

DAVID ASHTON

Based on the BBC radio series

The
PAINTED
LADY

AN INSPECTOR McLEVY
MYSTERY

'A Victorian Morse with a heart'

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ALSO BY DAVID ASHTON

The McLevy Mysteries:
Shadow of the Serpent
Fall from Grace
A Trick of the Light
End of the Line (eBook only)

THE PAINTED LADY
A JAMES MCLEVY SHORT STORY

DAVID ASHTON

Polygon

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[The Painted Lady](#)

The judge's wife looked at the portrait of herself hung high on the wall. In the painting she stood by a long French window that allowed a sliver of moonlight to enter, and wore a purple gown – the color indicating love of truth even unto martyrdom.

The expression on canvas was in contrast to the one upon the pale flesh of the observer. The depicted lips had the hint of a smile with subtle warmth in the direct gaze; the present face displayed to the world, had humanity been attending in the drawing room, was equally beautiful but tightly contained.

Behind glass.

Like a butterfly in a case – such specimens as festooned the walls in their caskets, splayed out bright colours that belayed their expiry at the hands of his honour.

Such a pretty death.

The door opened and the butler entered carrying a tray precisely laid with a pot of tea, toast and two soft-boiled eggs, the judge's invariable breakfast.

"I can take that," she said abruptly. "The master has been ill. It will be my pleasure."

The butler nodded with a frigid movement of his head, and exited.

Opening the bedroom door while clutching a tray was a difficult task but if servants can accomplish such, surely a judge's wife may succeed?

As indeed she did. She entered, laid down the tray on a small bedside table, and finally twitched back the counterpane.

He lay on his back, mouth open, eyes staring, pinned to the pillow and most obviously bereft of life.

She took a deep mouthful of air and let loose a single piercing scream.

This was not a pretty death.

Diary of James McLevy

The heart is an intricate contrivance. The seat of mortal courage and source of all affections. Love, they tell me, dwells there and desire prowls like a hungry beast. I am not such an idiot that I cannot experience within myself the darkness of the human heart, its violence and anger, plus the impulse to murder and destroy, but I find love a trickier proposition.

A knock at his attic room door interrupted James McLevy in mid-meditation and the voice of his landlady, Mrs MacPherson, a stalwart Dundonian in foreign climes, accompanied the sliding of a letter under the portal.

"This came through the letterbox, Mister McLevy. "Your name upon it, your business I would be a wager."

With that she stumped off back down the stairs while he carefully blotted the page, put aside the pen and then crossed to pick up the missive.

It was addressed to Inspector James McLevy, and as he stuck a stubby thumb under the envelope flap he pondered who would hand-deliver at this time of night.

The devil maybe?

But no, it was not Auld Hornie – not that name at the bottom of the page.

I am falsely accused of a crime I did not commit. Spied upon; my own servants look at me with s

accusing eyes. I have no friends, no one to turn to, but let me plead my case.

~~It was I who insisted on a post-mortem on my husband's body because of the sudden advent of his death. Why would I do that if I had poisoned him? I was shaken to the core at the findings of arsenic in his remains and fainted to the floor. Is this the action of a guilty woman?~~

“Uhuh, Mrs Pearson?” he muttered. “It’s easy to faint, ye just close your eyes and fall over.”

My husband was a great admirer of your tenacity of purpose and scrupulous presentation. I fear the Haymarket police will slant the evidence against me and I have no one on my side. Please help me. If not, then Justice will not be done upon this earth.

Yours in desperation and hope,

Judith Pearson.

McLevy walked to the large window that overlooked his city, deep in thought. He had been reading Walter Scott’s *The Heart of Midlothian*, and this provided a deal of contrast. The inspector was acquainted with the salient facts of the case but no official charge had as yet been laid by Haymarket police.

Of course it was none of his business, out of his parish, he didnae even know the woman. But Leith was quiet at this moment and he was aye itchy in the quiet.

He slurped cold coffee from a tin mug that had its domain on the rickety table, which sufficed as a desk when writing his diary, and made a face.

A terrible brew.

Pity he’d fallen out with Jean Brash but the woman had the morals of an alley cat. Mind you, his coffee came all the way from the Lebanon and was a sore loss.

McLevy looked over his beloved Edinburgh to witness the lights shine in the dark.

One needs the other – light the dark, God the Devil, birth death, and policemen need crime.

It was a love of sorts, he supposed.

Constable Mulholland had much on his mind as he loped along with his inspector. Normally he relished being on the saunter, pacing his one long stride alongside McLevy’s two short footfalls, but the quest so far had been a fruitless trek and his thoughts shifted back to the station.

Lieutenant Roach’s long snout had twitched excitedly as he pored over his morning edition of the *Leith Herald*.

“One moment Judge Pearson is donning the black cap and the next? Dead as a doornail.”

“I often wondered about that,” Mulholland said, who did not possess the Calvinist undertone of prudience.

“Body riddled with arsenic! Inspector Adam Dunsmore hints at *imminent arrest*.”

“Why a doornail?” asked the constable. “Why should that be deader than any other nail?”

As Roach gazed somewhat blankly in response, McLevy entered, late as usual, nodded briefly to the portrait of Queen Victoria on the wall and tuned in effortlessly to the lieutenant’s abiding interest.

“So the wife is suspect, eh?”

“Vile rumour has it so,” replied Roach happily. “And it is also hinted that the marriage bed was by no means sacrosanct. Only a hint, mark you!”

Dirty deeds in high society would seem to get folk going like nothing else, however, the lieutenant

swept concupiscence aside along with the paper. "Well, it's Haymarket's case, Adam Dunsmore is particular. We have more important things on hand."

Of course Roach was well aware that there had been a lack of murderous activity in the parish, not a decent robbery to be seen, no fearsome assaults in the wynds, no inexplicable bodies in the harbour, a paradise to the pure at heart but anathema to men who breathed in the fumes of deep criminality like a pig after truffles.

"McMunn's Elixir, the infant pacifier," McLevy pronounced without noticeable relish.

"Exactly!" answered Roach with enthusiasm. "Sold on a street corner to a witless nursing maid who administered it copiously to the respectable twins in her charge and due to the excess of cheap laudanum in the mixture?"

"It near pacified them off the planet," Mulholland threw in, while Victoria frowned at such malfeasance.

The lieutenant, trying to generate an appetite for the chase, banged his fist down on the desk causing one of his inkwells to jump like a rabbit. "You claim to know the wynds and back doubles of Leith better than any living being, McLevy. Find this man and find him quick!"

The inspector knew that these street corner Johnnies were notoriously hard to pin down but nodded obediently enough as he turned to go.

"C'mon, Mulholland, crimes of state wait for no man."

Had Roach been more alert he might have wondered at the dutiful tones of his subordinate but the lieutenant was anxious to get them out the office so that he might rifle the middle pages of the newspaper and search out additional salacious titbits on the Pearson case.

The constable however, had been struck by the inspector's compliant response, and after a futile trawl through the harbour streets and wynds of Leith, pondered further why they had ended up at a tavern called The Salutation, which though not in the Haymarket itself was a favourite haunt of the police force.

"We'll hae some belly-timber here," declared James McLevy. "I'm starvin' hungry."

As he followed his inspector inside, Mulholland had his own thoughts as to the precise nature to the sudden need for sustenance.

Adam Dunsmore's opinion of himself had seldom been higher. He pressed his back against the bar, lifted a glass in acknowledgement of the glory to come and saw nothing in the faces of his cronies to contradict this masterful conclusion. He was a small man with a big nose and a loud voice to which he now gave issue.

"Well, gentlemen, there's nothing like getting your name in the paper and nothing like the prospect of a pretty woman dancing the Perth two-step in the morning air."

A gale of boozy laughter greeted this callous statement as regards a future hanging but the Dunsmore's somewhat fishy eyes spotted two newcomers fighting their passage through the smoke, a fair deal of which was caused by the large cigar clenched in his fist.

"McLevy! Whit're you doing in this neck o' the woods?"

"I am conducting a wide reconnaissance," was the stolid response.

"Searching out what?"

"A nostrum salesman," said Mulholland rather unwisely, but in truth his attention had been taken by a huge slice of goose pie on a plate further down the bar.

"A nostrum salesman?" repeated Dunsmore to universal sniggers. "Ye have to admit, Jamie boy, you're small fry these days."

McLevy ignored the provocation. "The Pearson case. Ye have a suspect?"

"And a motive!"

“Such as?”

Dunsmore affected a mysterious air. He relished the knowledge only he possessed, not even passing such to his colleagues apart from the odd insinuation. “Ever hear of Jardine Boothroyd?”

“A painter of sorts, I believe?” Mulholland contributed, stomach growling like a hound on the scene.

“Aye. Handy wi’ a brush.”

More sniggers. McLevy was unimpressed. “I’ve heard the whispers. They mean nothing.”

Dunsmore decided to add some spice to the mix. “The night the judge died, he had a heavy colic. The wife was observed to serve him up a *potion*.”

“The function of a faithful spouse.”

“Faithful?” Dunsmore drew out the word as he puffed at his cigar. “That remains to be seen.”

McLevy waited further but the little man had vaunted sufficient, kept what he knew up his sleeve and snapped his mouth shut.

The inspector realised he would get little more at this juncture and signalled to his constable who had leant over the bar and craned his neck to see into the bustling kitchen beyond at the back premises.

“Come away, Mulholland, we’ll leave these birkies tae their important pursuits.”

As they left, Dunsmore, never a man to let well alone, jeered a farewell. “Get after the quack medicine man, Jamie boy. Quack, quack!”

At the laughter McLevy turned and for a moment there was a gleam of animal ferocity in his eyes that stilled the sound and had Mulholland instinctively reaching for his hornbeam stick.

He’d never cracked the skull of a fellow policeman before but there was always a first time. McLevy went for blood he would follow – that was how they played the game. Both had survived many a vicious battle by holding to that rule. One for the other, no matter what.

“Quack, quack indeed, Adam,” replied the inspector quietly. “You would know. Ye have a face like a duck’s arse.”

And they were out through the tavern door leaving silence behind.

In the street Mulholland took a deep breath – how close he had come to an affray he would never know but one thing was certain . . .

“That provender was sore tempting.”

“I lost my appetite,” said James McLevy.

If a passer-by had glanced in the window of Milady à la Mode in Princes Street, they would have glimpsed inside the shop two very contrasting individuals.

One was the squat form of a far from fashionable old biddy who sat grimly upon a chair like some Chinese dragon guarding the gates of hell, and the other a slim female figure who slipped in and out of sight, each time festooned in a different guise of dress.

Jean Brash was in her element, green eyes hectic with choice, red hair ablaze, skin smooth as the silk she wore, not a trace of sin on either covering.

Hannah Semple, the grumpy guardian, loathed shopping in such genteel surroundings. A market stall was more her style: haggle and be damned.

One owned the premier bawdy-hoose in Edinburgh – the Just Land – and the ancient other held her position as her right-hand woman, keeper of the keys and indeed a dragon with whom to be reckoned if wielding a cut-throat razor.

“Whit do you think to this?” asked Jean, twirling around in an azure blue gown.

“It’ll cover your nakedness.”

“A different colour – pink maybe?”

“No!” Hannah’s pug-face darkened as she glowered at a nearby assistant who had been dancing attendance. “I’ve been three solid hours in this skittery wee chair. *Would madam like this, would you?*”

madam like that, does madam's backside stick oot like a coal bunker?"

"It certainly does not," was the tart response.

"I know you, Mistress. Ye're lacking diversion. First ye shop and then ye get up tae mischief."

"Well, I'm still at the shopping stage."

Indeed Jean had a diversion in mind that involved looking her best and displaying all possible charms to an admiring male gaze, but that would be her secret.

"I'd even welcome McLevy on the scrounge for coffee," muttered the old woman.

"The inspector's in the huff wi' me."

Hannah grinned. "That's because ye took in that big boxing mannie. A fine muckle specimen!"

The man concerned had been the loser at a fighting match Jean attended and his plight touched her heart.

"I was helping him recuperate."

"Is that whit they call it?"

Though the boxer had departed a while back to punch his weight elsewhere, McLevy's nose was still well out of joint. Serve him right.

Jean looked at her image in the mirror and frowned to observe two small lines tugging down from each side of a generous mouth.

"I better try the pink," she murmured. "Nail my colours to the mast."

Another beautiful woman, Judith Pearson, looked down from her portrait at the two policemen standing like sentries in the judge's drawing room.

A funereal butler had brought them in and then gone to fetch his mistress but before her advent Mulholland had a word to say.

"This is not a good move, sir."

"Jist observe the butterflies, Mulholland."

For want of better to do, the constable cast an eye on the meticulously mounted display around them.

"A fair collection," he averred. "Swallowtail – we have those in Ireland. Purple Emperor – not easy to catch, spends its life high in the treetops."

McLevy peered at a specimen with a white bar on the forewing. "Very dainty, this wee thing, eh?"

Mulholland had nodded grudgingly; he had been shown the contents of Judith's letter but found no poor reason to be out of their parish courting nothing but trouble.

"A Painted Lady," he identified.

And as if on cue the mistress entered, dressed in muted colours tending towards black but by no means a full widow's regalia.

Introductions were effected, positions assumed and Judith formally thanked the inspector for his response to her plea. McLevy looked as if he had swallowed a frog.

"Mistress Pearson," he announced abruptly. "Let us dispense with the politesse."

"By all means."

"The judge died of arsenic poisoning."

"Which might not have been discovered, had I not insisted upon a post-mortem," she replied calmly.

McLevy grunted acknowledgement of the point but then launched into what his constable recognised as one of their favourite ploys – *keep the suspect out of kilter*.

"I did not like your husband."

For a moment her eyes flickered, but with what?

"Might one ask why?"

“He enjoyed too much the punishment he meted out,” was the flinty response. “One young girl had tried to steal the wallet of a fine gentleman who was otherwise engaged with her. Whoring.”

This time Mistress Pearson did not blink.

“In the witness box she cried to break your heart. She had done it to feed her family, it was her first offence, she begged for the court’s mercy. The judge smiled and sentenced her to fifteen years.”

Mulholland put in an equalising aside. “We were the arresting officers, sir.”

“But I had no delight in it. The judge *smiled*.”

In the silence all three took stock. The officers saw a woman of singular beauty with a secretive quality, raven dark hair, near to violet deep blue eyes, alabaster skin. There was something both inviting and contained about her – a combination that might unsettle many a man.

Behind her, the portrait, its purple gown glowing in the subdued colours of the drawing room provided an odd disparity as if one was more alive than the other.

She saw two equally contrasting creatures. The constable tall, somehow boyish, as if growing out of his clothes, the hair fair, the accent soft and Irish, the eyes light blue – an innocent face that might lure many a suspect into inadvertent confession.

The inspector was another proposition. James McLevy, thief-taker, a chunky, menacing figure in his dark overcoat and low-brimmed bowler. The face white and broken, eyes boring into hers like a wolf sizing up its quarry. By no means a butterfly.

Yet he was her last hope.

“My husband was a cruel man,” she murmured, eyes moving to the mounted display on the wall. She often thought that the great relish he found in the collecting of these beautiful creatures was in the fact that once caught, he might stifle their senses and then put them in the killing jar. To watch them die.

“Was he cruel to you?” asked McLevy.

The watching Mulholland sensed an opening, but was it by accident or design?

She hesitated a moment and then spoke candidly. “He consorted with . . . loose women. And made no secret of it. The Just Land – that was where he took his pleasure.”

“What about *your* pleasures?”

This time she did blink at McLevy’s challenging enquiry. “What do you mean?”

“There are stories that you may have found solace elsewhere: a cruel husband and new love add up to a powerful motive.”

Another thrust that met with a calm response. “That is a lie. The portrait you see there is by Jardine Boothroyd. He caught my likeness. That is all. There is nothing between us.”

McLevy waited for further protestations of innocence but none came. Her face was like a shield and he felt a sudden surge of anger. A jerk of the head to his constable and the inspector turned abruptly to make for the door. “Well, if you’ll excuse us, Mistress Pearson, we are both busy men.”

“It’s a very nice picture,” allowed Mulholland on the move. “The fellow has talent, no doubt.”

For the first time her composure faltered and the cry almost wrenched from her. “Can you not help me?”

McLevy’s hand was on the doorknob and for a moment he thought he heard the sound of retreating steps on the other side; the butler perhaps – she had written of being spied upon.

“It’s not my case, and you’ve told me nothing,” he said turning the handle.

“Wait!”

His face was stony, disinterested, but he did stop while she struggled to find the words.

“My husband took a stimulant to . . . increase his potency. He boasted of it to me.”

She focused on Mulholland, who appeared at this moment a much more sympathetic listener. “Arsenic not regarded as some sort of . . .?”

“Aphrodisiac, ma’am?”

Judith nodded chastely. "I found traces on his clothes. A white powder."

"It's a long shot," said McLevy, unimpressed.

"His doctor can tell, surely? Alexander Galbraith in Palmerston Place. They were as thick as thieves."

"Doctors are bound by oath. Goodbye, Mistress Pearson."

"Is that all you have to say?"

The undertone of dismayed anger in her voice brought him back into the fray. "The night your husband died you mixed him a potion. What was in it?"

"Hot toddy. To help him sleep."

"He certainly slept, right enough," was the sardonic response. "Were you lying beside him that fateful night?"

"Our bedrooms are separate."

"That's nice. We'll see ourselves out."

She suddenly flung her arms out in an oddly dramatic gesture, as if an actor on stage. "I am innocent, I swear to heaven. I beg you, inspector."

"That wee girl begged your husband and got fifteen years. As I said. Not my case."

With that and a polite nod from Mulholland, they were out of the door.

For a moment Judith fought the panic as her other impassive image looked down. In a strange way it brought the fear under control. No matter what McLevy had said, he had come. The question was what would he do next?

What the inspector in fact accomplished was to blow his nose vigorously outside in the street before addressing Mulholland. "Ye didnae say much."

"I was observing the scene."

"Whit did ye think?"

"Hard to tell with beautiful women."

McLevy let out a whoop of laughter. "By God you're right – hard tae tell whether she had it all prepared or it jist – spilled out like a gutted fish!"

"I know one thing though," Mulholland said gloomily. "You'll have noted those types on the corner over there?"

"I see them."

"Haymarket men. We are in deep trouble, sir."

McLevy nodded sagely. "You could be right and to that end, I propose that we part company. Myself to have a wee saunter round, and you to lawfully pursue the nostrum salesman."

Mulholland did not bother to argue. The inspector was up to something; it would be designed to get the nose out of joint of one Adam Dunsmore, a pompous nyaff that McLevy detested, and he, the constable, was in enough vexation already.

A shake of the head as he strode off. "No good will come of this, mark what I say."

"I hear those words, Mulholland, and they strike sparks from the anvil of caution!"

Having called out this nonsense and for some reason feeling absurdly cheerful, McLevy waggled his fingers at the watching Haymarket men then slid round the corner to disappear into the crevices of his beloved city.

Alec Nimmo was hoping to do a roaring afternoon trade. It was a fine summer's day, he had set up his open suitcase on a quiet street corner down by Leith Harbour and in no time at all he had gathered a curious crowd, mostly females, as he extolled his wares. He was a personable fellow with an impish gleam in his eye, a ready tongue, a quick wit and an easy smile, born in fact to sell worthless commodities to the public at large.

His tone was confidential, not strident, as he drew the audience in like bees to honey.

“Ladies,” he murmured. ~~“No one knows better than I the trials and tribulations you face. The~~ children, God bless their wee souls, are not meant to suffer the pains of ague and gum rot. They cry and howl for you their mother to soothe their brows and ease their aching breasts. You stand alone – damsel in distress!”

Here, he mimed the part of a worried mother, which drew some laughter from the throng. Alec allowed a little humour, but sympathy was his keynote. His hands were raised up dramatically in the air like a priest’s, for indeed the bulk of his audience would be of the Catholic faith and credulous to a fault.

“But do not despair, there is a solution at hand and I have it here before me!”

He held up a small bottle of reddish brown liquid as if it were indeed holy water.

“McMunn’s Elixir,” he intoned. “Made up uniquely by the most skilled apothecaries to a special recipe. Two large spoonfuls and your groaning infant will slip into a harmonious healing slumber.”

“I’ll give the wee bugger four!”

This cry, in a coarse Irish accent from a hefty matron who had an equally hefty baby in her arms, provoked laughter, but Alec kept the exchange on course for the acme of his persuasion approached.

“Two will be sufficient, believe me,” he answered smoothly. “No more, no less. Now the price for this elixir, this bringer of peace and happiness, is a remarkably considerate single sixpence.”

“That’s not cheap!” called the same woman.

Alec sighed and shook a weary head. “Very well, I am a fool to myself and soft-hearted to boot. I will reduce the price to five pence. Do I have any takers?”

“I’ll take the entirety and yourself as well, my good man.”

The voice that rang through the air was firm and commanding. Lieutenant Roach, since the station was sepulchral, had decided to stroll down by the harbour and, as luck, fate, or a roll of the dice ordained, had come upon the sought-after nostrum salesman.

Roach was well aware that both his subordinates, especially McLevy, regarded him as a desk-bound man. A drawback and the few times he had ventured out on the streets with them had met with varying success.

Now was his chance. Arrest the man where he stands and when the inspector returned empty handed, there would be the miscreant in the cells.

“Who the hell are you?” asked Alec since the lieutenant was near hidden at the back of the crowd.

“I am a policeman and you are breaking the law!”

But as Roach shoved through the onlookers, Alec’s quick wits came into play.

“Stand between us, ladies,” he cried manfully as he kicked the trestle together and slammed the suitcase shut to a clatter of bottles. “This man would deny your children the right to a peaceful existence!”

The crowd closed ranks and as the lieutenant attempted to push through, a foot neatly tripped him and he fell like a sack of coal on his hands and knees.

Alec called back triumphantly as he left at a rate of knots. “We’ll meet again, ladies, there are many nooks and crannies in Leith and I know them all!”

As Roach groaned, his knees having taken the brunt of the fall, the hefty woman looked down at him with contempt.

“Fell over your own feet. Some kind of policeman you are.”

Amid ribald laughter the lieutenant rose with as much dignity as could be mustered, and limped off in bootless pursuit of the vanished nostrum salesman.

A final insult was offered from the female as he disappeared from view. “Ye’ve ripped your trousers, mister. I’ll mend them for ye free of charge. All ye have to do is strip them off your back.”

hurdiess!”

~~Her baby woke up at the racket and started howling, and the hefty woman shook her head in disgust. If it hadn't been for that damned policeman, she'd have the wee brute pacified and be in clover.~~

Jean Brash lay back on the sofa with one silken arm of azure blue draped along its length. She had decided against the pink finally for fear it might give her the appearance of mutton dressed as lamb. Pink was for the young, or perhaps a rose bush in spring. She was neither.

It had been hard not to move and the process so far was a slight disappointment. Certainly being mastered as regards the deployment of her limbs had a certain frisson while she marvelled at the dependability and stamina of the man's purpose. Yet despite the quivering of muscles unused to such submission, so far there was a lack of excitement.

She was aware of some part being infiltrated but the sensation escaped her at this juncture.

Then, as if to compensate for this numbness of experience, the door flew open and a strange, amorphous shape blundered into the studio. The lines arranged themselves into the entity known to her as James McLevy, his face showing rare confusion.

“Damnation! The door stuck. I pushed. And here I am. It needs a good oiling. The hinges. The door.”

This was addressed to the third body in the room but Jean answered anyway. “You could have tried knocking.”

McLevy was further flustered. “Jean Brash – whit are you doing here?” Answer came there none so he had to work it out for himself. “A pose. You are posing!”

Jardine Boothroyd, brush in hand, confirmed the deduction. “Mistress Brash has commissioned a portrait.”

“Uhuh?” The inspector tried not to catch Jean's mocking eyes as he walked across to cast his discerning gaze over the preliminary sketch plus a few colour shades that Boothroyd had so far mapped out. “The nose isnae sharp enough.”

“What do you want here, McLevy?” Jean snapped; the man could nettle her no matter the surroundings.

“A word with Mister Boothroyd. But I didnae know he had such fine company.”

The artist made a smooth intervention before war broke out. “Perhaps we should stop, Mistress Brash. I would not wish to fatigue you.”

Jean stood up and shrugged into her coat, aware suddenly that her carriage was due and she had a bawdy-hoose to run. “I rarely run out of puff, Mister Boothroyd. Tomorrow – same time?”

“I shall be waiting.”

“Don't forget to oil the hinges. Goodbye, James, try to behave yourself.”

“Whit d'you want a picture for anyway?” McLevy asked out of the blue.

It was a good question. She had heard whispers from many sides that Jardine Boothroyd was a man of parts, her curiosity had been roused and, as Hannah had observed, she lacked diversion.

“So that when I am old and wrinkled, I may look back and see what a beauty I was in my prime?” Jean answered ironically.

“In your prime?”

“That is what I have attained. In case you havenae noticed!” And with that the door slammed leaving both men a little short of air.

Finally McLevy got a decent look at the man who was handy wi' a brush. Tall enough, broad enough, a handsome fleshy face with a slight hint of petulance. Weakness to the jaw? The brown eyes were steady though, penetrating under heavy brows, and the talent manifest in his portrait of Judith plus the sketch he had made of Jean.

The inspector had experienced an abrasive, choleric and unsuccessful exchange with Galbraith, the judge's doctor, and decided to take the plunge into art. Jean Brash was the last person he'd expected to find, but life is full of surprises. So here he was. With a lady's man.

"You wished to speak with me, inspector?"

Instead of answering, McLevy, whistling absent-mindedly under his breath, and wandered round the room like some visitor to a gallery. The large space with a skylight window above was remarkably tidy – he noticed a single bed tucked away in the corner, no doubt where the painter slept over possessed by artistic frenzy.

Of course it might have other uses but that would entail an obvious question that would give rise to an equally obvious answer. Mind you, the inspector quite enjoyed playing the buffoon and to that end sniffed the air like a warthog before enquiring, "Whit is that odour I detect?"

"Turpentine. For the cleaning of brushes."

"Is that poison?"

"The taste would deter an imbibor."

"Pity."

However, while Boothroyd, who had a remarkably deep and pleasant voice, patronised McLevy from the other side of the room, the policeman had been sifting idly through a sheaf of drawings neatly arranged in cardboard folders – mostly head and shoulders of various society matrons and, must be admitted, somewhat unattractive daughters. But then he found a preparatory study of Judith Pearson.

Again this was a head and shoulders with the flowing line of her bare neck given particular emphasis, but what was hidden in the finished portrait was manifest on paper.

He turned abruptly, holding the sketch under his chin so that it faced out to Boothroyd who now had the benefit of being regarded by two visages, one admiring and one most certainly not.

"Judith Pearson – how deep does it go?"

Boothroyd was disconcerted by the unexpected question and the ferocity in McLevy's eyes.

"I beg your pardon –"

"You heard me! How deep did you delve, my mannie, how deep does it go?"

"A . . . commission. Nothing more."

The inspector paid little heed to this faltering response and tapped the sketch with a meaningful forefinger. "A kind regard in her eyes. Ye might even say desirous."

The painter had recovered himself somewhat and adopted a lofty tone. "I have heard the rumours concerning myself and Judith Pearson, they are untrue and unwarranted. There is nothing between us."

McLevy let out a roar of laughter to further rattle the composure of his target. "That's what the widow announced. Exact same words."

"The simple truth!"

A sly disbelieving look answered this vehement protestation and McLevy shook the stiff paper. "The picture tells another story, my mannie. Desirous!"

"I cannot help it if women form attachments!"

Boothroyd's face jerked suddenly as if the truth had been ejaculated and McLevy intuited that perhaps, one way or another, should the man but know it, which he certainly did not, the painter might be exactly opposite to what he imagined of himself.

Not a predator, a victim. A weakling. He needed women. Needed to see his image in their eyes. McLevy also noted a faint sheen of perspiration on the smooth skin above the upper lip – a symptom of unease perhaps, or something stronger? Guilt was never far away, especially where murder concerned.

"Attachments, eh?" he echoed, replacing the sketch. "So long as you don't form them back?"

“Precisely!”

McLevy grinned like a wolf, nodded brusquely and left abruptly, without even a goodbye. Let his stew. But the inspector had a real case to pursue now and whistled cheerfully as he went down the narrow staircase.

One of Robert Burns’s less well-known airs: “My wife’s a wanton wee thing, She winna be guid by me.”

McLevy was still breezy as he walked into Lieutenant Roach’s office to find Adam Dunsmore waiting like a bad smell while, surveyed by the icon of Queen Victoria, Roach was grimness personified at his desk.

“You’ve been busy, inspector. In the Haymarket.”

“A few wee visits,” came a blithe response.

“One of them to the Pearson house,” Dunsmore declared. “My men saw you.”

“As I saw them.”

“And the other visit,” Roach interposed, lips pursed, “was to a certain Doctor Alexander Galbraith who has written a formal note of complaint, which Inspector Dunsmore has been kind enough to deliver by hand.”

“A good deed never goes wrong.”

The lieutenant ploughed on, trying to contain a mounting irritation. “The doctor states that you barged into his consulting rooms and tried to prise out confidential medical matters.”

“Stimulants,” McLevy clarified. “I wanted to know if Judge Pearson had been prescribed such as Arsenic, for instance.”

“You’re hawering, man. Typical Leith!”

Dunsmore’s interjection caused Roach to purse his lips further for a different reason – he was proud of his station and no one but himself insulted his officers.

“And who told you of these . . . stimulants, inspector?”

“The wife. After she wrote tae me.”

“A love letter, was it?” sniped the Haymarket man.

McLevy’s face betrayed nothing of the anger that was building. For two pins he’d smack the wretched nyaff in the chops and have done with it. But he kept steady, remembering that he was dealing with a lower species.

“She merely affirmed that she had no faith in the investigation and felt it was prejudiced against her.”

Dunsmore went puce. “You’ve got a damned cheek!”

“You go to hell, Dunsmore.”

Before blood might spatter the picture of his Queen, Roach took command. “That’s quite enough, gentlemen!”

He rose from his desk like Moses on the mountain. “Inspector Dunsmore, you may accept my assurance that your investigation can proceed without further intrusion and that the matter will be dealt with here – severely.”

Dunsmore nodded pompous acceptance of the offer but before leaving, strived for the last word. “And McLevy, as for your precious Mistress Pearson, I have evidence that will show the dirty line underneath. Dirty linen!”

Out he went and Roach surprised his subordinate with a quiet remark. “I don’t know if I much care for Mister Dunsmore.” Then just in case McLevy took that as a signal for further action, he added swiftly. “However, I want your solemn promise to interfere no more in this matter, otherwise I shall haul both you and Mulholland up before the chief constable for an official action of censure!”

“I promise not to set foot in Haymarket until I have your permission, sir.”

That came out a bit too pat for the lieutenant’s liking, but he nodded warily.

“Where is the constable anyway?” asked McLevy to alter tack before Roach became over suspicious.

“He has been already reprimanded and I have sent him to my home to pick up a spare pair trousers – it’s the least he can do.”

“I noticed the rupture in your cloth. Was it a dog?” enquired McLevy chummily. “I don’t like dogs.”

This brought to the lieutenant unwelcome memories of his recent debacle. “No, it was not a dog. Now quit my sight and for God’s sake try not to get into any more mischief!”

With the look of an angel of virtue that sat most strangely upon his countenance, McLevy slid off of sight.

Minnie Holmes, despite her profession, was a curiously innocent soul. In fact her apparent lack of guile attracted the older clients who could then indulge in patriarchal lechery of Biblical proportion. She had a small dainty face, a frame to match, and, in the main, seemed to find the world a puzzling proposition.

At this moment it was more fearful than puzzling as she sat between Jean Brash and McLevy in the kitchen of the Just Land. This was usually Hannah Semple’s domain where the old woman rustled up provender for the magpies on the principle that the girls needed sustenance for their activities in much the same fashion as an army marches on its stomach.

Jean had been informed of a tapping at the back garden door and opened it to find the inspector looming like a hungry beast in the dark night. No mention had been made of the recuperated boxer McLevy had merely remarked that he was on a case and needed information as regards the chosen magpie of Judge Pearson.

She had been tempted to inform him in turn that he might crawl into the nearest dung heap, but by chance Hannah had just made a brew of coffee and the aroma not only gave rise to a wistful look on the scrounger’s face but brought out her better side.

Besides she missed him like a sheep misses a tick.

The Just Land was busy with the General Assembly being in Edinburgh; however, Hannah was sent to fetch Minnie and now here they all were. Gathered to worship.

McLevy came straight to the point, though he was not too comfortable with the subject matter. “Now, Minnie . . . you were Judge Pearson’s preferred company, were you not?”

“He appreciated my beauty,” said Minnie.

Jean hid a smile. This could be fun.

McLevy slurped the fragrant coffee for succour. “Was the judge a . . . vigorous man?”

“No’ too bad. For his age. I had twa gae-ups for one gae-doon but that’s quite usual.”

Jean laughed aloud this time and the inspector’s face began to show pink at the edges. “To that end did he avail himself as it were . . . of artificial stimulation?”

“No. Not at all,” Minnie replied promptly, then catching the narrowing of eyes from a mistress who knew the magpies inside out. “Well – nearly not.”

“Tell me a wee thing,” McLevy said, with what he hoped was a benign expression.

“There was a white powder he took. Tried tae get me to, but I wouldnae.”

“Why didn’t you inform me of this, Minnie?” Jean exclaimed angrily.

“He said it was doctor’s orders,” was the plaintive response. “It perked him up no end.”

Silence followed. McLevy had nothing more to say but there was a predatory gleam in his eye.

“You may go now, Minnie,” said Jean, “and the next time some man lays out white powder, you l

me know.”

At the door Minnie stopped and a wistful look came over her face. “We used to do a game, the judge and me. I would be a butterfly. He would chase. And pin me down.”

With that she exited. A silence ensued.

“The powder might well have been arsenic,” McLevy remarked finally. “The judge was apparently murdered by such.”

“Ye think he took too much, maybe?”

“I don’t know. But a woman stands accused.”

“His pretty wee wife?” Jean teased, with more than a little needle in her tone. “Are you her knight in shining armour, James?”

He responded in kind. “Your friend Mister Boothroyd may well be involved in all this. Watch yourself.”

She too had heard the rumours and it had piqued her interest to the extent that Jean had decided to indulge her curiosity. A diversion of desire.

“Ye better get going,” she announced, refusing McLevy the satisfaction of a response. “As I said we have the General Assembly. Busy as hell.”

A sudden shaft of humour lit up the lupine eyes. “Whit happens if I meet one of the clergy?”

“Tell him you’re the devil in disguise.”

For a moment they looked at each other. Jean and McLevy had been in many scrapes together and it was a mystery to one and all what held the two of them in bondage. But bonded they were, and the secret they shared was one that no other person would ever penetrate, no matter how much acrimony danced at times in their hearts.

“I thank you, Jean Brash,” he said. “For the coffee.”

“Good night, James McLevy,” was her answer.

Diary of James McLevy

It is amazing how wayward women can be, for I do believe there was a hint of jealousy in Jean Brash at the end of our conversation. Thank God men are above such things.

And yet Judith Pearson’s countenance stays with me from that portrait. Desirous, yet vulnerable like a child caught in a woman’s body. Then Boothroyd, a handsome brute – flesh on the bone, but with a sense a weakness and behind that fallibility the rank sweat of fear and guilt.

What is the truth of it all? What lies behind these faces? How did the judge come to die and what is this feeling that I have somewhere missed a sign?

At this point McLevy laid down his pen, slurped at his tin mug and grimaced over the bitter dregs. Events so far had left a residue of crystals; dregs of a sort that he was looking at like some old harp in the fairground trying to read the future in tea leaves.

He opened the pages of *The Heart of Midlothian* to seek out solace in the writing of Sir Walter Scott, a man of the highest moral and literary integrity – never knowingly found in a bawdy-hoosier who aspired to the ideal that virtue may always be rewarded and treachery unerringly punished.

The inspector had never found this to be the case in his own experience but he was prepared to be diverted.

Yet something in the case had slipped him by, and he could not bring it to mind.

As the artist struggled out of profound sleep a gloved hand laid itself over his mouth. He let out

muffled yelp of anger and fear at the intrusion while a voice sounded in the darkness – a voice familiar to his senses but not welcome at this moment.

“Pleasure and pain, Mister Boothroyd. Pleasure and pain.”

The hand was removed for him to blurt out, “God Almighty, what are you doing here?”

Judith Pearson laughed softly, desperation and desire entangled in her response. “I have your key entered in.” She saw the panic in his eyes and moved to soothe this reaction. “The servants were asleep. I left by the back door. No one saw me.”

“How can you be sure?”

Once more Judith fed him comfort; this was what drew her to Jardine Boothroyd, the need for reassurance like a child almost, in contrast to his driving certainty in the act of love.

“It is the dead of night. Everyone sleeps, save you and I.” She took his hand and pressed it fast over her heart just below a breast untrammelled by corset. “There – can you feel it beating?”

He was still uneasy. A recent visit had unsettled his nerves. “McLevy – he came – he asked me of you. At great length.”

“How excellent!” she cried. “The inspector is pursuing the case – that is the best news possible!”

“You are mad, Judith. This . . . we agreed that there would be no contact. You are mad.”

She laughed softly and leant closer so that he might smell the fragrance of her perfume. “What have we to fear? We are innocent. Babes in the wood.”

His eyes began to adjust to the darkness. He could make out the familiar shapes of the studio and the white oval of her face hanging before him like a tempting spectre. Hard to think when the mouth is dry, when desire melts resolve and hardens flesh.

“Innocent,” she repeated, her lips now so near that he could feel the warmth of her breath. “Save for a certain . . . enticement on your part.” Judith laughed again but this time with an edgy, uncontrolled quality that both alarmed and attracted the artist.

“You laid aside the brush, walked over to where I sat and said, ‘I admire the line of your neck. It is very beautiful.’ You reached out your finger and traced that line down my flesh. Skin upon skin. Do you remember?”

His hand had moved to cup her breast. Another familiar shape.

“And do you remember when you came to my house, to finish off the portrait – you held me hard against the wall? So hard I was bruised. Like a butterfly.”

“Yes,” he muttered hoarsely.

“We are guilty of nothing but love, and must be forgiven our sins.”

“Sins?” The judge had died. Out of the blue. Poison was rife in rumour but he knew nothing except – the judge had died. His thoughts were confused. There are many sins. But he knew nothing.

Judith could sense his desire now. To match her own flame. This was everything. All her terrible fears burnt to ashes at this moment. This was everything.

“It is the dead of night,” she murmured. “Only we two . . . are truly alive.”

Somewhere a church clock struck midnight as their bodies moved together into the two-backed beast.

Pleasure and pain.

Alec Nimmo once more weaved his spell. Market Place, Leith: different crowd, similar delivery as he neared the end of a dramatic description on the vicissitudes of motherhood. “Ague and gum rot! The children cry and howl for you their mother to soothe their brows and ease their aching bodies –”

“They need McMunn’s Elixir.”

Alec’s head snapped round as a tall figure detached itself from the crowd and moved to stand directly before the improvised trestle table. It was most obviously a constable at law.

“And I need you at the station,” said Mulholland. “With your confiscated cargo.”

“You want it? You can have it!”

So saying, Alec threw the contents of his tray at his nemesis and hurtled off, only to be tripped by an unexpected boot that brought him hard to the ground.

“Alec Nimmo!” said McLevy cheerfully as he hauled the man up. “I thought you’d moved Glasgow.”

“I came back,” was the gloomy response.

“That was a mistake,” replied the inspector as a none-too-happy Mulholland approached, spattering in brown liquid spilled from the scattered bottles.

“Oil of cloves,” McLevy identified amongst the odours. “Nice smell.”

“Plus the laudanum,” said the constable grimly, as he slammed the restrainers onto Alec’s wrists. There were no heroics from the throng this time – Roach had finally confessed his failure as regards crowd control and so, forewarned, one glare from McLevy sent them on their way.

“Well, Alec,” the inspector said to the disconsolate figure. “I thought market day in Leith would be too much of a temptation for a nostrum salesman and I was proven right.”

“I havenae done anything wrong, McLevy.”

“You sold a serving maid this mixture and she near killed two children with it,” Mulholland reprimanded.

“She must hae poured it doon,” was the indignant claim. “I tell them every time, jist twa spoonfuls.”

The constable was unimpressed and McLevy shrugged his shoulders. “Sorry, Alec, but the law is the law –”

“Wait!” As Nimmo was about to be dragged off, his quick mind was searching out a bargaining chip. “The man that makes up the mixture, he’s mair tae blame than me, eh? An apothecary. Respectable!”

Neither policeman altered expression. Less said the more comes your way.

Alec’s words tumbled over each other in an effort to ignite their interest. “Dishes it out under the counter. Society doctors at the back door. Dishes out the drugs – cheap, cash in hand, nothing official, no records kept. Records do not inspire trust, eh?”

Both officers had heard of such criminality, though finding proof had always been the problem. Yet they still gave nothing away. McLevy sniffed at the oil of cloves emanating from Mulholland as if that was all there was to concern him and the constable jerked impatiently at the restrainers round Nimmo’s wrists.

“Wait! I can give you his name. They come from all over, he tellt me, the doctors. Princes Street, the Royal Terrace, Haymarket, everywhere!”

“Haymarket?” All feigned disinterest blew away in smoke as McLevy’s eyes lit up like a wolf on the prowl.

“Now hold on,” Mulholland said worriedly. “Hold it right there –”

Nimmo smiled at the constable’s reaction and then flinched slightly to find McLevy’s face about a foot and a half inch away from his own, eyes boring in like the east wind.

“I’ll do what I can for you, Alec, but you better not be blawin’ your horn. Nice and slow. No mistakes. Name and address. We can go in by the back door.”

Alexander Galbraith had large mutton chop whiskers that framed a florid complexion and a choleric disposition. It showed at this moment as he faced intruders in his home.

“So, inspector, not content with invading my consulting rooms, you now interrupt my mealtime as well!”

McLevy was unperturbed; not, however, Mulholland, who knew that if this went wrong they would both be up before the chief constable – at the least, official reprimand with a black mark on the book – and at worst the added infliction of being taken off the streets and confined to desk work at the station. A fate worse than death.

The odour of steak and kidney pie wafted in from the kitchen where the Galbraith family sat waiting for a blessing from the master of the house as he launched into further vehement remonstrance directed at McLevy.

“I have already made one complaint about you, sir, but this time I shall go straight to the top. And let me warn you, I attend the same Masonic lodge as your own Chief Constable!”

Mulholland winced, but the inspector did not turn a hair as he threw out a casual question. “Templeton the apothecary. Do you know him?”

Galbraith blinked for a second. “I don’t think so.”

In for a penny, thought Mulholland. “Mister Templeton has premises in the Canongate, sir.”

“What has this to do with me?”

“You have certain similarities,” McLevy affirmed quietly. “Both weak and greedy men.”

“How dare you!”

But the accusation lacked a certain force as the inspector continued testimony. “The apothecary supplied large amounts of cheap laudanum to a nostrum seller called Alec Nimmo. We threatened Templeton with criminal proceedings and he cracked like a soft-boiled egg.”

“I . . . I fail to see –”

“His back room had all the opiates under the sun, sir,” Mulholland added gravely. “None of them noted on his receipt books – illicit sources, no doubt.”

“There’s a fortune to be made for a doctor dispensing to the addicts of high society – get it cheap, sell it dear, and no one is any the wiser.”

McLevy’s calm statement provoked another blustering response from Galbraith but if it was possible for a ruddy-faced man to turn white, it was happening before their eyes.

“How . . . how does this concern me, if I may ask?”

“Simple,” said the inspector. “Templeton will testify that you were one of his main customers.”

Galbraith was stunned into silence. He would be reported to the Medical Council.

“I shall be ruined.”

“Indeed you will, sir,” the constable confirmed solemnly. “And sore disgraced.”

McLevy carried on in this tenor as if staring into the grave of a dead reputation. “There may be some degree of clemency, Doctor Galbraith, but that is dependent upon your willingness to offer some cooperation.”

“In what?” asked a man desperate for redemption.

“In the small matter,” said James McLevy, “of a dead judge.”

Adam Dunsmore was back in Leith Station. Same room, same Queen above, Roach at his desk, Mulholland like a lamp-post at the door, and the inexorable figure of McLevy at the centre of the stage.

The Haymarket man looked as if someone had kicked him in the stomach as he listened to his rival bringing these unwelcome discoveries into the light of day.

McLevy ended the account of his investigation with a single succinct statement.

“Judge Pearson was addicted to arsenic. For priapic purposes. Galbraith supplied him.”

“That proves nothing!”

“It would, however, Inspector Dunsmore,” Roach said judiciously, “explain the amount of arsenic in the body.”

Having no intelligent response to that, Dunsmore took refuge in recrimination. "You assured me, Lieutenant Roach, that McLevy would be off this case."

"I promised to stay away from Haymarket," the inspector intervened with a straight face. "It's true that Galbraith's consulting rooms were in your parish, but his house is up by the university. Miles away."

"Ye're worse than a Highlander, McLevy!"

"The inspector stuck to his word though," Mulholland chimed in from the doorway. "No denying that."

Roach nodded what seemed reluctant agreement with his constable, and the Haymarket man tried hard to control his umbrage at such persecution. "I know she did it. I have proof."

"You have suspicion, that's not enough."

This comment of McLevy's was the last straw.

"One of the servants saw her, through the keyhole," Dunsmore blurted. "Dirty trollop!"

"A keyhole observation?" McLevy riposted. "Whit does that prove?"

"Boothroyd and her. In the room together, locked the door but the butler keeked in. She was unbuttoned, his hands everywhere. Up against the wall. Didn't even have the decency to lie down!"

Silence followed this graphic image.

"The servant will confirm such?" asked Roach.

"I have his sworn testimony."

McLevy and Mulholland exchanged glances. So that's what Dunsmore had up his sleeve – no wonder he'd been so cocksure – but now his case was shot to pieces.

"I'll charge her anyway," said Dunsmore bitterly. "The world will get to see her. A dirty little trollop."

"What is the woman on trial for, inspector – murder or adultery?"

Dunsmore paid no attention to McLevy's remark. "She killed her husband to enjoy her lover. I know it in my bones. One way or another – she poisoned him dead!"

A long silence ensued on all sides before Roach took command.

"I'll deal with you later, McLevy. You may have stayed within the strict letter of your promise but that's about all, the rest is wilful disobedience. You may leave."

The inspector nodded, but just before departing, his eyes locked with the bitter angry gaze of Adam Dunsmore.

"Quack, quack, Adam," he said. "Who'd have thought a nostrum seller could lead to such a pass eh?"

"I hope you burn in hell, McLevy."

Roach sighed as the other two shut the door behind them. Though Dunsmore had brought this upon himself, he felt some pity for the stricken man.

"Inspector," he asked, reaching into a low drawer of his desk whence the clink of glass was heard. "May I offer you a small malt whisky – just to show that Leith is not completely beyond redemption?"

Dunsmore bowed his head, Victoria gazed into the middle distance and the liquid headed for the glass as if signalling an end to proceedings.

Outside in the main station McLevy's face was sombre; despite his parting jibe, he felt . . . incomplete.

What had been said? What had been betrayed that he could not bring to mind? What had slipped him by?

Mulholland was by no means celebrating either – they had yet to face the wrath of Roach.

"The inspector has strong evidence that Judith Pearson is guilty of infidelity," McLevy muttered. "And that furnishes hard and proven motive."

“But you’ve demolished the case for poison,” the constable pointed out. “Arsenic no longer applies.”

McLevy made no answer. Something was obviously swirling in his mind and Mulholland wondered if it was the same image of vertical infidelity.

“Not such a sweet wee butterfly after all, eh?” he commented. “A Painted Lady. Caught in the act.”

The inspector had been replaying the meeting with Judith Pearson – what had she said? *Caught. Once caught he might stifle their senses?* And then what had slipped him by, the intuition that had been trying to throw rocks up from the depths, finally hit the mark.

Damnation!

McLevy moved off swiftly and called back to the still stationary constable. “If Dunsmore comes on with a gun looking for yours truly, tell him I’ve gone to consult an expert in *Papilionidae!*”

With that he was gone. Mulholland wondered whether to follow but he hadn’t been invited and besides it was Thursday, the Old Ship tavern would have sheep’s head broth on the evening board, and it had been a long while since he’d had a decent meal.

A safer course of action by far.

Judith Pearson was caught indeed; amid elation and a certain dread as she stood before an impassive McLevy while her portrait hung between them on the wall.

Elation – when he had informed her that the arsenic found in her husband’s body was a result of the judge’s choosing and not hers.

Dread – that Dunsmore intended to press the case regardless and had sworn testimonial to her lubricity.

She nevertheless dismissed the butler’s evidence. Judith had banished him the previous day – the man had been devoted to her husband and had turned the servants against her. A despicable spy.

“But is his tale true?” asked the inspector, a sardonic glint in his eye. “Come along. You owe me some veracity, just atween ourselves. I am your knight in shining armour after all.”

The widow took a swift glance around as if to make sure no witnesses were present. “I . . . cannot deny I have some feeling for Mister Boothroyd and he for me.”

“Was it consummated?” he enquired bluntly.

The violet eyes flashed in anger. “That is not the matter of accusation. It is murder, and I am innocent!”

“Not quite.”

The force of these two words silenced her for a moment. “What do you mean?”

James McLevy looked around at the glass cases hung upon the wall. “I have been consulting with an expert in the field and he confirmed my suspicions.”

“As regards what?”

He did not answer the question immediately but looked at her as perhaps a collector of crime might regard a rare specimen. Then he whistled a Jacobite tune under his breath before launching forth.

“Let us suppose,” he began quietly, “a wife wishes to murder her husband and comes upon a perfect solution – use the man’s own obsession as the weapon against him.”

He crossed to where the Painted Lady lay quiescent in her case, and continued. “When he caught a beautiful creature within his net, the husband would pinch the thorax to stifle consciousness, then poison the victim in the killing jar – you mentioned such on our first meeting, Mistress Pearson, and it lodged deep within my mind yet did not emerge until this very day.”

Judith was calm, her gaze unwavering.

“Death for the butterfly would be caused by a fermentation of crushed laurel leaves – hydrocyanic acid, otherwise known as . . . cyanide. As I say, a perfect solution for the husband.”

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