any details of Professor Carrington's work in his letter, but says I am bound to be interested.' He obviously didn't have an inkling of the bombshell contained in that man's folder. 'I was going to send the car to the station but perhaps you would like to meet them instead.'

Lewis tried to look stricken. 'I'm sorry, sir, but I won't be here. I've had a letter from my Uncle Maurice's housekeeper. Apparently his chest is very bad again and I thought I'd run down and see him.'

Mr Otterbourne was clearly put out. 'That is very inconvenient, Stephen.'

'Oh, I don't know, sir,' said Lewis easily. 'After all, you don't really need me and poor old Uncle Maurice is pretty ill, you know.'

Charles Otterbourne's lips thinned. 'As you wish.' He turned his head dismissively. 'Ask Ragnall to come here.'

His tone, the autocratic tone of a monarch dispensing with his subjects, suddenly irritated Lewis. 'Ragnall's out for the day, too, I'm afraid.' Mr Otterbourne looked downright affronted. 'He seemed very seedy at breakfast,' Lewis explained rapidly. 'Molly was concerned about him. He told me he'd slept very badly and thought he might be coming down with something. I thought of packing him off to bed, but he said he'd rather not. I didn't think he was in any fit condition to talk to either Mr Dunbar or the Carringtons, so I asked him to go along to Stansfields, the timber people. He's already left.'

Mr Otterbourne drew himself up. 'I should have been consulted first. You have overstepped your authority, Stephen. In future I would ask you to remember that Ragnall is not here to come and go on your say-so.' He frowned. 'Stansfields? We've not dealt with them before.'

'No, but their quote was substantially lower than White and Millwood's.'

Charles Otterbourne steepled his fingers together. 'Quality needs to be paid for. That is one of our guiding principles. We cannot cut corners. You say Ragnall has actually left?'

'Yes, sir,' Lewis said. 'You wouldn't have wanted him around today. He was really under the weather.'

'I would have liked to have judged that for myself. I am not at all pleased.' He frowned at Lewis over the top of his pince-nez. 'If you are going to see your uncle, you'd better be off. Do you intend to return this evening?'

'Oh yes,' said Lewis, involuntarily glancing once more towards the folder. He swallowed. 'I don't think I've got any choice.'

Professor Alan Carrington was, thought Molly, one of the most alarming men she had ever met. Although his name was English enough, there was a sort of foreign arrogance about him, a scarred down-at-heel but aristocratic foreign arrogance. Like Count Dracula, she said to herself and immediately wished she hadn't. Professor Carrington would make anyone nervous without thinking of vampires. He was tall and spare with high cheekbones, a beaky nose, brilliant blue eyes and nervous thin hands that were continually in motion. His tweed jacket and grey flannels were shapeless with age, the pockets distended with papers, and bagged at the knee and elbow. Hamilton, the butler, took his shabby hat and coat with a barely perceptible lift of his eyebrows, but it was clear that he thought his master's latest guest was a very odd fish indeed.

The Professor was abstracted and irritated to the point of rudeness by the conventional pleasantries. He was clearly far more interested in a wooden crate, about the size of a tea chest, which Eckersley, the chauffeur, together with Gerard Carrington, carried into the hall. He stood by it defensively, arms folded across his chest, Gerard Carrington and Andrew Dunbar on either side.

It was while Charles Otterbourne was sketching out the day – tour of the factory, tour of the village, lunch – the Professor shook himself impatiently and cut Mr Otterbourne off in mid-sentence. 'Are you going to buy Dunbar's firm?'

Charles Otterbourne, for once taken completely aback, stammered to a halt. 'I . . . er . . .'

'You can't ask things like that, Dad,' said Gerry Carrington, completely unruffled by his father's abruptness. Dunbar, a short, stout man, pulled at his moustache in a deprecating way. His eyes, Molly noticed, were fixed on her father. In the face of Professor Carrington's overwhelming personality, it was difficult to think of anyone else, but Molly was suddenly aware she didn't like Mr Dunbar. Steve said he had a tough reputation, but she also sensed coldness about him, a wary, calculating quality. If her father did do business with Mr Dunbar, he would have to be very careful he didn't come out the loser from the deal.

'Well,' demanded Professor Carrington. 'Are you?'

Charles Otterbourne coughed in a bring-the-meeting-to-order way. It had never failed to obtain respectful silence but it failed now.

'Because if you are, I suggest you cease to waste any more time and examine my machine forthwith.'

'Your machine?' queried Mr Otterbourne.

'Yes, sir, my machine!' the Professor barked. He put his hand on the wooden crate. 'This machine. Great heavens, sir, you do know what I'm talking about, I presume?' In the face of Charles Otterbourne's blank enquiry, he whirled on Andrew Dunbar. 'I understood this man was interested in my work. He seems completely ignorant of it.'

Andrew Dunbar's accent, that unmistakable Edinburgh twang, grew stronger under stress. 'You cannot talk to Mr Otterbourne in that fashion, Professor. You ken these things are not decided in minutes.'

'Exactly,' agreed Charles Otterbourne gratefully. 'I shall be more than happy, Professor, to examine your machine.' His gaze dropped to the crate. 'You will understand, I trust, that I cannot possibly give a decision on these far-reaching commercial matters without careful examination of all the possible implications.' Alan Carrington sighed mutinously and folded his arms again. 'What does you

machine actually do?’

‘It records and plays sound, sir!’

‘But we—’

‘Electronically!’ Professor Carrington ran an impatient hand through his hair. ‘It utilizes electronics.’

‘It’s unlike any other machine,’ murmured Dunbar.

Alan Carrington ignored the interruption. ‘I wish to know with whom I am dealing. If, sir, you are to be responsible for the money necessary to develop my machine, naturally you have a right to understand exactly how it works and what its capabilities are. If you are not, I will bid you good-day.’

‘Steady on,’ said Gerard Carrington easily. ‘You can’t go marching off, Dad. We’ve only just arrived.’ He smiled, a warm, friendly smile.

Molly caught her breath. Gerard Carrington had curly brown hair, mild blue eyes, rumpled clothes and gold-rimmed glasses and Molly suddenly realized he was a very attractive man.

Gerard Carrington must have heard her little intake of breath, for he turned to her as if eliciting her support. He pushed his glasses firmly on to the bridge of his nose with his index finger. ‘I know Steve’s been called away, Mrs Lewis, but I suppose we’re relatives too, in a manner of speaking, aren’t we?’ He smiled once more. ‘After all, Steve’s my cousin. As a matter of fact, as we are relations, I suppose you should call me Gerry. Everyone does.’

Molly couldn’t help smiling in return. ‘Of course I will. And you must call me Molly.’

Gerry looked at his father again. ‘You see, Dad? We can’t go yet. We’re with members of the family, and it would be very bad manners. Besides that, Mr Otterbourne wants to show us the factory and the village and so on, don’t you, sir?’

Mr Otterbourne was about to answer but Alan Carrington beat him to it. ‘Why on earth should I want to see the factory, let alone the village? I presume, sir, as you are a gramophone manufacturer you are capable of manufacturing my machine. That is all I need to know.’

‘Let me have a word with Mr Otterbourne, Professor,’ said Andrew Dunbar in a conciliatory way. He drew Mr Otterbourne aside further up the hall. Professor Carrington scuffed his feet and taking his pipe from his pocket, stuffed it with an untidy wedge of tobacco, lit it, and dropped the match on the floor. Gerard Carrington looked at Molly in a resigned plea for understanding that seemed to make them allies. She liked the feeling. Molly heard phrases such as *difficult*, *genius* and *truly extraordinary*, in the mutter of words along the hall, but whether that referred to the Professor or his machine she couldn’t tell.

‘We’ve decided to change our plans,’ said Charles Otterbourne after a few minutes’ intense conversation. ‘If Professor Carrington is agreeable, it would perhaps be as well if he explained his work to me right away.’

‘Just as you like,’ grunted the Professor through puffs of smoke.

Molly saw her father control his temper with an effort. ‘Molly, my dear,’ he said turning to her, ‘I intended to escort Mr Dunbar around the factory this morning. That, I’m afraid, is no longer possible. Could you take care of him and Mr Carrington?’ He cast an unfriendly glance at the Professor before turning back to Dunbar. ‘I’m sorry to have to change the arrangements at such short notice but I can escort you round the factory this afternoon.’

Dunbar regretfully shook his head. ‘I’m very sorry, Mr Otterbourne, but that won’t be possible. I understand you’ve got a fine concern here and I would like to see it very much. Perhaps we can make an appointment for another day?’ There was a definite gleam in his eye. ‘I’m sure we can work together to our mutual benefit. However, I must be away back up to town. There’s a meeting of

learned society I'm pledged to attend, you understand. The Professor is giving a paper, aren't you sir?' Alan Carrington nodded agreement.

With his plans for the day in ruins, Charles Otterbourne gave in with reasonable grace. The two Carringtons carried the wooden crate into the study. Gerard Carrington appeared a few minutes later. 'The gov'nor's well away,' he said with a grin. 'He's giving poor Mr Otterbourne the full works. He won't be finished for at least an hour, probably longer.'

'Would you like to see the village?' asked Molly. 'We can drive down in the car or we can walk if you'd rather.'

Andrew Dunbar shook his head. 'Thank you, Mrs Lewis, but I'll have to decline. I have some papers I intend to discuss with your father and I'd appreciate some time to look at them. I meant to read through them on the train, but I didn't have the opportunity.'

'The gov'nor wouldn't stop talking,' explained Gerry Carrington. 'He was on good form, wasn't he Mr Dunbar?'

'He was very loquacious,' agreed Mr Dunbar. 'And very informative. Is there a room I can use, Mrs Lewis?'

'You can have the library,' she said. 'You'll be free from interruption in there.' She turned to Gerard Carrington. 'Shall we have coffee in the conservatory, Gerry?' She felt mildly self-conscious as she said his name but he obviously liked her using it.

He smiled warmly. 'That'd be nice.' His smile broadened. 'Now the gov'nor's safely taken care of I can relax for a bit.'

The remark gave her the oddest sense of kinship with him. He obviously cared about his father and that protectiveness was something Molly was very familiar with.

The Professor didn't fit into the world but neither did Dad. Molly suddenly knew Gerry Carrington would understand how she felt about her father. He was vulnerable. Dad had to have the world run by his rules; he simply couldn't cope in any other way. He had to be surrounded with an armour of deference because without it, he would be as helpless as a crab without its shell. He was, as Steve said, a pompous old tyrant with no sense of humour. She knew that, but there were worse failings, weren't there? He might be an old tyrant, but he was a kindly old tyrant and she loved him. Steve was usually privately and cheerfully disrespectful about her father but every so often, he was serious. 'It's crazy, Molly,' he protested. 'Why on earth do we all have to live by his rules? We're not children.'

'We don't have to,' she said. 'We just have to pretend.' It was kinder that way. So in London she danced, drank cocktails and went to card parties, and Steve couldn't understand that, for Dad's sake she was willing to lead this odd sort of double life, but it was for Steve's sake, too. She didn't like the double life; she seemed to have been on edge for ages. It was so difficult to simply relax. Gerry, she thought, would understand. The knowledge made her feel slightly shy.

They sat in the conservatory together. Gerard Carrington seemed completely at home, talking about their surroundings, his father and Steve. He really was a remarkably easy person to get along with.

'What does your father's machine actually do?' she asked. 'What makes it so special?' She had expected to be told it was too difficult for her to understand – Steve usually made a joke if she asked a question – but Carrington looked at her with a sort of hesitant enthusiasm.

'Do you really want to know? To put it very simply, it uses electrical impulses to record and play length on to a magnetized ribbon.'

'Hasn't that been done before?' asked Molly, a wayward memory coming to her aid. 'Wasn't there a man called Poulsen? I've heard my father talk about him.'

Carrington looked at her with undisguised admiration. 'Spot on. I must say how refreshing it is

meet someone who has an intelligent interest in the subject.'

~~She felt ridiculously flattered. Steve teased her and Dad declaimed but neither told her she was intelligent.~~

'The gov'nor's machine is an improvement on Poulsen's. He developed a system of storing electrical signals on magnetized steel wire some time ago now but the sound was terribly distorted when it was replayed. On this machine the sound is very clear.' Carrington leaned forward enthusiastically. 'The gov'nor's come up with the idea of magnetic ribbon wrapped round a cylinder. It's tricky to use at the moment and he'll have to come up with some easier way to manipulate the ribbon but the principle's sound enough.'

'Perhaps it's a silly question,' said Molly doubtfully, 'but I don't see how a sound can be electrical.'

Carrington grinned. 'It's a first-rate question. It really all goes back to Michael Faraday. As you know, Faraday's major discovery was that a magnetic field can induce an electrical current, yes?'

Molly nodded to indicate she was comfortable with Faraday and magnetic fields.

Carrington flushed with pleasure. 'You really do know something about this, don't you? Now as far as sound recording and reproduction are concerned, the trick is to turn sound waves into an electrical impulse. Lee De Forest is doing some pioneering work on this in the States and some exciting breakthroughs are being made in the field of thermionic emissions. If you take an equation where K is Boltzman's constant . . .'

He broke off, noting the glazed expression in Molly's eyes. 'Perhaps I can explain it without maths,' he said tactfully. 'A sound can be converted into an electrical impulse by using a carbon-filled microphone.' He gave a wriggle of enthusiasm. 'You see where this is going? The sound waves vibrate the microphone diaphragm so they're converted into a varying electrical current. If you wrap an iron pole within a coil of wire surrounded by a permanent magnet – we're back to Faraday again – an electrical field is produced and we can use that to make a picture, so to speak, of the sound waves.'

'But you still need a way to turn that picture of the sound waves into actual sound.'

'Exactly!' Carrington pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. 'My word, Molly, I'm enjoying this conversation. I've never met a girl like you before. We can hear the sound by using a device which picks up the changes in the magnetic field, converting it to an electrical signal which is amplified so it's powerful enough to make a diaphragm vibrate and reproduce the recorded sound waves audibly. You'll appreciate there's more to it than that, but that's the gist of it,' he said, looking at her happily.

He was so appreciative she felt a rush of pleasure. There was a button missing on his shirt, she noticed. She suddenly wished she could sew it back on for him. She had the oddest desire to look after him. It was the Otterbourne fault, she thought with a rueful stab of recognition.

'Anyway, that's the theory behind the gov'nor's machine,' said Gerry, picking up his coffee. He raised an interrogative eyebrow. 'You were wary of him, I know.' She rushed to deny it, but he shook his head. 'He can be difficult but he's had a lot to put up with. He had to retire early.' He drank his coffee. 'I'm glad he's got this project to work on. He needs something to occupy his mind, to stop him from brooding. He likes to have me around, which is just as well. I can step in if he's getting too outrageous. I understand what he's talking about, you see, but I'm a bit of a plodder compared to him. He really is outstanding but he does find ordinary life very awkward. If things don't go the way he wants them to, he doesn't have any way of coping.' He smiled at her. 'We do, don't we?'

The insight could be nothing more than coincidence, but it seemed so apposite, it took her breath away. She was saved from having to answer by the maid, Dorcas, coming into the room. The coo

wanted to consult her about lunch and Molly, putting down her cup and saucer, followed her to the kitchen.

Hamilton, the butler, passed the biscuit tin to Eckersley, the chauffeur. The two men were good friends and always took their morning cup of tea together in Hamilton's pantry, secure from the listening ears of the womenservants. Hamilton liked to be able to express an opinion without any danger of having it gossiped about in the village. 'So what did you think of the Professor?' he asked.

Eckersley dunked his chocolate biscuit, raising his eyebrows expressively. 'I think he's a couple of screws loose, Mr Hamilton, and that's the honest truth. I thought I was picking up a tramp when I saw him at the station.' He bit into his biscuit reflectively. 'He's got a shocking tongue on him, to say he meant to be a gent. I mean, we've had scientific types before and plenty of them, but I've never seen the like of him, shouting and losing his temper and carrying on. I reckon young Carrington's got his work cut out for him, looking after his Pa. More like his keeper, he was. He seemed a nice enough bloke but his Pa's a right one and no mistake.'

'Old Man Otterbourne was put out,' said Hamilton. 'He was as close to losing his temper this morning as I've ever seen, and that's saying something.' He nodded his head towards the door. 'When I took their coffee in to the study they were at it hammer and tongs. I heard them.' He adopted a high pitched voice. '“Don't be an absolute fool, man!” That's what the Professor said, true as I'm sat here and a good bit more. His nibs didn't like it above half, especially as I was in the room.'

'What was he going on about?' asked Eckersley with interest, reaching for another biscuit.

Hamilton shrugged. 'Something to do with that machine of his. Edison or something or other came into it.' He laughed. 'His Highness had a face like thunder. I don't think he's ever been spoken to like that in his life.'

Eckersley grinned. 'It won't do him any harm.' He stopped short. The door opening on to the kitchen garden was ajar and from somewhere very close at hand came a sharp crack. Eckersley threw his chair back and stood up abruptly, his body poised, listening keenly. 'That was a gunshot.'

'It can't have been,' said Hamilton.

Eckersley waved him quiet. 'It was. I know what I'm talking about. That was a gun.'

'It'll be a poacher in the woods,' said Hamilton uneasily.

Eckersley shook his head. 'No. It was too close. Come on, we'd better have a look and see what's happening.'

Hamilton unwillingly got to his feet, sobered by Eckersley's complete seriousness. The chauffeur was right; he'd served in the army for two years and did know what he was talking about when it came to guns.

'I reckon it came from the back of the house,' said Eckersley. 'Shall we go along the terrace? It's the quickest.'

Hamilton was shocked. 'We can't do that! What if the master sees us? We'd better take a look in the hall.'

Eckersley's mouth hardened into a straight line. 'All right.'

On the other side of the green baize door the hall was deathly quiet. Once again, Eckersley stood poised and listening. 'The study,' he said softly. 'Can you hear it?'

Hamilton did hear it then, a little choking sob followed by rapid breathing. Straightening his waistcoat and squaring his shoulders, he pushed open the door of the study.

Professor Alan Carrington was kneeling on the floor, a gun held loosely in his hand. Beside him the body of Charles Otterbourne lay sprawled out on the hearthrug. He looked round as the door opened.

but said nothing.

Hamilton looked from the Professor to the horribly still body on the rug. There was a great dark patch by Mr Otterbourne's ear. For what seemed an endless space of time, Hamilton couldn't take in what had happened and then Eckersley spoke.

'You've killed him!'

The Professor got to his feet and stared at them. 'I killed him?' He looked at the gun in his hand. 'killed him?'

Hamilton was shaking. 'You bloody murderer. Yes, you killed him.'

The Professor's face twisted in fury. 'What the devil are you talking about? I'll have you know I've done no such thing, my good man.'

It was the *my good man* that did it. As if someone had broken a spell, Hamilton started forward. Eckersley by his side. 'Don't you *my good man* me. You've killed him.'

The gun came up in the Professor's hand and Eckersley made a dive for his arm. The Professor grunted and struggled. Hamilton tried to catch hold of him and, with a deafening blast, the gun went off, the bullet zinging off the marble of the fireplace. There was an utter confusion of shouts, blows and grabbing hands, then the gun went skittering along the floor and the three men fell into the hall in a heaving, struggling, yelling mass.

Hamilton felt a hand between his shoulder blades, pulling him away, and found himself looking into a distorted, shouting face he dimly recognized as that of Gerard Carrington. He fell back, panting. Carrington wrenched Eckersley away from the Professor. The hall was suddenly full of people all demanding to know what was happening. Gerard Carrington had hold of his father's arm and the womenservants surrounded Hamilton. Molly Lewis was with them. She was speaking too, but Hamilton couldn't make out the words.

Hamilton, his chest heaving, straightened his clothes and pointed a shaky hand at the Professor. 'He killed him,' he said, raising his voice to carry over the torrent of questioning voices. 'He killed the Master.'

There was a fresh chorus of voices. Mr Dunbar, he mechanically noticed, had come out of the library and was staring at the Professor.

'I don't believe a word of it,' said Dunbar robustly, plunging his way past the group and into the study. Gerard Carrington, keeping a firm grip on his father, went after him. Molly followed. She was so utterly bewildered she scarcely grasped the sense of what Hamilton said. The Professor was talking in a non-stop flow of words, but she couldn't make out what he said.

Then she saw her father's body and screamed.

THREE

Molly, after that first scream, stood bewildered and silent, her hand to her mouth. Dad was lying sprawled out on the rug before the hearth, one hand flung wide. Papers were scattered round him on the floor, flapping lazily in the breeze from the open French windows. In the garden beyond, the lawn stretched out in the green glory of a spring day. She knew there was an avalanche of voices round her, a meaningless torrent of noise. A blackbird hopped across the grass and Molly stared at it, trying to see anything but that grotesque thing on the rug, the thing that had been her father. The blackbird pecked a worm from the grass, snapping at it with its beak. Molly gave a little cry as this innocent violence seemed suddenly too much to bear.

She felt her maid, Susan, put her hand on her arm. 'Come with me, m'am. You shouldn't be in here. It's not right.' Susan's voice was kindly but Molly didn't want to go. Mr Dunbar was still kneeling beside her father. It was hard to take in how quickly everything had happened.

Dunbar looked up, his face grave. 'He's dead, all right,' he said, looking to where Professor Carrington stood, Gerry beside him. 'You did this, sir?'

'No, I damn well didn't,' said the Professor testily. 'Gerry, for heaven's sake, can we go?' He ran his shaky hand through his hair. 'There's no point staying here any longer. We'll have to get my machine packed up, I know, but then I really think we should leave.' His gaze slid past the body on the rug. 'It's obvious that Mr Otterbourne can't help us any more and we have no further business here.'

Gerry's grip tightened on his arm. 'Dad, shut up!' He looked at Molly, his face harried. 'I'm sorry. It's just his way of talking.' He turned to Hamilton and Eckersley. 'Is there anywhere I can take my father? Somewhere we can stay until the police arrive?'

'The police?' broke in Professor Carrington. 'Bless my soul, boy, what do you want the police for?'

Dunbar stood up, his hands behind his back, his chin thrust forward. 'There is a man lying dead, sir, and you have to account for it.'

The Professor flinched back as if he had been struck a physical blow.

'For God's sake,' said Gerry desperately, 'will you leave this to me?' He looked at Hamilton and Eckersley once more. 'Is there anywhere?'

Molly found her voice. 'You'd better go into the library,' she said shakily. 'It's across the hall.' She shook off Susan's hand. 'Don't worry. It's all right. I'll be all right.'

In a ghastly parody of his usual manner, Hamilton showed them across the hall into the library. With Gerry beside him, Professor Carrington sat bolt upright on the leather sofa.

'The police,' said Molly to Hamilton. 'Please phone the police.'

Inspector Gibson paused by the open door of the library where Sergeant Atterby was solidly keeping guard. 'Is he in here?' he asked in an undertone.

'Yes, sir,' said the sergeant quietly. 'Him and his son, Gerard Carrington.'

'Has he said anything?'

Sergeant Atterby puffed out his cheeks in wry agreement. 'He's done nothing *but* talk, sir,' he said in low voice. 'I'm beginning to wonder if he's all there. He hasn't mentioned Mr Otterbourne but he's gone on and on about a lecture he's supposed to be giving tonight.' Sergeant Atterby shrugged. 'I couldn't understand a word of it. He's not shut up.' He cast a glance back into the room. 'I know he's a professor, sir. I reckon we might have a real mad scientist on our hands.'

‘You mustn’t believe what you read in magazines about scientists, Sergeant,’ said Gibson, uneasy aware that the Sergeant was voicing his own thoughts.

‘He’s not normal, sir,’ said Atterby with conviction. ‘That young chap, Mr Carrington, he’s all right. He’s worried, I can tell. He knows what’s happened. He’s tried to get his father to talk about it but the Professor just ignores him.’

This, thought Inspector Gibson, was going to be difficult. On the face of it, there didn’t seem to be much doubt about what had happened, certainly not in view of the menservants’ evidence.

He had been shown the study first where Charles Otterbourne still lay with papers scattered around him. On the table were more papers, scribbled over with mysterious-looking diagrams and a box about the size of a gramophone without its horn. The gun, an automatic, belonged to the house. Mrs Lewis’s husband had used it during the war. Hamilton, the butler, couldn’t say if it was usually kept in the study but Mr Lewis might have left it there.

The Inspector drew a deep breath. It seemed like an open and shut case but he was wary of arresting the Professor out of hand. For one thing, he was a professor and therefore a man to treat with respect. But what was really making him pause was Hamilton’s and Eckersley’s assurance that the man would come off his head. Inspector Gibson had never had anything to do with loonies before and Hamilton’s confident assertion that the Professor would end up in Broadmoor unsettled him. ‘Mad as a hatter,’ Hamilton had said *and* he had witnessed the Professor quarrelling with his master. It worried him that the Sergeant Atterby so obviously agreed with them.

He squared his shoulders and walked into the library, motioning to Sergeant Atterby to follow him.

The Professor was sitting on a leather sofa beside a younger man who was, presumably, Gerard Carrington. Despite his shabby clothes, the Professor had a real presence, thought Gibson. His eyes were very bright. Unnaturally bright, perhaps. He gave an official cough. ‘Can I have a word with you, sir?’

‘At last!’ Professor Carrington got to his feet. ‘How long will this take?’

‘I’m afraid I can’t say, sir,’ said Gibson. ‘I must ask you to tell me exactly what happened.’

‘I’ve gone through this endlessly,’ said Professor Carrington, clenching his fists in frustration.

‘Dad,’ said Gerard Carrington warningly. ‘This is a police officer. Just answer his questions, will you?’

The Professor sighed in exasperation. ‘Very well.’ He braced his arms against the back of the sofa. ‘If you insist, I’ll go through it again. I had an appointment with Charles Otterbourne to discuss my new recording apparatus. The sound itself is recorded on to magnetic ribbons by means of . . .’

‘What did you actually do, sir?’

‘I invented it.’

Inspector Gibson began to wonder if Professor Carrington was pulling his leg. ‘What did you actually do with regard to Mr Otterbourne, sir?’

Alan Carrington glared at him. ‘Nothing.’

Inspector Gibson coughed once more. ‘You must have done something, sir. Let me just run through the facts of the case as I understand them. You had an appointment with Mr Otterbourne, yes?’

Professor Carrington looked at him wearily. ‘So I’ve said. It was to discuss . . .’

Inspector Gibson held up his hand. ‘Never mind that for the moment, sir. You’d been with Mr Otterbourne in the study, yes?’

‘Yes, of course I was. Great heavens, man, do you usually state the obvious?’

He glanced at his watch. ‘Can you hurry up? I want to catch the train back to London and the best service departs in little over half an hour.’

Inspector Gibson heard Sergeant Atterby's quick intake of breath. Surely, *surely* the man must know he was in danger of being arrested for murder? 'I'm afraid you might have to miss the train, sir,' he managed to say. He held up his hand to cut off Alan Carrington's torrent of words. 'I need to get to the bottom of what occurred this morning. The butler served you and Mr Otterbourne with coffee at approximately quarter past eleven.' Alan Carrington looked blank. 'The butler stated he heard you speak very sharply to Mr Otterbourne.'

'The butler should mind his own business,' said Carrington distractedly. 'I might have been a little impatient. It's a fault of mine, I'm afraid. Mr Otterbourne seemed unable to grasp the utilitarian value of thermionic emissions and I was probably more abrupt than the occasion demanded.' He glanced up. 'You might have heard the process referred to as the Edison effect. It can be demonstrated by . . .'

Inspector Gibson hastily intervened. 'Never mind that, sir. You say there was no personal disagreement between you and Mr Otterbourne?'

'No.' The Professor looked puzzled. 'Why on earth should there be?'

Inspector Gibson ignored the question. 'About ten or fifteen minutes later, the butler and the chauffeur heard a shot. They found you in the study, holding a gun.'

Alan Carrington ran his hand through his hair. 'I've explained all that,' he complained. 'And I must say, I thought both the menservants behaved in a disgraceful way.' He dropped his gaze and looked away. 'I don't know what came over them.'

Gerard Carrington stood up. 'Listen to me, Dad.' He spoke slowly and clearly. Professor Carrington unwillingly raised his chin and looked at his son. 'Mr Otterbourne is dead.' Professor Carrington flinched. 'The police think you shot him.'

He ignored his father's murmur of *ridiculous*. 'You were found holding the gun. How did that come about?' The elder man swallowed but said nothing. Gerard Carrington took a deep breath. He spoke very deliberately, spacing out the words. 'Did you shoot Mr Otterbourne?'

Alan Carrington started back as if he'd been struck. 'Of course not! Gerry, you mustn't say such things, even in jest.'

'Then tell us what happened.' Again, Gerard Carrington spoke very deliberately.

Professor Carrington covered his face with his hands. 'I went out of the room. It was a call of nature, you understand. I was only a few minutes at most. When I came back in he was dead.' He dropped his hands. 'I suppose he committed suicide but why he should do any such thing, I do not know. He seemed perfectly in control of himself before I left. I was astonished. He was lying face down on the floor with a gun beside him. As I went to turn him over, the menservants burst into the room and demanded to know what I was doing. Their manner was abrasive in the extreme.'

'You actually had the gun in your hand, I believe,' said the Inspector.

'I picked it up, yes.'

'And you threatened the butler with it.'

'I did no such thing!' said Carrington indignantly. 'I told him to stop talking nonsense – he was babbling that I had shot his master – and I told him to stop.'

'Whilst holding the gun.'

'What the devil was I meant to do with it?'

Inspector Gibson glanced at Sergeant Atterby and took a deep breath. 'Professor Carrington, I'm afraid I have to ask you to accompany me to the station.'

'To catch the train?' asked the Professor hopefully.

Gerard Carrington caught hold of his father's arm. 'Dad, you're being taken to the police station. Stop pretending you don't know what's going on. You're being arrested.'

‘Arrested?’ repeated Alan Carrington. ‘Arrested?’

‘Yes. For the murder of Mr Otterbourne.’

And Alan Carrington started to laugh.

It was nearly nine o’clock that evening when Gerard Carrington returned to Stoke Horam House.

Steve Lewis was standing by the fireplace in the drawing room, his elbow on the mantelpiece, talking earnestly to a sandy-haired man about his own age. He broke off abruptly as Carrington was shown into the room. ‘Gerry! I can hardly believe what’s happened. I was at Uncle Maurice’s. I’ve only just got back. Why didn’t someone try and get hold of me?’

‘I knew you were there,’ said Carrington. ‘Your wife said so when we first arrived. Uncle Maurice is Colonel Willoughby, isn’t he? I don’t know his address or if he’s on the telephone or not.’

‘He’s not on the phone but Molly should have sent a telegram.’

Carrington shook his head. He was speaking mechanically, forcing himself to think of the words. ‘Your wife was knocked sideways. The doctor packed her off to bed with a sleeping draught.’

‘Yes, Hamilton told me she’d taken it pretty hard.’ Steve Lewis looked critically at Carrington. His face was paper-white and he was swaying on his feet. ‘Sit down, Gerry.’ He walked over to the sideboard and picked up the whisky. ‘Can I get you a drink?’

Carrington sank gratefully into a chair, resting his forehead on his hand. ‘Thanks. It’s been awful. He took the whisky and soda from Lewis. ‘I hoped you’d be here. I wanted to explain things. They aren’t any real excuses but I don’t know if my father’s responsible for his actions.’

The sandy-haired man looked at him curiously. ‘Excuse me, Mr Carrington, but do you believe your father’s guilty? I’m Ragnall, by the way, Hugo Ragnall, Mr Otterbourne’s secretary.’

Gerard Carrington spread his hands wide in a hopeless gesture. ‘He more or less has to be, doesn’t he?’ His mouth trembled. ‘He’s always had a shocking temper but there’s more to it than that. The last couple of years have been pretty grim. He got caught in a Zeppelin raid during the war and had to be pulled out of the rubble. That affected him very badly, but when my mother died he went to pieces. He simply couldn’t cope. If he doesn’t like something he just ignores it.’ He looked at Lewis. ‘I’ve told you something of this before. After my mother died it was as if she’d never existed, but every so often he’ll say something that proves he knows how things really are. It drives me up the wall. The police don’t know what to make of him. He’s not said anything at all for the last few hours. He didn’t seem to know I was in the room with him. I telephoned Sir David Hargreaves, his doctor, and he’s on his way. He might get him to talk but as soon as the police learn his medical history, I’m afraid they’ll simply shut him away.’

‘His medical history?’ asked Ragnall.

‘He’s always been unstable,’ said Carrington flatly. ‘It was my mother’s death that finally pushed him over the edge. He had a complete nervous breakdown. He had to give up his post at Cambridge and eventually there was nothing for it but for him to be admitted as a patient in a mental asylum. He was released a couple of years ago.’

‘A mental hospital?’ repeated Ragnall slowly. He shot a look at Lewis. ‘Maybe I’m wrong.’

Lewis sucked his cheeks in. ‘It’s difficult, isn’t it?’ He hesitated. ‘Look, Gerry, I know things look black for your father, but there could be another explanation.’ He glanced at Ragnall. ‘That’s what we’ve been discussing.’ He drew a deep breath. ‘You tell him, Ragnall. It’s all to do with the firm’s pension fund.’

Gerry Carrington listened in growing bewilderment and with many interjections. ‘But that doesn’t make any sense either,’ he said when Ragnall had finished. ‘Even if Mr Otterbourne had been dipping

into the pension fund, surely that's not such a big deal? It's his firm, after all.'

'It's a very big deal,' said Ragnall. ~~'Mr Otterbourne might have thought of it as the firm's money~~ but it's theft. The pension fund is made up of both voluntary savings and compulsory contributions from the workers. That money was invested safely, mainly in gilt-edged stock. Those stocks have been sold out and the capital has vanished.'

'Do you see now, Gerry?' asked Steve. 'I tell you, he wouldn't want to face the music. His reputation would be ruined and, for a man like him, that would be impossible to live with.'

'I still don't see it,' said Gerry. 'From what you've told me, Mr Otterbourne didn't know you tumbled to it. Besides that, he wouldn't discuss the firm's affairs with my father. For one thing, the gov'nor wouldn't have a clue what he was talking about.'

'That's true enough, Mr Carrington,' said Ragnall, 'but, as I understand it, your father stated he left the room. Mr Otterbourne could have easily have picked up the accounts and realized exactly what I found.'

'I knew him well,' said Steve Lewis quietly. 'He wouldn't want to be remembered as a suicide. He could have realized the game was up and, knowing Professor Carrington would more or less be bound to be blamed, shot himself in order to incriminate him.'

Gerard Carrington started to his feet. 'No,' he breathed. 'No, he couldn't. No one could.' His voice quavered. 'Could they?'

Lewis shrugged. 'I tell you, I knew the man. He lived for his reputation. It meant everything to him.'

'But this could let my father off the hook,' muttered Carrington. 'I thought he'd lost his temper and perhaps didn't know what he was doing, but he could have been telling the truth all along. Is there any way of proving it? If we could show that Mr Otterbourne did know he'd been found out, it might make all the difference.'

Ragnall and Lewis swapped glances. 'We could look in the study,' suggested Ragnall. 'I know where I left the accounts. If they've been disturbed, then that would surely tell us that Mr Otterbourne had looked at them.'

'Come on,' said Lewis. 'The body was taken away this afternoon but I don't think anything else has been touched.'

The three men walked into the study. There, on the floor, was the manila folder. Ragnall stooped down and picked them up. 'These are the accounts,' he said breathlessly. He opened the folder, flicking through the papers. 'He must have looked at them.'

'Come on!' said Carrington urgently. 'We have to tell the police.'

They drove to the police station in Lewis's car. As they drew up outside the station, Carrington noticed a black Rolls-Royce parked nearby. 'It looks as if Sir David Hargreaves has arrived,' he said. 'It's just as well. Even if Dad's not guilty, he's still in a pretty bad way.'

Sir David was standing by the desk in the police station, talking to Inspector Gibson. Three other policemen were in the room. They all looked very solemn. Sir David looked up as Carrington, Lewis and Ragnall came in.

'Sir David,' said Gerry Carrington. 'It's good of you to come, sir.' He stopped, chilled by the sudden silence in the room and the grave faces of Sir David and the policemen.

Sir David glanced at Inspector Gibson, then came forward and, looking at Gerard Carrington compassionately, put his hand on his arm. 'I'm sorry to have to break the news, Mr Carrington, but your father is past my help. The Inspector found him in his cell.' He paused. 'I'm afraid your father is dead. He took his own life.'

FOUR

For the first couple of weeks or so after her father had died, Molly found it hard to work out exactly what was happening and why. She had loved her father and he had betrayed her. She was grief-stricken, hurt, but, most of all, angry. A chilled, hard anger that ripped into her emotions like ice ripping away the top layer of unshielded skin.

She'd refused to believe it at first. Dad *couldn't* be a thief. Everything he'd stood for, every rule he'd handed down, every hoop he'd made her jump through was undermined by that one stark fact. Her father was a crook.

Ever since her mother died she had protected Dad from the world, shielding him from unkind remarks and cynical appraisal. Why? Because she believed he believed in his ideal of an ideal life for ideal workers.

It was so quixotic, so unattainable and so worthwhile that she loved him for it. She had enough worldly knowledge to see how some regarded him as nothing more than a self-serving, unctuous, pompous hypocrite. The knowledge had hurt. And now the cynics were proved right. Her father *was* self-serving, unctuous, pompous hypocrite. All her past happiness had been poisoned and she'd been trampled by those feet of clay.

To make it worse, at the one time in her life when she wanted to hide like an injured animal, she was forced to parade her scarred emotions for public enjoyment in the press. Not that she could feel any emotion any longer. She was numb. The tidal wave of publicity that had engulfed her drowned everything, so that the inquest, the funeral, the horrible, endless questions about her father, seemed like little islands of events in a featureless sea.

One thing she had been sure about, and that was she didn't want to stay in Stoke Horam. Even the room in the house, every cottage and building in the village, reminded her of Dad.

Steve proposed a move to London and found a ground floor flat in Mottram Place, off Sackville Street. The domestic distractions of moving house were a welcome relief. There were practical decisions to be taken, such as furniture and food and where everyone would sleep. Steve solved the tricky problem by cutting the domestic staff down to a cook and two maids and suggesting Hugh Ragnall should live out. She found the new arrangements unexpectedly agreeable and she was glad to escape to the anonymous bustle of London.

She should, she knew, be grateful to Steve. He seemed to have inexhaustible energy as he flung himself into work, defying the speculators who hovered round, waiting for the crash. 'Every penny he vowed to a fascinated public, 'will be repaid. Not one of Otterbourne's employees will come out worse.' Which, if it wasn't quite true, was true enough to satisfy the press. He plunged his own money into the firm, cut the unprofitable lines, sold off some of the cottages and land and re-opened negotiations with Dunbar. He tried to comfort her and she should have been grateful, but she seemed incapable of feeling anything; she was completely numb.

It was a fortnight after her father died that Steve came into her dressing room. Molly was in front of the mirror, brushing her hair. They had been invited to dinner with Mrs Soames-Pensford, a neighbor in Mottram Place. Mrs Soames-Pensford was, Molly dully knew, a kind-hearted, gossipy soul with three chattering daughters. Steve wanted to accept the invitation and she went along with as little enthusiasm as a puppet on wires.

He leaned forward and gently took the hairbrush from her hand.

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