

A Case Most Peculiar

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Smashwords Edition

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Prologue

Were I an ordinary and reasonable man it is entirely possible that the volume you are about to read would never have been written down in the first place. I, of course, have never considered myself anything within the realm of ordinary so it is only fitting that the most extraordinary experience of my life be chronicled. Most assuredly it will be chalked up to my overabundance of imagination and affinity for opium but nevertheless it is written here for those with an open mind, or at least time to be wasted. The story began with a letter in the winter of nineteen-hundred and twelve. It was addressed to the offices of Carson & Parney. Obviously the soul that had written it had procured the address from an outdated edition of the London Times. No advertisement bearing that name had been posted in years.

My partner, Matthew Parney, had met his end three winters preceding; stabbed to death with a crudely fashioned shiv by the snakesman we had been pursuing at the behest of a warehouse owner who had seen stock continually vanish from his property. The thug's weapon brought to a crashing halt a partnership that had already been on the rocks for several years. Parney and I were friends, that much had always remained constant, but being a man of military background the baser aspects of my personality often grated on him.

He'd married a woman from Leeds who was something of a teetotaler and far more religious than any sane person ought be. Despite allowing him to choose me as best man for the wedding she never approved of Parney and I fraternizing in the evenings. Gone were our nights of drunken revelry for Mr. Parney, despite his staunch military facade, had quite a penchant for hard drink and was prone to pub brawls or running off to some dark alley with a local Judy.

As our friendship deteriorated so did my diligence and more and more frequently Parney found himself retrieving me from opium dens and brothels. You see, unlike my partner, I did not receive the loving affection of two stable parents and the benefits of a modest education.

I was born in the year eighteen-hundred and seventy-six to a cowardly drunk of a father and a mother who'd once earned her keep as a lady of the evening. My father was twenty years my mother's senior and worked as a shoemaker in Northampton.

At the age of six I was sent to live in an orphanage in London after that old muck snipe decided one evening to burn down our house in a jealous and drunken rage and to blame the fire on my mother. He said she'd gone off her chump and had her committed the very next day to the state hospital. It would be thirteen years before I would see her again. By that time, of course, being in the presence of so much madness had left her little more than a specter. Her heart still beat and still she drew breath but she did little else, save for stare out of the windows; through those bars that contained the insanity within.

As to my father I found that some years later he had succumbed to syphilis and died penniless and alone, a fate I feel he likely deserved.

At the age of twenty-two, with empty pockets and little more than the clothes on my back I left Northampton for London, hoping to find decent employment. Something which had eluded me in my home city. Little had prepared me for the reality of the place. It was a foul city, the sky often black with soot and the streets smelling of shite and all manner of retched things. Realizing very quickly it was not a place for me I made the decision to join the Queen's army.

Attempting to work up the nerve I went for a quick pint before signing away my very life to queen and country and it was in that dreary establishment on Fleet Street that I met Mr. Matthew Parney.

From his manner of dress and the slight limp that he carried it was apparent to me that he had served, so I bought him a pint and began to inquire about his career. After polishing off the first round with astonishing speed he order another and kept them coming. In fact in retrospect it is now apparent to me that he sought to make sure that I was too inebriated to ever make it out of that pub and back to the enlistment office. He told me about the miserable conditions; the friends he'd lost serving in Burma and of the many men he'd seen die pointlessly of illness a few years later in Ghana. Naive as I was I did finally catch on to his plot and explained to him that although the military was not what I truly wanted out of life that I had nowhere else to go and nothing else to make a life out of.

I walked, or rather stumbled, out of that pub some time approaching sunrise with a new friend and the promise of employment. Matthew had the good fortune to catch the eye of a young woman whose father owned a brewery. It was a modest one, the family had in no way become rich from their business, but they were at least comfortable. A month later and I'd managed to acquire lodgings, meager as they were, of my own and things began to improve. I even met a young lady who worked at a restaurant as a waitress and began to court her. Her name was Alice and she had lovely shoulder length hair the color of wheat. She had a beautiful smile and seemed to take quite a fancy to me. Best of all her family was poor, this meant that a boy like me had nothing to live up to in order to gain their acceptance.

Then, three days before Christmas of eighteen ninety-seven, Parney's fiancée was found murdered in her flat. Despite knowing him for only a short while I felt that I understood Matthew Parney quite well so you can imagine my surprise when such a strong and grounded man flew into a rage and disappeared for several days. I found him half a week later in an opium den. He refused to speak with me until I partook in the evil myself. Introducing me to opium was one of the things I knew Parney always regretted, though he never said it aloud. My mental fortitude was stronger in those days and I managed to wrestle him from his stupor the next morning and with some tea and harsh words brought him to his senses.

As he stood and dressed himself he made his intentions quite clear. He wanted to return to London and track down whoever had taken the life of his beloved. There was no mistaking the seriousness in his eyes. As absurd as it seemed he somehow thought that he and I could do what Scotland Yard could not, track down the killer and bring him to justice. To be honest I thought him a complete fool, though I did understand how his recent bereavement could bring him to such madness. So I went along.

That was our first case. We succeeded brilliantly. As it turned out the fiancée's brother had accumulated a rather sizable gambling debt and had hired a young bootblack to remove his sister as a beneficiary to what little fortune he would inherit when his father passed away. How, precisely, he had planned to kill the old man we never discovered.

After presenting our evidence to the authorities an arrest attempt was made but the brother fled. Parney and I caught up with him shortly thereafter but the fool pulled a pistol. My partner; however, made short work of him with the service revolver that he carried concealed in his coat pocket.

After that Matthew Parney asked me to go into business with him, we were to be private consulting investigators. I agreed so long as what had happened with the pistol did not happen

again. We were to solve crimes, not to deal out justice. He agreed and with the meager funds at our disposal we rented an office above a bakery.

The heat from those ovens rising through the ceiling kept us warm that first winter as the office served both as our place of business as well as our residence. Slowly but steadily we built our endeavor and it seemed as though we'd both found our calling in life. We were damned good at what we did. For ten years we worked together.

The first six or so of those years were exhilarating. Then came Margaret and as my closest friend in the world pulled away from me thanks to the meddling of that conservative wench I sank into self-doubt and my actions began to cause Parney to lose confidence in me. I'd strung along poor Alice for many years as well, too uncertain of myself to ever marry her, so eventually she walked out and never came back.

Then one night that miserable little gonoph sent Parney to the grave and it was all over. I moved into what had once been Matthew and I's office once again and sank into an overwhelming depression. My life became a bizarre mixture of bouts of heavy cocaine use, so that I could get any work done, interspersed with days on end of wasting away in opium dens trying to forget how much it hurt to simply be alive. No family, no friends, dwindling business. I began to get an overwhelming sense that the time when I would compromise my morals was fast approaching and that soon I would become little better than the criminals that I sought to bring to justice.

So it was in my thirty-fifth year that a letter arrived, a letter that set off a chain of events that would completely remake my life. Surely, staring at the multitude of pages on my desk, I have already begun to ramble. I shall now get on with my story.

The Letter

Inspectors Carson & Parney, I pray that this letter finds you well. My name is Elizabeth Dunning, I am the daughter of Mr. Michael Dunning, a prominent businessman of Leeds.

At the mention of Leeds I distinctly remember opening the bottle of scotch which sat upon my desk and pouring myself a glass. Any mention of the city quickly brought the Widow Parney to the forefront of my mind, someone I preferred not to think of. I decided instead to inspect the letter itself. The letter was typewritten, the paper of a fine quality and a faint odor of expensive perfume. Whoever had posted it possessed money to spare, she was not lying about her father.

I hope that you will forgive my forthrightness, I know that it is not proper for a lady of my standing, but I write to you concerning a matter of a most urgent nature. A grievous act has recently been allowed to occur on my family's estate. My father and brothers would prefer that the matter slip for fear of the truth tarnishing my prospects of marriage into a noble family. I, however, have decided to seek out my own justice and hence is the reason that I am writing you now. There is no tactful means of conveying this so I shall simply spell it out for you kind sirs. I was involved in a love affair with the boy who managed our stables and on the morning of February 17th he was found dead by our servant boy.

Considering the haste with which he was buried and the lack of any investigation I can only surmise that someone in my family decided to end our affair and plotted his death. It is my hope that you will choose to take the case and can come to Leeds as soon as your schedule will allow. Enclosed you will find train tickets as well as the address of Mr. Samuel Peterson. He is an old family friend whom I have arranged to escort you to our estate upon your arrival. I can assure you that you will be paid handsomely for your time. I look forward to meeting you both in person.

*Sincerely,
Elizabeth Dunning*

Swirling the scotch in my glass I began to wonder if my distaste for Leeds was truly warranted, most especially since the words "paid handsomely" had been included within the contents of the letter. The dreariness outside of my office window and the cold that the ovens below barely held at bay made me consider how nice it would be to get away from London for a few days; to enjoy the warm bed and satisfying food that would be provided at such an estate. After all, it had been several years since I'd left the depressing greyness of London behind and seen some of the countryside.

A knock at the door brought me back to the moment. I emptied my glass and placed it on the table before getting to my feet and walking over to it. Through the large crack in between two of the door's planks I could see that it was Mrs. Caffrey. She was the baker's wife and also my land-lord. I reached for my pocket watch and was surprised to see that it was already supper time. I straightened my collar, attempted my best smile, and opened the door.

"Good evening Mrs. Caffrey."

“Good evenin’ Mr. Carson.” the plump middle-aged woman smiled up at me and spoke with her typical accent, cockney of the variety so thick it could be spread onto toast with a knife if one so desired. “A lil’ somefin to soak up all de scotch you’ve no-doubt been getting’ into since mid-day.”

“You would be correct Madame.” I replied.

“It’s not good for you Mr. Carson and I don’t like it one bit but since you’re not likely to ‘ave a change of ‘eart on account’a me I’ll just leave you wif your supper.”

She held a plate out in front of her. By the look of the inlaid patterns it had at one time been part of a set of fine china. It now served as a second-hand curio, something to feed the good-for-nothing upstairs tenant off of and likely the dog as well. For I could swear I’d seen the same plate in the alley every morning. It was of little importance. At such a low point in my life eating from the same dinnerware as a dog was only one more indignity to heap upon the already considerable load that I somehow managed to make bigger day by day.

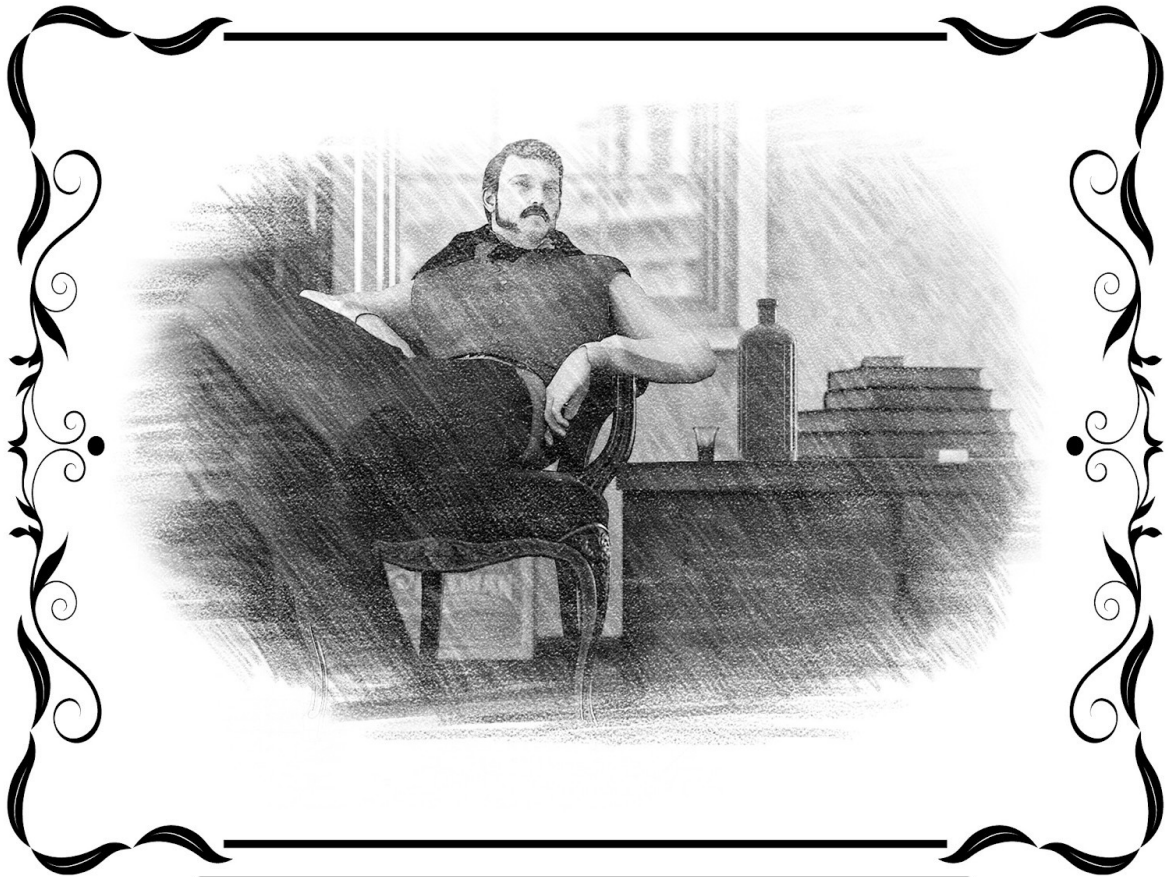
I decided, like every evening, that politeness was the best course of action. I looked down at the steaming meat pies resting upon the chipped old plate, they looked delicious. They were accompanied by what looked, by the state of it, to be a hunk of three-day-old rye bread. Beggars, as they say, cannot be choosers and my land-lords had no obligation to feed me. They felt sorry for me and therefore offered me kindness.

“It smells positively delicious. I shall cork my bottle and sit down to enjoy my meal. Please tell Mr. Caffrey that he has my appreciation, as do you my good lady.” and with that I smiled at her once more and nodded a quick thanks before closing the door.

In the depths of winter the floorboards in my living space made an awful creaking any time I roamed from one side of the room to the other and as predicted they did so as I walked back to the spot where I had been sitting near the window and set my plate onto the wobbly old table. I often considered how the Caffreys were actually rather lucky to have me as a tenant. Between my drunken stupors, in which I seldom moved from my chair, and my many evenings spent in opium dens those creaky old floorboards were frequently silent for long spans of time.

As I bit into the first pie my thoughts returned to the matter in Leeds. The meat was so savory and this did much to lift my mood. Yes, perhaps I would take the job in the country. Not that I would in any way wish to decry the quality of the Caffreys’ cooking but perhaps a few days of fresh air and some finely prepared meals would do much to restore my vigor. Of course should the entire affair fail to work as a restorative at least I would have some coin in my pocket, even if it was only to spend on narcotics and women of comfort. The fact I had degenerated into such a sad state that even my land-lords took pity upon me, and had for some time, had not been lost on me. I make no excuses and do not expect any reader of this story to sympathize with me. My suffering *is* and *has* been without exception of my own doing.

Upon finishing the meat pies I decided to tuck the stale slice of rye into my coat pocket. Might as well save it for another time, it was already long past fresh. My hand went for the nearly empty bottle of scotch but retreated. I’d told Mrs. Caffrey that I’d cork the bottle and leave it corked I would. I had packing to do.



The dreariness outside of my office window and the cold that the ovens below barely held at bay made me consider how nice it would be to get away from London for a few days; to enjoy the warm bed and satisfying food that would be provided at such an estate.

The Train To Yorkshire

There had been a few items of business to attend to before setting off for the train station, which I did roughly at noon. The day was especially rainy and the general cold misery of London when it was wet only reinforced my decision to leave for a time. As a long-time inspector I had the train schedule memorized, in case I needed to prevent a criminal's flight from the city, but they had recently changed it all around and I'd yet to commit the new schedule to memory. As luck would have it, however, the next departure to Leeds was at 1:15 in the afternoon so my wait was not a terribly long one.

Upon boarding the train I was directed to a private cabin. It would seem that my benefactor indeed had money to spare. Not being one to look a gift horse in the mouth I gladly tipped the boy who'd helped me with my belongings and asked where I might find the bar. He pointed me toward it and I hesitated for a moment. Should I begin this new venture with a head full of alcohol? My weakness got the better of me and assured my good reason that I'd be plenty sober by the time I went calling upon Mr. Peterson. Walking from my cabin to the bar I shuffled by many passengers but all of them seemed to be of middle or upper classes. I figured it doubtful they even allowed the riff-raff from steerage to come into the more luxurious cars. Despite the fact that I often found class distinction to be distasteful I can say that it certainly added to the ambiance. Not once were my nostrils offended by the harsh smells I was accustomed to whilst walking the streets of London. Everyone seemed to smell of delightful and fragrant perfumes which began to make me keenly aware of the ragged state of my own attire and how my own fragrance likely offended their delicate upper-class noses. I smiled and chuckled to myself. "Good. Let them be offended." was all I could think.

My suspicion was confirmed when the bar-tender eyed me up and down as I approached. Now I feel I must explain, being a business man I most certainly did not dress nor smell like the city's common rabble, but the once-fine clothing that I wore had begun to clearly show the signs of use and age. I did frequent bath houses and tried to maintain a certain level of hygiene but compared to those with their own private baths and servants to keep them nice and tidy I must have appeared in an utter state of disarray. I made a quick effort to brush my hair into shape with my hand and then remembered that I'd forgotten to shave. Oh well, I was in need of strong drink and the bar-tender's opinion of me was of little concern.

"What shall it be sir?" his question came off somewhat sarcastically.

I leaned against the bar and motioned for him to come closer. "Look here young man. I may not smell of the finest cologne and my attire may not be the latest fashion but I can assure you that I have money for drinks and if you intend to relieve me of any of it in the form of gratuity you will at once change your attitude. Are we clear?"

To my surprise the boy chuckled and smiled then leaned in and spoke into my ear. "Truth be told these blue-bloods make me sick sir and I commend you for correcting me on my snobbery. Last thing I want is to become anything like them." he slapped me on the shoulder and reached for a glass, "Tell you what, first drink's on the house."

"Most appreciated young man."

"Just remember that when it comes time to dole out that gratuity."

"That I shall."

I was starting on my second glass of scotch when I felt the lurch of the train as it set off. I had been chatting with the young barkeep, who I'd learned was also named Robert. Meanwhile several other patrons had entered the car and taken seats. Most of them chose to sit in groups at tables but those who had no companions sat at the bar as I did, though they did keep at least one stool between myself and their own person. Did I really appear such an unsavory character?

Regardless, I chose to ignore them. Of course when I say "ignore" what I actually mean is that I did not socialize with them. Whether drink had touched my lips or not my eyes were always observing and my mind always analyzing. Opium was the only substance I had yet encountered that had the ability to turn off my...well I suppose it's either a gift or a curse depending upon how one looks at it. I turned often to opium as a rest from my constant whirlwind of thoughts but I was intelligent enough to space out my visits to the dens. I had seen first-hand what addiction could do to a fellow, so while I chose to partake on a fairly regular basis and my mind had become somewhat reliant on the substance I never allowed my body to follow suit.

By the look of the gentleman sitting four seats down from me it was obvious that he was no stranger to opium either. Rather more likely laudanum to be specific. I'd noticed the vague smell of the concoction upon him as he'd walked by me and a stolen glance at his pupils told me the rest of the story.

The lady two seats down to my left wore a large fur coat and a strand of pearls around her neck as well as several rings of the finest variety which rested upon her fingers. She was the widow of a wealthy man and quite a lush. No man accompanied her yet she still wore a wedding ring. The heavy wrinkles on her face despite the lack of any gray hair told me that alcohol had aged her prematurely, that and the fact that her hand had not once left her glass and that she kept a constant eye on the bartender, never allowing him to venture far from her sight.

The extremely heavy perfume she wore as well as the nearly-indecent amount of makeup coupled with the sultry glances she was giving to every man at the bar not accompanied by a woman suggested that she was indeed single and likely on the prowl for another nouveau-riche to guide comfortably into his death bed.

To my right sat an American banker. His accent wreaked of Boston and his style of dress as well as the masonic emblem he wore on his lapel told the rest. He'd also produced a rather large bundle of cash to pay for his first drink yet failed to provide any gratuity to the young man working the bar. This man liked to keep all of his transactions nice and tidy, he refused to start a running tab, insisting instead that he would pay for each drink individually.

"What mine did you work?" I asked of young Robert as I signaled for him to refill my glass.

"Excuse me?"

"You were a miner were you not?"

"Yes but how did you..."

As he handed me my third glass of scotch I grasped his left hand in my own and turned it over. "Calluses of the type gained from using a pick-axe for prolonged periods of time. I have also heard you cough no less than seventeen times, albeit subtly, since I have sat down. If that's not enough there is also an unmistakable bit of Durham accent on your tongue."

"So then you already know where I worked. Why bother asking?"

I chuckled to myself and took a sip of the top-shelf scotch that I was enjoying far too much for my own good. "Conversation my good man. Perhaps the better question now is what are you doing serving drinks on a train?"

"Doctors said I couldn't keep working the mine."

“Surely not. What are you? All of twenty-two?”

“Twenty-one.”

“I’ve known men to work those mines for the better part of forty years before succumbing to diseases of the lung and you managed in a tenth of that?”

“My father died at thirty-six. Doctor said it ran in the family and that I’d be dead long before that if I kept at it.”

“Curious. A hereditary intolerance for coal dust?”

“Your guess is as good as mine sir. The doctor’s an old family friend and his brother works for the railroad, said he could get me a job and so here I am filling glasses for folks who look down their nose at me.”

“An interesting fact of life, Mr. Robert, is that no matter how high on the social ladder one thinks he is there is always someone higher.”

The boy gave me a queer look then asked, “What about you? I’ve been trying to put my finger on you since you sat down and best I can guess is you’re a copper.”

I laughed out loud, perhaps with a bit too much volume as it seemed to disturb the lady with the audacious coat, she glared at me. “Robert...the bar-tender, I am many things but a copper is not one of them.” I raised my glass into the air, “I am a private inspector of some repute. Well...at least I used to be. Now I am somewhat better associated with a penchant for strong drink and inappropriate behavior.”

The boy’s demeanor changed in an instant and he leaned in close. “You’re here to investigate the missing jewels and bonds aren’t you?”

His statement piqued my interest. I raised an eyebrow and queried, “Stolen jewels and bonds you say?”

“Yes, on the last four trips items have gone missing from private cabins all over the train. I’d heard some of the staff say that the railroad was hiring an inspector to come aboard and try to apprehend whoever is responsible.”

“Very interesting. No that is not why I am here.” one of my most infuriating traits is my inability to let a mystery rest, “Tell me more. Do they suspect anyone in particular? Someone in the employ of the railroad would of course be at the top of my list since the robberies have taken place on multiple trips.”

“I’ve heard no accusations Inspector.”

“Hmm. What about passengers? Have you noticed any particular passenger taking frequent trips?”

He laughed and responded, “Sir this is a train, many of the folks here ride the line several times a week. I can spot at least five of them in this very room now that I see on a weekly basis.”

“Yes, but have you noticed any *one* particular person on *all* of the trips in question?”

He thought for a moment. “I don’t think so sir, but then again it’s rather difficult since I see many of the same faces quite often.”

I rubbed my chin in thought, “Well, I suppose my first order of business is to speak to the engineer and make certain that there is not already an inspector hired by the railroad aboard this train. I’d not want to impede his investigation in any way.”

“Of course not. Another?”

“No.” I waved his bottle away from my glass, “I’ll take tea if you have any.”

“I can get you...”

He was interrupted by a conductor entering the car, “Tickets! Tickets!”

Several of the patrons around me began to fumble around in their purses and pockets. I had already had my ticket punched so I simply waved it for the conductor to see and he nodded in acceptance. I watched as he went to the banker on my right who quickly produced his ticket. Left inside coat pocket, he was an organized man and knew exactly where it was. He then went to the fur-coated lady on my left who seemed to be having some difficulty in locating her ticket. She struggled for a few moments, much to the conductor's chagrin, before producing five tickets from her purse. I quickly stood from my stool and walked over to her.

"Excuse me Madame." I looked eyes with her, "May I see your tickets for a moment?"

Her expression turned to one of fear and in that instant she betrayed herself fully.

"What is this? Who are you?" the conductor demanded in a thick northern accent.

"Of course." I turned to him, "My name is Inspector Robert Carson. I am here investigating the robberies that have been taking place aboard this train of late. I'm sure you are aware of the situation." I could only hope he would presume that I was the inspector that had been hired by the rail line.

The lady tried hastily to pack her things back into her purse but I put out a hand to stop her while still staring down the conductor. He looked at me questioningly for a few moments and then over my shoulder, no doubt at his co-worker at the bar, before nodding for me to proceed.

"Now," I said as I turned to the widow. "May I see your tickets please?"

"You certainly may not!"

"Show the gentleman your tickets." the conductor spoke up.

She hesitated for a moment and then thrust them at my chest angrily. I snatched them from her grasp before transferring them to the conductor. "If you will sir please examine the dates on these tickets."

He nodded as he took them from me and looked them over one after the other.

"Mr...?"

"Ledsome sir. Henry Ledsome."

"Mr. Ledsome. Do the dates on those tickets match the dates upon which the alleged robberies have taken place?"

He glanced at them again and then nodded, "Yes sir, they do." he then looked up at the widow with sudden realization. "But Inspector I've not seen her before. What about you Robert, you seen this woman before?"

I turned to the bar-tender who shook his head. The dates matched, however, and that made the woman extremely suspect. I returned my gaze to her.

"What precisely are you suggesting sir?" she asked.

I said nothing. I approached and began to look her over more closely. Under scrutiny certain things about her seemed very odd indeed.

Mr. Ledsome spoke up, "Inspector Carson, I see you eying the lady's jewelry but certainly had she robbed it from passengers on this very train she'd not have the gall to wear it in public."

"You're right," I said to the conductor as I continued my examination, "The jewelry she wears belongs to her...or at least it was not filched from anyone on this train."

"This is absurd!" the lady yelled right before she slapped me squarely across the right cheek. I paid little heed and my stalwart demeanor only seemed to anger her further. "I will not be accused of thievery by the likes of...you!" she motioned to my unkempt clothing.

"You both say that you have not seen this woman before, correct?" I asked of the railroad employees. They both responded in the positive. "Well, what if I told you you'd simply not recognized her?"

With that I grabbed a fistful of hair and to the gasps of all in the car pulled the wig from her head. “A very nice piece Madame, one of the finest I’ve ever seen, but not enough to fool me.”

“How did you?” the conductor was nearly speechless.

“Let’s just say that I’ve had experience with disguise.” between the top-quality wig and indecently heavy amount of makeup it’s no wonder that no one working the rail line noticed her. Even I suspected nothing until the tickets gave me cause to scrutinize her further. “Check her cabin, I’m certain that you’ll find your pilfered valuables there.”

The woman rose from her seat and attempted to run for the door but was grabbed by one of the on looking patrons. Her choice of heels had hampered her ability to be fleet of foot, a choice she now no-doubt regretted.

“How can you be certain,” Mr. Ledsome asked, “that she won’t have off-loaded the stolen goods at a previous stop?”

I smiled and reached into her purse. “I caught a flash of this as she was attempting to stash her belongings.” I pulled another ticket, this one for a ship bound for New York, from it. There were other tickets in her purse as well, some for other rail lines. “The fact that she was planning to flee the country makes me certain that her ill-gotten riches will be stashed nearby. Again I say check her cabin.”

The small crowd in the bar car erupted into applause as the conductor led the woman away cursing my name. Not being one to bathe in attention, and wanting to avoid questions, I thanked them all and quickly made my exit. I still had a good bit of time before Leeds and decided that a little lunch and a quick nap would serve me well.



“Well, what if I told you you’d simply not recognized her?” with that I grabbed a fistful of hair and to the gasps of all in the car pulled the wig from her head. “A very nice piece Madame, one of the best I’ve ever seen, but not enough to fool me.”

A Disdain for Motorcars

I had never before been to Leeds and to be fair my entire opinion of the place had been shaped by only one person, the former Mrs. Parney. In her maidenhood she had held the surname of Willings, a name known quite well in the vicinity of Leeds for both her father and mother were celebrated orators for the cause of sobriety. They were known to whip church-going crowds into self-righteous frenzies and send their flock out into the streets to preach against worldly sins.

They seemed to reserve a special hatred for spirits but also spoke out against pleasures of the flesh as well as what they felt was a plague of logic and reason that was poisoning the minds of men and turning them against the religious establishment. Matthew Parney was far from a loose-tongued man but had confided on several occasions that Margaret was not as chaste as she had initially led on. Quite the opposite, he implied that her...appetites...were of a nearly deviant nature and that her insatiability had often worried him about the possibility of her committing adultery when he was away on business.

Despite her own deviations, however, she staunchly remained opposed to the imbibing of alcohol. Many a time did she chastise me for arriving at my partner's doorstep with the smell of scotch about me. Regardless of her opinions, all of which I found unsavory, I tried for some time to make peace with the woman but she would have none of it. After a while I began to suspect that her distaste for me had as much to do with keeping Matthew all to herself, even more-so than it did for her disapproval of my lifestyle. Towards the end I began to suspect very strongly that Matthew was growing tired of the manipulative wench but I never did get confirmation of that fact.

Regardless, there I stood at the Marsh Lane station holding the two bags I had brought along with me, staring out at a strange city. Leeds was a town of over one-hundred and fifty-thousand souls, a mere speck compared to London, but still plenty large enough for someone unfamiliar with it to get lost in. So with my luggage I made for the nearest hire carriage. It wasn't raining in Leeds, but it had recently. Stepping off of the train platform I was greeted with the pathetic squish of mud under my feet. It had been churned up by countless coaches coming and going and I immediately sank into it nearly up to my ankles.

"A little help here?" I yelled at the coachman.

He returned my call with, "Already engaged." I saw no one inside of the coach nor did I see anyone loading baggage.

"You don't appear to be engaged."

"Piss off!"

I suddenly felt as though my judgment of Leeds had been justified, a city of fustilugs and bun stranglers. Perhaps a lack of manners was simply a common ailment in the area. Just then, as I was working up an appropriate insult a man in a dark gray John Bull and plaid coat came running up to help me. His shoes and the bottoms of his trousers were so caked in mud that I could not tell what sort they were but his style of dress seemed a bit eccentric.

"Never mind him." the man said as he grabbed one of my bags and extended a hand to help me free myself from the mud. "He's not a hire-cab. That's Andrew Willings' private carriage."

He'd said the name as if I were supposed to know who he was referring to. I, however, did have an inkling.

“Willings? The abstainer?”

“What? Oh, goodness no. Let’s get your things into the car and I’ll tell you all about it.”

“Car?”

“Yes,” he motioned to the contraption behind him, “my motorcar.”

In recent years the noisy and unreliable things had begun to crowd the streets of London. I had ridden in one only once and after smelling of petrol for an entire evening had vowed never to get into one again. I’d also had the displeasure of pulling a man out from under one after its driver had lost control and run him down. Even to this day I care not to speak of the state in which I found that poor fellow.

For some years now I’d sincerely hoped that folks would simply lose interest and we could all return to the sensible combination of walking, carriages, and trains to get about. Even bicycles, for which I had no particular fondness, seemed a far better idea than motorized carriages which coughed and spit foul vapors into the air and frequently lost control, plowing into crowds of unsuspecting pedestrians.

“Pardon me for asking, but just who are you sir?”

“The name is Johnson, William Johnson.” he said with his back to me as we walked toward the sputtering machine. “I’m a news agent from the Yorkshire Post. Heard of it?”

Indeed I had. In my profession it was prudent to be familiar with periodicals and often times with those who ran them as well. “Your editor still Simon Webley?”

The man stopped in his tracks and turned to face me, “You know Simon?”

“Some years back he provided me with a bit of archival information that I was in need of. We met only once when he was in London.”

“Information for a case I’m assuming?”

“Then you know who I am?”

“Indeed.” he said as he tossed the first bag into the back of the motor carriage. “I’d come to speak with the railroad, see if there was any new information about the recent robberies. Imagine my surprise when they told me that an inspector had caught the thief and that they’d recovered nearly one-hundred-thousand pounds worth of stolen items from her cabin.”

“A hundred-thousand? She was a very busy lady. You will excuse me if I find it hard to believe that the railroad was speaking to a reporter about items going missing on one of their trains. Very bad for business were it to get out.”

“A friend of mine with ties to the railroad let it slip some days ago. I’d promised not to publish anything until the thief had been caught so long as they kept me in the know. It was going to get out eventually but if the first wind of it the general population got was that the railroad thief had been captured it’d look like they were doing a good job protecting their passengers from theft.”

“I suppose. So you’ve deduced that if you give this mysterious inspector a ride to wherever it is that he’s going he’ll be kind enough to relate the entire tale to you for publication in your newspaper. Correct?”

“A reasonable deal wouldn’t you say?” the newspaper man twisted the ends of his mustache and grinned, “Lest you be stuck trying to find your own hire-cab at this hour.”

He had a point, it was getting dark and I desired to get to Mr. Peterson’s residence as quickly as possible. He would also be the perfect man to provide me with information about the Willings. Having run into a rather rude coachman in their employ I had even more curiosity about them than before. After loading my baggage into the car we climbed inside and I watched as Mr.

Johnson struggled with the controls. I knew very little about the workings of such contraptions but he seemed to be having a time getting the braking mechanism to release.

Eventually, however, he did manage it and with a bang and a puff of black smoke we were off. I reached into my coat pocket and provided him with the address that I had been given. He seemed to recognize the name. I let him question me openly about the happenings on the train. He had quite the barrage of questions but I answered them quickly and succinctly, knowing that the sooner he finished his line of questioning I could begin my own.

Having exhausted his queries the man fell silent and I seized my chance, "Tell me about Andrew Willings. Does he have a daughter named Margaret?"

"No. He has a sister named Margaret."

"So it is his father who is the famous orator I take it?"

"Yes, though he's not been as much of a rabble-rouser in recent years. It would seem that Mrs. Willings has fallen ill with an ague and he is oft-times at her side. If you ask me all of those years of angry shouting built up inside her and caused her current infirmity. Anger is not good for the soul Mr. Carson."

"Then has it fallen to Margaret and Andrew to remind the masses of their sins?"

"No. When word last reached me of Margaret she was still living in London and as to the boy Andrew he is a businessman. Lots of savvy, none of that abrasiveness that lead so many to despise his father. He owns several of the city's textiles as well as a manufacturing plant."

"What do they produce?"

"Parts for steam engines mostly."

"A good business to be in if you ask me."

William Johnson smiled and chuckled to himself.

"What?" I asked.

"Steam is on the way out Mr. Carson. This..." he pointed to the engine at the front of his car, "is the future. Petrol will power the 20th century sir."

I scoffed at the very idea.

Changing the subject back to the Willings he asked, "Besides mistaking Andrew Willings' fine brougham for a hire-cab and being taunted by its driver I suspect you have further interest in their family."

"At least a passing one, yes."

"Would it have anything to do with your former partner Mr. Parney?"

My glare made him back-pedal a bit. "Forgive me Inspector but in Leeds everyone knows the Willings. I seem to remember some years back it being news when Margaret married an inspector from London. Despite my advancing years I do seem to recall the name of Matthew Parney. He had a partner named Carson, I can only surmise that you are he."

"Indeed I am and I commend your talented memory however I wish not to discuss my late partner if that suits you."

"Very well Inspector. At any rate we will be at Mr. Peterson's shortly. May I be so bold as to inquire what brings you to Leeds?"

"You may inquire, Mr. Johnson, but that is all. I'm afraid that the matter I have come to attend to is of a sensitive nature and that my client demands total silence."

"Understandable." he shook his head. "It wouldn't have anything to do with the Dunnings would it?"

The man was rather astute, I granted him that, but despite my surprise at him having deduced who I was in Yorkshire to see my expression remained stolid. "I'm afraid I am not at liberty to say who my employer is or who I am here to call upon. We shall leave it at that."

"As you wish Inspector."

By the time the motor-carriage sputtered up to Mr. Peterson's home the sun was down past the horizon. The streets were illuminated softly by the glow of a few electric lights scattered here and there. In London many a street still retained the old-fashioned gas lights but there in Leeds I could see none. All were electric. It was at that moment that I felt something that surprised me, a pleasant feeling about my long-time home, London. The gas lights provided a glow that the electrical variety could only emulate but never quite capture. Dirty, diseased and filled with crime there was at least *one* thing I missed about the streets of my home city.

As soon as we came to a stop I removed the infernal goggles that I'd been forced to wear, presumably to prevent an insect from taking out one of my eyes as we barreled along, and handed them back to William Johnson. He helped me with my bags and bid me a good evening before hopping back into his motorcar and once again wrestling with the brake which had irritated him so only a short while before. As I walked up to the door of the small but pleasant looking two-story home it opened and a small gray-haired man with reading spectacles perched precariously on the end of his nose motioned for me to come inside.

Mr. Peterson

“Inspector...?”

“Carson. Robert Carson.”

“May I assume that your partner was unable to accompany you or will he be along shortly?” the elderly gentleman asked as he reached out to take one of my bags.

“I’m afraid Inspector Parney passed away some years ago. May I ask, how did you know to expect me?”

“Come in, come in Mr. Carson. I will explain.”

As I passed through the entrance and into the diminutive man’s home I was greeted with the pleasant smell of food being prepared and a lovely warmth that immediately began to fight off the chill I’d received whilst motoring through town.

“No one” he began, “calls on my wife and I any more in the evenings, let alone a gentleman carrying luggage. It was a fairly safe assumption that you were one of the detectives from London we’d been expecting. I must say though, I did not expect you to arrive in the company of William Johnson, a fact that troubles me somewhat.”

“I can assure you that I have discussed none of my business with Miss Elizabeth Dunning nor have I even confirmed that she is the client I have come to see.”

“Confirmed?” the old man asked, peering over his spectacles. “So he suspects who your client is does he?”

“I cannot be sure. He merely seemed to be probing me, hoping that I would reveal some small detail, I did not. Mostly he questioned me about some happenings aboard the train.”

“Oh? Now you’ve piqued my curiosity.”

“It seems as though the railroad has been dealing with a string of robberies and that Mr. Johnson had gotten wind of the story. On my ride up from London I managed to pinch the perpetrator. His questions were mostly related to that matter.”

The old man smiled, “Caught a criminal on the train ride did you? Spectacular! I see Miss Dunning has indeed selected the right man to investigate her concern.”

“Speaking of which...” I began but was cut off by Mr. Peterson.

“I’m afraid I know little of the issue, save for the fact that I am to escort you to the Dunning estate in the morning to meet with Miss Elizabeth and that I was to keep the matter private until you arrived.”

“Private from whom?”

“Everyone, including her own family.” he pointed to a door a short ways down the hall, “Now then, I’m sure you are hungry.”

“I would be lying if I said the smell was not enticing, however I’d not want to put you out.”

“Nonsense! My Margaret always cooks far more than we can eat alone.”

Another Margaret from Leeds, fantastic. Were she to be even one half as sweet in temperament as her cooking smelled, however, I may find myself able to look past her unfortunate moniker.

“Let me take your coat sir.” Mr. Peterson demanded. I allowed him to help me with it and watched as he stashed it in the closet nearest the front door. He then led me, slowly as he walked with a cane, into the dining room. What the Petersons’ modest home may have lacked in terms of

size it certainly made up for with an abundance of coziness. Nearly every inch of wall covered in paintings or photographs, every surface adorned with knick-knacks of a thousand different varieties. Warmth emanated from every direction and I could keenly make out the sound of several fireplaces crackling with life. The amalgam of scents flowing from the kitchen poured forth with such a saturation that I could not discern one smell from the other. I had never known my grandparents but should I have I would have liked for their home to be exactly like the Petersons'. I can say that never before in my years did I feel so immediately comfortable as I did in that small house in Leeds.

"Please Mr. Carson, take a seat."

"You may call me Robert, Mr. Peterson."

The old man smiled as he walked around the table to the chair opposite mine. "Then by all means...call me Samuel."

The elder gentleman was easily two times my thirty-five years so addressing him in the familiar seemed improper, however he seemed the type to insist, so I did. "Very well, Samuel it is. I certainly thank you for having me in your home. Whatever it is that your wife is preparing smells absolutely delicious."

"I married a woman who seems to have an infinite ability to try my patience but she is one hell of a cook. No doubt," he snickered, "she finds me immensely trying at times as well eh? What about you sir, are you married?"

"No, I'm afraid not."

"Surely there are scores of young ladies in London who would fancy a career man such as yourself."

"I have little issue getting them to fancy me. It is holding on to them once they learn of my plethora of vices that has proven to be a difficult undertaking."

Samuel laughed heartily as he grabbed my arm and shook it. "I used to make quite the arse out of m'self after a few shandy-gaffs. Me old lady had to drag me home by m'whiskers on regular occasion."

His sudden change in articulation caught me off my guard. Until that moment his speech had been nothing but impeccable with only the slightest hint of an accent detectable in his speech. He apparently noticed the surprise on my face.

"Having spent more than a handful of years in the service of the Dunning family I learned to regulate the amount of northern that escapes my lips. You'll excuse me if I forgot myself for a moment. I reasoned that a Londoner with a fondness for drink would take no offense at it."

"Indeed I do not." I wondered what offense he might take had he suspected that my debauchery lie in many places other than just at the bottom of a bottle. I sought to change the topic. "The Dunning family then, they are not northerners themselves?"

"Oh heavens no." he chuckled. "The father, Michael Dunning, came up from Swindon as a lad and bought up the failing Eight Hill Estate from the Murphy family, renamed it Larchwood."

"Since he was but a young man I can only assume that his fortune is inherited."

Samuel nodded. "Second cousin of an Earl or something along those lines. I was the agent of his estate for nearly forty years but never pried into his personal history."

"A secretive man then?"

"No..." he started, "not particularly, but as you'll see for yourself soon enough he's not the chattiest fellow on Earth either. Very quiet and whiles away much of his time away from others."

"His family?"

“Aye. He’ll go for walks about the property and not be seen until supper. Just his way I suppose.” we turned both as a clatter from the kitchen startled us. “Margaret? You all right in there dear?”

“Yes love. It was just an empty muffin tin. Are you and the gentleman ready to be served?”

“At your convenience dear, don’t hurry on our accounts.” he turned back to face me, “I would offer you a drink Inspector but I’m afraid the missus has forbade me to bring a bottle into this house. Still, I regret that you should be made to want due to the foibles of my youth.”

“Not at all Mr. Peterson. Think nothing of it. Now I must ask, you have spent some forty years in the employ of this man yet you collude with his daughter to bring an inspector from London to his estate without his knowledge? Why?”

The old man sat back in his chair, eyes locked with mine. I hoped that I had not insulted him, the question was intended to be direct, not offensive. A moment later he leaned in, this time closer than before, and spoke in a hushed tone.

“Do not mistake me sir. I am loyal to Master Dunning. It is thanks to him above all others that I came up from my misery to have a comfortable home and a doting wife to call my own. Before meeting him in a stroke of sheer luck I lived as something of a vagabond, working what odd jobs I could find for my meals and bedding down in every padding-ken from here to Romalldkirk.”

“Still, Inspector, those Dunning children hold a special place in my heart. I watched them grow from wee little ones into fine adults, especially that Elizabeth. Never once has she treated me as anything other than a part of the family and if she asks for my assistance I render it without question. I believe her to be of impeccable moral character and I am certain that you will find her the same. While I may find it difficult to believe that anything warranting the services of an inspector such as yourself could have been perpetrated by any member of the family if the young miss deems it necessary I honor her request.”

“It sounds as though you hold the young lady in very high regard.”

“The missus and I were incapable of having any children of our own but the Dunnings had four. With Mr. Dunning’s rather aloof nature and his wife’s frequent ailments it fell to the nannies and close friends of the family to spend a lot of time with the young ones. Most wealthy families would no-doubt be appalled at the very thought but the Dunning children spent many a night in our home and to this day call my wife and I Aunt and Uncle. As you can observe from the warm atmosphere of our home my Margaret would have made an excellent mother and she so enjoyed whenever we had occasion to take care of the children. We found each of them to be kind and intelligent but none more so than Miss Elizabeth. I can say with profound sincerity that I am proud to have had a hand in rearing that young lady.”

“What of Mr. Dunning himself? I should like to know more about how you met him? You said that it was through a stroke of sheer luck.”

“Well, as I said before I squandered several years of my youth as a gentleman of the road. Work just so happened to take me through Leeds and I happened to be in the right place at the right time to push Mr. Dunning out of the way of a runaway carriage. Not knowing what sort of fellow he might be I feared a good flogging for having shoved him face-first into the mud but instead he took me into his home, newly acquired at the time, and offered me a position on the estate.”

“So...a detached individual but something of an altruist?”

“Oh yes. Not a year has gone by that I have not received a healthy Christmas-time consideration on top of my already generous salary. Even now that I have retired the master

typically sends 'round a messenger bearing a generous consideration and a letter of thanks sometime in mid-December. As to his withdrawn character it has only been in the last few years that it has troubled me. Mind you he was never a terribly social chap but with age he seems to desire contact with his friends and family even less than before."

"An ailment he is concealing perhaps?"

"I do not believe so. When I have had occasion to see him he has always been in the best of spirits, he shakes my hand and smiles as we spend a few moments catching up but then he wanders off again."

"I see..." I was about to probe him for information regarding Miss Dunning's summoning of me but at that moment his wife, Margaret, walked into the dining room carrying a covered dish of fine silver with wisps of steam escaping from its edges.

"Ah, looks like dinner is ready." the older gentleman declared and gave his wife a warm smile. "It smells delicious my dear. Do you need a hand bringing the rest in from the kitchen?"

"If you wouldn't mind being a dear." was the lady's response. Mr. Peterson rose to help but I insisted that I should be the one to provide a hand. He protested greatly, stating that I was a guest, but I assured him that it was the least that I could do in return for the hospitality. The lady had prepared quite a formidable repast that took some time to carry from the kitchen to the dining area even with the two of us attending to the chore.

Surely she had not known to expect a visitor for dinner. Did she truly prepare such meals on a regular basis? Already she did much to improve my impression of the women-folk of Yorkshire. Come to think of it, the late Mr. Parney did indeed put on a couple of stones worth of weight after his espousal to the horrid Miss Margaret Willings. I put the thought out of my head for I cared not to associate in my mind the grandmotherly Mrs. Peterson with that irascible woman.

It was obvious to me that Samuel had married a woman some ten or so years his junior, she was silver-haired and far past her prime, yet still seemed to carry herself with a certain amount of elegance and self-respect. She spoke softly, not out of the false respect beat into many a wife by a vicious husband but instead the kind that comes from the security of one's place in life. Despite his statement indicating a troubled beginning to their relationship the two seemed to have come to a rather agreeable compromise and appeared, at least from my terse observation, to be quite happy in their old age.

After several minutes we had laid the impressive spread upon the table and sat down to eat. As I had predicted Mrs. Peterson, whom I'd been instructed to address as Margaret, took up a place next to her husband. As she sat the old man leaned over and placed a kiss upon her left temple and thanked her for all of her effort. It was truly upholding to see that such a thing as respect between a man and his wife was not only possible but still alive and well in the world. Far too frequently, in my dealings in London, I found myself in the midst of a row between spouses.

Somehow the warm house, the aroma of freshly prepared food and the gentle disposition of the two I shared company with made me long for a life that had never been mine. Had I known something other than the cold embrace of dirty city streets and the back of a cruel father's hand perhaps I could have been a different person. A possibility at least, that I could be of fewer regrets and more abundant graces.

My surprise was likely palpable when Samuel clutched my hand and Mrs. Peterson began precisely that, grace. I do honestly believe that not since my days at the orphanage had I taken part in a meal that included the blessing. Respect demanded I bow my head, though I

remembered not the words nor even felt a connection to the meaning behind any of it. Religion had long-since left my company, were it ever with me to begin.

Uncovering the lovely silver dish, most assuredly a gift from Master Dunning considering the dissimilarity with the remainder of their tableware, revealed a roast goose of exquisite corpulence. Such a fine animal would have been impossible to locate in the markets of London let alone purchase on anything but a generous salary. It would seem that Mr. Peterson's forty years of service had left him quite comfortable in terms of finance. Supplementary to the succulent looking fowl was a loaf of freshly baked bread, smashed potatoes, kidney pie and a boiley cake as well as tarts of several varieties.

"Are you certain you had no notion that I was to arrive this evening?" I asked as my eyes drifted across the incredible meal laid out before me.

Mrs. Peterson chuckled lightly and smiled up at me as she worked to place her napkin securely in her lap. "Does no one cook for you Mr. Carson?"

"I have the good fortune of leasing an office space above a bakery. Most evenings my landlady is kind enough to bring up a couple of meat pies or a portion of bread. I cannot say exactly when I last enjoyed a meal of this caliber however, and please, call me Robert."

"Well I can certainly see how you'd think me foolish to prepare such a large meal for only myself and my husband. To clarify, I cook this lavishly only once per week."

"Then I chose to arrive on a most fortuitous evening did I not?"

Both smiled then Mrs. Peterson spoke, "I am delighted that you turned up on such an evening. I'd hate to serve nothing more than soup and a bit of sandwich to a guest."

"Think nothing of it. If odor is any indicator of your culinary talents Madame then even that much smaller meal would have been a fair sight more enjoyable than to what I am accustomed."

We sat in silence for a few moments as the goose was cut and we filled our plates from the serving dishes. Unsurprisingly the food was sublime. Having been several years since I had relished in a proper meal I was content to forgo conversation for a time. Upon reaching a point where I feared I was approaching rudeness at the gusto with which I was devouring my supper I decided to pause and take time to sip from the glass of cider that had been provided. Margaret Peterson seemed not to mind my mild lapse of table manners. She simply smiled at her husband who only nodded in delight as he too put away his dinner with abandon.

"So Mr. Peterson...Samuel," I began, "you mentioned that the lady Dunning has been suffering from maladies. If it is not too brazen of me I should like to inquire as to their nature. I pray she is not moribund."

"No, nothing of the sort. Nothing life threatening or infectious. For some years she has suffered from severe headaches for which the doctors seem to be able to provide little relief."

"I see. That is most unfortunate. Has she been seen by any of the physicians in London? Their methods are perhaps more modern than those in Yorkshire. They also have access to all of the latest elixirs and curatives."

Samuel nodded as he finished chewing his food. "Aye. I fear she has seen every doctor your city has on offer; still they can do nothing for her condition. Most days she does little else but lie in her bed chamber with the curtains drawn. By lamp-light she reads most copiously. I dare say the Dunnings possess the largest private library in the county."

I nodded then took another sip of my cider. "What of the children? I would care to know their names and any other pertinent information about each of them."

"Do you fear that the family will be uncooperative with you Inspector?" the lady asked.

“It is a possibility, certainly. Tomorrow a strange investigator will arrive at their estate without a proper invitation and begin to question them about a matter they no-doubt would prefer be forgotten. You have known them for many years and it would aid my investigation immensely should I know precisely who I am dealing with before my arrival.”

“Of course. My wife did not mean to insinuate that you were prying Inspector.” Mrs. Peterson nodded, agreeing with her husband, then he continued. “Firstly there is Master Adrian, he is the first born. He is of average height and weight with medium-short-cropped reddish hair. He is thirty-four years old I believe.” he glanced at his wife who seemed to confirm his statement, “He is an extremely ambitious young man and it pains me to admit that while I hold all of the Dunning children dear he is the only one whom I have a difficult time trusting his word.”

“A liar?”

“Not bald-faced. He is very savvy, however, and I have many times seen him manipulate facts to suit his own ends.”

“I see. A history of violence? Even against animals? Save for hunting or slaughter of course.”

The two seemed taken aback. “Not that I have ever known.” Samuel responded. “I’ve never witnessed an inkling of cruelty in any of the children so you may cross that off of your list of questions Inspector.”

“I shall, and if I have offended I apologize.”

“No...” Mrs. Peterson started, “we understand that you are simply being thorough.”

“The other children?”

“Miss Elizabeth is the second-oldest. She is twenty-nine.”

“And not married?”

Samuel shook his head, “Mr. Dunning and his wife have tried many times to arrange a profitable marriage for her to gentlemen of good standing from here to Cornwall.”

“They would not have her?”

“Quite the opposite Mr. Carson. She would not have them. She is a young lady of stunning beauty with an intellect to surpass. She could have nearly any man she fancied yet she has made habit of embarrassing her family every time they foolishly invite a potential suitor to their home. With little more than a glance or a few words in passing she turns up her nose and refuses to participate in any form of courtship.”

I paused and rubbed at my side-whiskers for a moment before speaking. What I was about to suggest could easily cause an outrage in my two generous hosts. “Have any considered the possibility that she is...a Tom?”

Precisely as I had feared the color drained from both of their faces and Mrs. Peterson stood from her chair and walked to the corner of the room with her back to me, no-doubt biting her tongue. At any moment I expected to be asked to vacate the property but after a short while she returned to her seat and grasped her husband’s hand in her own. “Mr. Carson...Robert...such things may be a commonality in London but here we do not speak of such topics in polite conversation, investigation or no.”

“I understand. I shall not bring it up again.”

“Thank you.” she said, then hesitated.

“What is it?”

“What I am going to say to you Inspector must never leave this room. I am about to tell you something, against my better judgment, that will allay your perverted notions about Miss Elizabeth.”

Queerly the look of shame upon the lady's aged face stirred curiosity in me. Likewise the puzzled expression Mr. Peterson wore said that it was a secret that not even he knew of.

"Some years ago sir, I believe when Miss Elizabeth was around the age of nineteen, she came to me in confidence with a very serious dilemma." the old lady hung her eyes, as if she were ashamed to even be relating the story, "She told me that she had fallen in love with a young man from town; a banker's assistant whom she'd met when he'd visited the estate. She said he'd gone many times to meet her at an old cabin on the edge of the property and there they'd...consummated their relationship on many occasions."

I sat forward in my seat, that was indeed a most interesting detail. With no less than two affairs featuring young men it certainly did seem that women were not to her taste after all. Perhaps she simply had an affinity for the excitement of forbidden love, it would not be the first time I had seen such a trait in a young man or young woman.

"She...had fallen pregnant. When learning of the length of their involvement I was in fact astonished that she had not been with child much sooner. Their affair had been going on for nearly eight months you see."

Samuel, by the look on his wrinkled face, seemed amazed that his wife had managed to keep such a secret for so many years.

"I told her of a doctor of sorts here in the city who could help with unwanted pregnancies but she refused. Do not mistake me Inspector, being a woman who never was able to conceive the very idea of ridding one's self of a child broke my heart into pieces but I knew that with her position in life and her family depending on her it simply could not be. She, somewhat to my relief however, could not go through with it. She went to tell her banker boy in hopes of running off with him but he scorned her and wished to have nothing to do with her or the child. In what I believe to be nothing short of catastrophic heart-break she miscarried and the matter was done. She did, however, relay to me over the years liaisons with several other young men in town so I can assure you that she is anything but a...Tom...as you say."

The information was very helpful and I wanted to press for more but the lady of the house seemed to be shaken deeply by finally revealing the confidence which she had kept to herself for the better part of a decade.

"Thank you Mrs. Peterson. There are two more children correct?"

"Yes." this time Samuel spoke, "Two others. Three years younger than Elizabeth is Daniel. A brilliant young man who attended law school and now practices in York. He is married and very likely will not be present when you visit the estate as he only comes 'round near the holidays. Lastly is young Cyril. He is presently seven years old."

"The Dunnings conceived him rather late in life did they not?"

"Yes. Mrs. Dunning, Mary is her name, had him at the age of forty-six. It came as a surprise to everyone."

"As I should imagine it did. I assume that he will be present."

"Of course, though I feel for the poor boy. With his father rather aged and aloof and his mother frequently indisposed he, even more-so than the older children, has been reared almost exclusively by his nanny."

"And the nanny's name?"

"Tripti. She is an Indian girl who has been in the family's service for many years. She speaks English with hardly an accent and from what I have observed is an excellent servant; honest and attentive."

"Others who are likely to be at the estate?"

“Well let’s see,” the elderly gentleman rubbed the grey mustache that adorned his friendly face as he thought, “there is Kwame, a Gambian boy that the master brought back from a business trip. He was homeless or something of the sort I believe. Master Dunning took him in and he works the estate as an errand boy and general help. He is somewhere around ten years of age though no one knows exactly. There is also Mr. Findlay, the grounds-keeper. He’s a Scotsman and has been on the property for over twenty years. He is well known in town for his taste for drink and his affinity for pub brawls but never have I seen him be on anything but his absolute best manners when he is on the grounds. You will also meet Mrs. Kyle, the maid. Nothing much to be said of her. She is a bit of a gossip but does her job well. She lives in town with her husband and rides her bicycle to the estate early every morning.”

“No one else that frequents the property?”

“The estate is rather large Robert. There are several farms upon it. On occasion one of the farmers may stop by to speak business with the master or his agent, food and newspaper deliveries as well. That is all that I can think of. I hope the information will help.”

“Most assuredly. It is always favorable to go into a situation with as much knowledge of those you may encounter as possible. My arrival will no-doubt be a surprise and may ruffle a few feathers, I hope to at least depart with as little a level of acrimony as possible when all is said and done.”

“You seem a thoughtful, if somewhat brazen man, Mr. Carson.” the Margaret quipped.

“I shall take that as a compliment my good lady.”

“As you should.”

“While we are on the matter of compliments I must say that your cooking is of the highest order of excellence I have ever had occasion to enjoy in someone’s home. A lovely home I must also say. Your Mr. Peterson has been a fortunate fellow to capture the heart of such a diligent and intelligent woman as yourself.”

The old lady blushed. It was difficult to tell, seeing as she was now aged somewhere in the vicinity of sixty, but at one time she might have been quite attractive. After finishing our meal and being shown to my room I settled in for the night. A old photograph that sat on the vanity in the guest room confirmed that in their youth both Mrs. Peterson and her husband had been a rather handsome couple. As I settled into the bed, more comfortable than any I had ever owned, I let myself feel happy for the two of them.

Save for being denied the privilege of children they’d appeared to have had a pleasant life. Perhaps, just perhaps, if such a man could find contentment then there still remained hope for me as well. A moment later when my thoughts turned to opium and how I should have had the foresight to bring along a little hop to ease my sleep I was reminded at just how many impediments there were to my salvation.

An Inauspicious Start

I awoke shortly after sunrise to the smell of breakfast being prepared and the sound of horses and motorcars clattering down the street. I can say with all honesty that never once in my adult life had I awoken to the smell of food cooking, save for what was being prepared for customers in the bakery below my office. Frequently Matthew Parney and I would step out for breakfast at a local eatery but never had anyone specifically prepared breakfast for me. Having finally drifted off to sleep around some time closing in on midnight I hadn't slept long but I had slept well. I dressed and headed downstairs. Breakfast was somewhat spartan relative to the supper we had enjoyed the night before but still it was more than adequate.

Mr. Peterson informed me that due to his advancing years he no longer retained a horse nor carriage of his own and that all of his tasks in town were performed by means of...gasp...a bicycle. I tried to imagine the septuagenarian peddling one of those contraptions down cobblestone streets with a basket of groceries or a package to post. To transport us from his house in Leeds to the Dunning estate he had arranged, as soon as he had woken, for a carriage to pick us up shortly before eight-thirty. Glancing at my watch around the nine o'clock hour I realized that something must have gone awry. Shortly thereafter a young man arrived to tell us that his father's horse had injured its leg on a curb when they had nearly been run off of the road on their way to pick us up by a poorly driven motorcar.

Not wishing to pass up the opportunity to surprise me one last time Mr. Peterson then suggested that we travel to Larchwood Manor via bicycle. As it turns out he and Mrs. Peterson had purchased two of them, in the safety-bicycle design, to be used for running errands. As it was a distance of nearly seven miles, for the Dunning estate lay between Horsforth and Bramhope, and considering my lifestyle of the last few years rendering me far too feeble to withstand such exertion I told him that I would have none of it. He spent a few moments extolling the virtues of the bicycle and how much vitality the exercise from using it had provided him but in the end it was for naught. I refused to budge on the subject so he set about trying to locate another hire cab to take us to our destination.

I could not help but find some humor in the situation when the old man mounted his mechanical contraption and rode off into town. Informed by Mrs. Peterson that there was a market only a few blocks distant I decided upon a nice leisurely stroll to procure a small bottle of scotch with which I could refill my empty flask.

Upon my return, roughly some thirty minutes later, Mr. Peterson was waiting with news that he had managed to secure another cab. When it arrived we loaded my belongings into it and set off down the bumpy streets. The vehicle was an old growler and what little suspension it had possessed when it was new, ages ago, had long since failed to be effective. I sighed in relief when we left the paved streets of Leeds but my joy was only momentary. The road we soon found ourselves upon, though not built of cobbled stones was every bit as jarring. After what must have been less than a mile I reached into my coat for my flask. Mr. Peterson watched as I did so and upon seeing what I was grasping for he placed his hand on mine as if to stop me.

"Now Inspector, I understand that all of this may be a bit unsettling to the nerves but best not to visit a client smelling of spirits. Am I right?"

He was right. Despite my taste for strong drink indulging whilst working was not something that was common practice for me.

“How about a smoke instead?”

“I don’t smoke.” that was a lie, I had quite an affinity for smoking, however the tonic I cared to partake in was far more potent at calming the nerves than tobacco.

“Nonsense.” he spoke loudly over the ruckus of the jostling carriage. “You are guaranteed to enjoy this.” he pulled a lovely, but well-worn pipe from his coat pocket, “Extremely fine Arabian tobacco.”

Many conversations had I overheard in which smoking was said to have a soothing effect. Deciding not to argue with the man I took the pipe from his right hand and deposited it between my lips. Mr. Peterson reached into a trouser pocket and pulled out a box of matches which, considering the bumpiness of the ride, took him quite some time to open and even longer to successfully light. We did eventually manage it however and as I took a deep draw from the pipe a savory yet spicy aroma danced over my taste buds. It was followed quickly with profuse choking as I was not used to the particular impact of tobacco upon the lungs. The elder gentleman let out with a hearty laugh at my expense but then reassured me that I simply need not inhale so deeply.

“Puff in with your cheeks my boy. Let it sit upon your tongue for a moment before gently taking it into your lungs. It is a sip, not a gulp.”

I felt most peculiar, as if I were a boy being lessoned on how to smoke by my father. He was indeed a very patient man and would have made a great father had he been given the chance. I did as he instructed and my second attempt was much more pleasant, in fact I dare say it was from that very moment that I knew I had adopted yet another vice which would follow me throughout my life.

I certainly felt something, I am not sure if I would describe it as soothing, precisely, but there was a definite change in my disposition. As I finished what tobacco had been packed into the pipe I smiled and reached out to return it to its owner but to my stupefaction the grey old man refused.

“You keep it.” he said with a grin. “More of that, less of that.” he pointed to my coat, roughly where the pocket that held the flask was located.

“I can’t accept sir, it appears to have some history with you.”

“Exactly, the wife bought me a new one at Christmas-time and she’s been quite upset that I have not switched to using it yet. She’ll be delighted to see me using the new one.”

With such an argument I could not refuse. I placed the pipe into my pocket and as a further gift he handed me a small cloth pouch containing what he had left of the aromatic tobacco. He spent a few more minutes describing to me the different types of pipe tobacco and which ones I should try upon my return to London. I listened attentively for it seemed to give the old man great joy to share with me.

Were I less proficient at reading people I would have doubted that I had made myself a friend. Were I to find myself in Yorkshire again I would no-doubt call upon him. His company was pleasant and Lord knows I could do with an occasional home-cooked meal.

Larchwood Manor

My sentiment of only a couple of days previous, that of wishing to leave the stench of the city for clean living and countryside surroundings, was only reinforced as we drove further from the city and neared our destination. Of the fact that it was indeed winter there lay no doubt, trees along the road were bare of leaves and the day itself heavily overcast. The greyness did little, however, to arrest my enjoyment of the open spaces and sweet smelling air. Come summer I would have to venture away from the city for pleasure, I promised myself that. Then, remembering the reason that I had never done so before was due to a lack of funds owing to my vices, a sour taste entered my mouth.

I tried to reassure myself that should the job leave me with a surplus of funds I would change my ways but always there was a nagging doubt in the back of my mind, one that expected me to fail to affect a change and to simply return to my foul habits. An outsider may say that I am capable of astute observation of others but that I lack the insight to truly realize what I myself am doing. They would, of course, be terribly wrong. With great frequency it turns inward and I drive myself to madness, obsessing over my failings, a process which brings about a profound melancholy which results only in my attempts to soothe it away with the very things that cause my afflictions in the first place.

I closed my eyes and breathed in deeply, attempting to let my thoughts go; let myself feel the cold air coming in through the window as it brushed against my skin and through my hair. That seemed to bring me back into the moment well enough.

“Here we are.” Mr. Peterson declared. “Well, the turn-off anyway. It’s only about one-quarter of a mile down this road that we come onto Dunning property. The main house is some ways past that but not too long now.”

After that he returned to silence. That was one of the things I liked about the man. He seemed to read in my disposition that I did not desire conversation, that I wanted only to enjoy the passing countryside. Shortly down the narrow road there were a couple of farm houses off in the distance. They were small and built in a traditional style, looking as if they belonged to the 17th century or so. Smoke billowed from their stone chimneys and they had quite charming facades.

Eventually fields gave way to a dense patch of trees as we neared the master’s home. Were he any other wealthy land-owner I would say that Mr. Dunning had left some forest intact on his land for the purpose of fox hunting but from what I had heard of the man he did not seem the type to participate in such a social activity. Perhaps for his eldest son then, who peculiarly still lived in his parents’ home and was yet to be married despite being nearly thirty-five years old.

The main house came into view, set in a large open pasture and surrounded by several buildings which looked to be for housing livestock and perhaps farm equipment. As our carriage turned into the drive I saw off in the distance a small dark figure, the servant boy Kwame I presumed, running from what appeared to be the stables toward the house. My assumption was that he intended to inform the family and other servants that visitors approached. As we drew nearer to the house the front door opened and a man and two women stepped out into the cold. The man had red hair and was near my age, that would be Adrian. One of the women was dark in skin tone, the nanny Tripti. Last out of the door was a young lady with gorgeous flowing blonde

hair and pale skin. She wore a fine black dress, that would be the mourning young Miss Elizabeth.

As the old wagon came to a halt our driver, a poorly-dressed Welshman who seemed to speak very little English, hopped down to open the door.

“Who do you bring calling?” Adrian stepped forward and demanded. The question was not asked indignantly but instead with what I perceived as an inflated sense of authority. Perhaps the answer to why the young man still lived at home, unmarried. With his father unreliable and his mother impaired it was a possibility, though not a certainty, that he felt as though it was his responsibility to look after his family and the affairs of the estate. Still, his disposition did come off as almost childish.

“Adrian!” Mr. Peterson leaned over me and called from the window. “It’s good to see you my boy, and you as well Miss Elizabeth.”

“Uncle!” she said with delight and even Adrian smiled at the sight of the man.

The driver opened our door and Samuel stepped out first. So busy were they greeting Mr. Peterson that none of them noticed as I exited the cab. Elizabeth was the first to glance toward where I was standing. She had, of course, expected that when her uncle arrived there would be an Inspector at his side.

“Hello sir.” she said in a polite tone. There was restraint in her voice. She wished to be more excited about my arrival but dared not reveal her elation in front of the others. I cared not for the posturing the upper class deemed necessary amongst themselves, even between family members, and it reminded me that I did not envy them as so many others did.

“Who may I ask are you sir?” Adrian queried, this time with slightly more respect than the last time he had opened his mouth.

Elizabeth approached and spoke, “Mr. Parney?”

“Carson. I’m afraid Mr. Parney has been deceased for some years.”

“Oh I’m terribly sorry to hear that.”

“Never mind it my dear lady.”

“Elizabeth who is this?” Adrian demanded.

“I am Inspector Robert Carson, of London.” I reached out to shake his hand and gave my best attempt at a smile.

He eyed his sister questioningly before accepting my hand and shaking it firmly. Quite firm in fact, as if to insinuate his masculine bravado. His hands were as soft as velvet and clammy to the touch, however, so his pretense was for naught.

“Adrian Dunning. Might I ask why it is that you are here Inspector?”

“Of course. Your sister Miss Elizabeth has written me about a disturbing happening here at Larchwood and has thusly requested my presence post-haste. So here I am.”

“I can think of nothing that would deserve the attention of an inspector. To what is she referring?”

“Why to the untimely death of your stable boy of course. Surely that warrants some investigation.”

Adrian Dunning scoffed, “An accident Mr. Carson. He stumbled in the dark and fell upon a pitchfork. If that is what my sister has summoned you all of the way from London for then I’m afraid she has set you upon a wild goose chase. Let me compensate you for your wasted time and let you be on your way.” he reached into his pants pocket and produced a sizable fold of money.

“Adrian I have requested him and it is I who will decide when his job is complete.”

The young man began to protest but I interrupted him, "As the young lady says, I have been retained by her and it is by her alone that I shall be dismissed. Now please sir have one of your servants attend to my baggage." paying Adrian no further attention I turned to Miss Dunning, "Miss I believe that we have business to discuss."

With a friendly hand-shake I took my leave of Mr. Peterson and promised that I should one day stop in to pay him a visit and repay him for he and his wife's hospitality. As I turned and walked toward the house with the young miss I considered looking back to see the expression on Adrian Dunning's face but it was not necessary, I knew exactly what it was, disbelief. You see, the wealthy and privileged are not used to being spoken to so matter-of-factly. I have long taken pleasure in breaking them of that expectation.



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The Stable Boy

The Petersons had been correct in stating that the Dunning family possessed the largest private library in the county, for certainly no one else could own so many books let alone such a marvelous chamber within which to contain them. The floor was of marble and the ceiling no less than fifteen feet in height. Large windows which ran nearly as tall on one side of the room provided a view into what in summertime was no-doubt a luxurious garden. Being roughly forty feet in length and at least half that in width the room had books stacked from ceiling to floor on large oak shelves that ran the length of the two elongated walls. Opposite the windows was a small sitting area with two lovely leather chairs, a chess set, and a fireplace with an ornate mantle.

Elizabeth Dunning and I sat in those chairs staring at one another. Were I to say that I did not find the young lady quite attractive I would be telling an untruth. I did have a predilection for blondes, that much was true. I also, however, have a distaste for ladies of high society. Not that I do not find them fetching, mind you, but simply that I prefer women of sterner constitutions who can work as hard as any man and who can put me in my place should I need amelioration.

“Can I offer you anything Inspector?” Elizabeth asked before she dismissed Tripti.

“No thank you Miss Dunning.”

She turned to the nanny and nodded for her to leave.

“Do you mind if I smoke?” I asked, somewhat tickled by my new-found avocation.

She shook her head, “Not at all. Please make yourself comfortable.”

I pulled a match from my pocket, having always carried them in case of a lamp or opium pipe needing lighting, and used it to ignite the tobacco I had somehow managed to pack while riding in the bumpy coach. “Now, Miss Dunning I understand the...sensitive nature of the events for which you have summoned me to investigate, a task I take on with the utmost seriousness. It must start, however, with a task for you.”

She looked at me queerly, “Please explain sir.”

“You see, what I do as an investigator is to examine evidence and evidence comes in many forms. There are things that I see, things that I hear, smell, taste, feel...and often most importantly what is told to me by those who have direct knowledge of the events. My task for you, my dear, is to relate to me your first-hand experience of what has transpired. Leave out no detail, no matter how small or insignificant it may seem, or no matter how embarrassing or damning the words may feel coming out of your mouth. If that is something that you can do then I will have the strongest foundation upon which I may begin my investigation and a far better chance at putting this mystery to rest than if I simply start poking around in the dark. Can you do that?”

The young lady dipped her head and entered into an uncomfortably long silence. Then, when I thought that her reticence would never find its end she spoke. “Colin came on last spring.” I could not deduce whether the shaking of her voice was due to her sorrow over the young man’s death or as a result of her own timidity and unfamiliarity with speaking of such personal subjects.

She hesitated again and after a few moments I foolishly, now looking back upon events, blurted out, “Young lady, Mrs. Peterson has already informed me of your

previous...predicament. Surely nothing you are holding on your tongue can be more embarrassing than that subject so knowing that I am already so intimate with details of your personal life you should now have no problems relating to me what happened, yes?"

Elizabeth Dunning looked up at me in horror. Immediately she stood and walked a few steps away so that her back was facing me. I cannot, to this very day, explain my inexplicable and rather sudden lack of tact. Perhaps it was the particularly jarring ride to the estate, the unfamiliar surroundings or even the influence of a substance until then unknown to my anatomy, nicotine. Regardless, as with most of my failings I make no excuses, only point to possible catalysts. To tell the truth I felt like an immense jack-arse.

"Miss Dunning I am terribly sorry, I do not know what has come over me. Please forgive me for blurting forth something so offensive and uncalled for."

She turned to face me and spoke, her eyes showing the first signs of approaching tears. "Inspector I do not fault you for making inquiry regarding my character. Were I to share your vocation I believe that it would only be diligent for me to do the same...I just...I am surprised that my Aunt Margaret would reveal such information to you."

I motioned for her to sit, "Please, forgive my rudeness and sit with me." she complied, "The information did not come easily. I pleaded with Mrs. Peterson, explaining of how much import it was for me to have all of the information that I could before beginning my investigation. As to your secret...upon its revelation it was apparent to me that not a word had ever passed her lips regarding the matter prior, not even to her husband."

At that she smiled briefly and I leaned forward to better engage with her, "Were we to meet in a social setting I would expect...no I would demand actually, to be treated by you regardless of your social standing as an equal. In this instance, however, I am indeed in your employ and will perform my duties to the best that my abilities will allow. As I said before Miss, my profession often calls upon me to be intimately acquainted with details of clients' personal lives. Simply keep in mind that I am but a tool to complete your task."

My statement was something of a falsehood. My ego prevents me from thinking myself akin to anything as lowly as a mere instrument of detection; however as a result of my overly brazen tongue I felt as though I needed to reassure the young lady.

"I like you Mr. Carson." she blurted out. "You are terribly direct, not like the posh swells and mashers that my father brings about to vie for my hand." she paused for a moment and I could see the embarrassment in her face. "Not that I am insinuating that you are here to vie for my affections!"

I put my hand out to silence her, "Of course my dear. No need to be troubled, I understand and accept your compliment for what it is. To be quite honest my forthrightness is typically appreciated but on occasion has cost me a job."

"It shall not cost you one here...though it may unsettle my father and my brothers." she smiled wryly, "Which should be perfectly acceptable to me. Were your direct nature to upset them I will consider it to simply be a perk."

"I see there is some animosity between you and your family."

"To put it lightly Inspector. As you have no-doubt surmised from my letter to you and from the story that Mrs. Peterson related I may be born of an upper-crust family but I frequently choose not to socialize with similar sorts of people."

"Men, especially, it would seem."

She straightened a bit, I was toying with her but she seemed to be growing more accustomed to my quips. “There is something I find so pedantic about the young men of my own social strata. I am afraid that soft hands and cleanly-shaven cheeks do not appeal to me sir.”

“I take it that your Colin was anything but. Tell me about him and how you came to be in love and remember that you have vowed to be honest and thorough with me.”

She nodded and then began. “His name was Colin Wright. Mr. Peterson met him in town, searching for employment, and knew that we were in need of someone to tend the horses.”

“Did he have experience doing such a job?”

She seemed surprised by the question, “Well, yes, he said that he’d done it before.”

“Did he say so before or after Mr. Peterson informed him of your need for a groom?”

“I don’t know.”

“Mmm. Continue.”

“He brought Colin to meet with Father and he hired him that very day. A room was given to him in the servants’ quarters and he began to stay on the estate full-time.”

“Was he staying in Leeds before he came here or was he simply passing through?”

“As I understand it he was passing through.”

So much for speaking with friends in town to get another account of the young man’s character. “If not Leeds then where did the young man hail from originally?”

“He told me that he grew up in Dorset and that he’d spent several years traveling about before coming to Leeds.”

“Did he ever relate to you exactly why he left Dorset? Was he in trouble? Was he an orphan?”

“Neither.”

“So he still had family in Dorset?”

“I would assume so, yes. He didn’t really speak of them.”

“Did he speak of his life before his travels at all?”

“Only if I questioned him on it and even then he was quite brief on the subject. Why is that important?”

“Everything is important my dear. A man who does not wish to speak of his past does not wish to think about his past. Family troubles, a broken heart, regrets for something one did...”

“He never appeared troubled to me, it simply seemed to be a part of his life he gave little thought to.”

“I see. Tell me about him, what did he look like?”

“He was about average height, short-cropped dark brown hair only slightly lighter than your own, muscular but not overly so.”

“What was the color of his eyes? Also I assume he was not clean-shaven from your earlier remark.”

“He had remarkable green eyes and wore a well-trimmed beard.”

“You said remarkable when referring to the young man’s eyes. Please elaborate.”

“They were just exceptionally green. The depth of the color was unique.”

“Very well. Please explain to me how you came to be romantically involved with Colin.”

She nodded. Most of her timidity seemed to have evaporated and she had become used to my customary rapid-exchange dialogue but I detected just a hint of hesitation before she continued.

“He worked here on the estate for two months, I believe, before I had occasion to actually speak with him in any meaningful capacity.”

“Details.” I demanded, relaxing back into my seat and puffing from my newly acquired pipe.

“We had exchanged pleasantries several times. I often accompany my brother and his friends on their fox-hunts, merely as a curative for the terrible boredom I often suffer from, and I would see Colin when I would go to the stable to retrieve my horse, Melody. The first time I met him I admired his handsomeness and his gentle way of speaking as well as his attentiveness to the horses. Then one night in mid-August I got into a terrible argument with my father and stormed off into the night. I went to the stables to retrieve Melody, planning to ride away to Leeds with nothing more than the clothes on my back and the small amount of money in my purse and from there to take a train to anywhere I could afford. It was Colin who sat with me for what was likely two or more hours and convinced me to stay. He was so gentle and kind, not like the suitors that my father kept insisting I meet. Most were simply old and unappealing. Those who were young and handsome were always like my brother, crass and self-concerned. I have consistently refused and will continue to refuse to marry a man who is only concerned with his own thoughts and desires.”

I motioned for her to continue.

“Not one week after we spoke that night in the stable my father brought a particularly old, unattractive and tactless man home to meet me. I flew into a rage and slapped him squarely across the face after he whispered something quite inappropriate into my ear. For once my father and brothers took my side and demanded the man leave immediately but it did not prevent my anger from seething over. After telling them in no uncertain terms exactly how I felt about them I stormed out of the house and went to see if Colin was in the stable. As luck would have it he was and he accompanied me on a long walk about the property and was kind enough to listen to my ranting with not so much as a single complaint. We spent the night together, though nothing of the intimate nature occurred, in one of the abandoned cottages at the edge of the estate.”

The one Mrs. Peterson had spoken of no doubt.

“The next morning my youngest brother was out playing and caught sight of us walking back from the direction of the cottage and ran to tell Adrian who, of course, flew into a unmitigated frenzy over the entire affair. To protect Colin I told Adrian that I’d wandered off into the woods alone and that the stable-boy had seen me go. When I’d not returned by sunrise he’d set off to find me and bring me back to the house.”

“Adrian seemed most suspicious but took my word and did not have my father dismiss Colin. That very same night I went to visit the young man at the stable again and managed to catch him before he returned to his room. Rather brazenly I kissed him and much to my relief he quickly returned the gesture. Over the next several weeks we courted as would any typical couple, save for the fact that we attempted to conceal the affair from my family. Within a month our nanny, Tripti, was helping me sneak into his room or he into mine several nights per week.”

“She would do that, risk her position to help a young lady have a forbidden romance?”

“Tripti left India to avoid marrying a man that her parents promised her to. She had been in love with another young man and it broke her heart to do so. She empathized with my situation I suppose.”

“Now, I must ask this question Miss Dunning, so please do not take offense. Are you, at this moment, with child?”

To my delight Elizabeth did not react to the question, she simply answered it. “As it has been only two weeks and some days since Mr. Wright’s passing I cannot be absolutely certain but as of today I am not aware of being so.”

“Thank you. So you were never caught in your clandestine rendezvous?”

“In our evenings together no, at least not that I am aware. Sometime around Christmas, however, my youngest brother Cyril caught sight of us holding hands and kissing in the garden. He reported it to my father and Adrian, both of whom had much to say on the matter. I did not hear the end of it for nearly a week. I told them that I was in love with Colin and that they would simply have to live with that fact or that I would choose to run away with him to start a life someplace else. Father threatened to terminate Colin’s employment but I told him that if he did so I would use every one of his secrets against him. He almost seemed pleased by my rather shocking use of tactics to get my way.”

“Everyone seemed to have dropped the matter for a while until late January when once again my father tried to marry me off. He must have searched high and low, for the man he presented me with was surprisingly handsome and quite mild-mannered but still I refused. I announced that I would marry only Colin and if he would not have me then I would die a spinster. My father, of course, asked if my young man had proposed and I answered him truthfully, that he had not. He tried to sway me, to convince me that Colin was only interested in taking the virtue of a well-bred lady and that he had no intention of marrying me. I countered with the fact that he likely never asked because he knew that it would not be blessed by my father. I also made comment that even if he were simply a selfish young man he’d be a fool not to marry the wealthy young lady who’s heart he’d captured. For that my father had no response. I thought the matter put to rest once again until the morning when Kwame found Colin lying dead in the stable.”

“Had you seen your young man the night before?”

“Yes.”

“But you’d not spent the night together?”

A slight look of embarrassment crossed her face, “He did come to visit me in my room if that is what you are alluding to but he did not remain the entire night.”

“Why not? Your family knew of your involvement. Did they think it not consummated?”

“Truth be told I did my best to conceal that fact from them. Most nights that he visited me he left shortly after mid-night.”

“So that you would not be discovered together in the morning?”

“Somewhat...he also said that he favored a walk about the grounds before settling down.”

“You did not find that odd in any way?”

“I suppose not. My father is known to take constitutionals at odd hours.”

“I see. So you parted around mid-night and then did not see him again.”

She paused, trying reign in her emotions. “Yes. That was the last time I saw him.”

Interesting. “Last time you saw him alive you mean?”

“No.” she blurted out, “The last time I ever saw him.”

“So there was no funeral?”

“No. My father would not allow it. He did not even allow me to see the body. The coroner from Bramsforth, an old friend to my father, came quickly to the estate to pronounce him dead and then they rushed him into a grave.”

“A coroner? What is his name? I may wish to speak with him.”

“Cotton Farragut. I believe that we have his telephone number should you wish to contact him.”

“Indeed, I shall do so after we conclude our conversation. So where is Mr. Wright buried?”

I had posed my question with such fervor that I had failed to notice the young lady breaking down into tears. I had little skill in comforting a woman, my own emotional frailties preventing

me from even properly consoling myself in times of heartache, so I could only sit and wait for her to compose herself.

“They would not even tell me Mr. Carson.” she sobbed. “A man I loved, as a wife loves her husband, and I cannot even visit his grave!”

“I am terribly sorry Miss Elizabeth. Mr. Wright’s resting place is one of the facts I shall endeavor to uncover in my investigation. You may rest assured that I will notify you the moment that I have done so, so that you may pay your proper respects. Now if I may I just need to bother you for a few more details before I make my call to the coroner.”

She nodded as she wiped away the last of her tears.

“How, precisely did the young man die? By this I mean what were the physical circumstances that resulted in his death and thereby your suspicion that he was possibly murdered?”

“Kwame was sent by Mrs. Kyle to see why Colin was not at breakfast. He found him resting on a pitchfork as if he had fallen backwards onto it.”

“But you believe that it was no accident?”

“I do not know Inspector. If your investigation reveals that it was then I will accept that truth and go on with my life. The haste with which he was buried, however, and the strangeness with which my father and brothers have been behaving leads me to believe that something very untoward may have taken place and I simply need to know.”

“I can certainly understand. I will have many more questions for you, most of the minor sort, so I will speak with you likely several more times today but I believe that I have enough information to begin with. If you would be kind enough to retrieve the coroner’s number for me and show me to the telephone I will place my call and commence questioning the others.”

“Thank you Mr. Carson.” she said very sincerely. “I cannot bear the thought of living in the presence of someone who has conspired to murder the man that I loved. If that is the case, be they family or not, I will see to it that they are brought to justice for committing such a terrible crime. Even if Colin had not been my lover I could not turn a blind eye to such a happening.”

“Your conviction is admirable Miss Dunning. Many I have met only respect the law when it is in their or their family’s own interest.”

“Is it not only decent Mr. Carson?” her eyes were alight with a passionate flame.

“Indeed my dear, indeed.” I shook my head as I puffed on my pipe.



“Sometime around Christmas, however, my youngest brother Cyril caught sight of us holding hands and kissing in the garden. He reported it to my father and Adrian, both of whom had much to say on the matter. I did not hear the end of it for nearly a week.”

The Master

Despite her account being not quite as thorough as I would have preferred I had chosen to give a certain amount of consideration to a young woman in such a state as she. I found myself anxious to call the coroner on the telephone and thought it quite a blessing that the estate even had one installed. My joy, however, was to be short lived. The man on the other end of the line was apparently quite busy and seemed to be rather upset that I was taking up a part of his day. As I suspected he confirmed his ruling that the boy's death had been an accident but I had hoped to at least glean some other useful information from him. I did not, he was most uncooperative and made it quite clear to me that since I was not an official police inspector that I should trust his word and leave the matter be. As I was concluding the unfruitful conversation I caught sight of Mrs. Kyle, the maid, walking past so I stopped her to ask where I might find the master of the house.

"Excuse me Madame. Mrs. Kyle is it?"

"Yes." she stopped in her tracks and answered in a mildly annoyed tone of voice.

"Might I inquire as to where I can find Mr. Dunning?"

She shrugged, "Your guess is as good as mine. If I had to hazard a guess I'd say somewhere out near the garden or along the walking path east of the house."

"Thank you Madame. Sorry to have troubled you."

With that I set off in search of the estate's owner. From my understanding of his character I reasoned that I would have a somewhat difficult time getting him to sit with me and speak. I was absolutely right. When I did happen to find him it was on a bench under a large oak tree along the east walking path just as Mrs. Kyle had predicted. Much to my chagrin, however, upon sitting down next to him the man rose and began to walk away without so much as a greeting.

"Mr. Dunning!" I yelled as I went after him. "Mr. Dunning my name is Robert Carson I'm an inspector from London. I've come to investigate the death of Colin Wright."

"Who asked you to come here?" he responded as he turned to face me. What had eluded his friends and family for years did not escape my attention. The constriction of his pupils told me instantly that he had some form of opiate addiction as did the expression upon his face. I recognized it all too well. Whatever it was that he had taken it was only just beginning to take effect and he wished to avoid interacting with anyone for fear that they would detect the euphoria that was rapidly setting in. The acne, uncommon for a man his age, also did its part to reveal his secret.

"Miss Elizabeth retained my services."

"Bah. I should have known she would not leave the matter be." he put a hand on my shoulder and looked directly into my eyes, wishing to end the conversation. "Mr. Wright stumbled and fell upon a pitchfork, there is nothing more to tell than that Mr. Carson."

With that he turned and began to walk away once more. If he thought that he was going to escape my questioning he was sorely mistaken. I quickly caught up to him and fell in step alongside him.

"Then certainly you won't mind answering just a few quick questions."

"Mr. Carson, please leave me be lest I ask you to vacate my property."

I was not in a mood conducive to tolerating his stubbornness. I reached down and grabbed his right hand, the one that held his walking stick.

“See here now Inspector. Unhand me!”

I waited until he turned and looked me squarely in the eyes. “Mr. Dunning I would prefer not to notify your family, friends and every business associate that I can find...and believe me I can find them, of your opiate addiction.”

The older gentleman recoiled. Had I not been holding his hand he would have taken a step back. Shortly his surprise turned into an expression of frustration. “You would be right in assuming that I would not wish that information be public knowledge. Walk with me and ask your questions but then you will leave me to my constitutional. Understood sir?”

I was keenly aware that I had approached the limit to which I could push the man, were I to persist he would evict me from the grounds and gladly suffer the consequences of his secret becoming uncovered. Likewise I knew not what affiliations he held in London and I did not wish to find myself returning to a city filled with his allies hell-bent on making my life difficult.

“Thank you sir.” I said in an apologetic tone and released him from my grasp. “I will only take a moment of your time and I shall keep pace with you so as to not disturb with your walk.”

He grunted his acceptance and I walked alongside him as he continued down the path. The day was cold but only the slightest breeze was to be felt so it was still pleasant. Clouds remained in the sky but the morning mist had faded away and there was no hint of eminent precipitation. Had I packed a little hop for myself I very well could have imagined myself partaking in some and enjoying the constitutional every bit as much as Mr. Dunning. There was something about the country that seemed as though it would be an infinitely more pleasant setting in which to find oneself wrapped into the warm embrace of an opium high.

Most others might not have noticed such minute details but it was evident by the weather-wornness of the master’s grey wool coat, which had once been a fine and quite expensive one, and also by his surprisingly tanned skin that he did indeed spend most of his time out-of-doors. The worn circular spot in the marble next to the chair that Elizabeth had sat in when we had spoken in the library told me more. Her chair’s leather had also appeared more worn than the one in which I had sat. Those facts led me to surmise that the majority of the time he did enjoy indoors was spent sitting in that chair with his cane in his right hand; staring at the fire and rotating the walking stick’s handle back and forth in the palm of his hand.

“I was told that you were aware of Mr. Wright’s relationship with your daughter.”

He scoffed. “The very thought turns my stomach. To think that my little girl would associate with...” he trailed off. It was not hard to surmise what he was going to say anyway so I paid it no heed.

“She tells me that you were rather upset by it.”

“Of course I was. Who wouldn’t be? Year after year I’ve tried to marry that girl off into a good family and I get rewarded by her having affairs with bankers and stable-boys. I’ve no idea where she gets the notion to behave the way she does. She’ll be the death of me...or worse yet her mother.”

“Is Mrs. Dunning still ill?”

“Yes she is and I’ll warn you now Mr. Carson, if you disturb my wife’s rest I’ll have you tossed out of my home without delay. Threats or no.”

I decided to heed his warning for the time being. Seeing as how she was primarily bed-ridden the likelihood of her having much information that would be useful to my investigation was

negligible anyway. I would only question the lady of the house if the rest of my inquiries proved fruitless.

“May I assume that despite your distaste for your daughter being involved with a young man in your employ that neither you nor your sons would engage in any form of malice toward him?”

“Surely you cannot think me capable of such a thing? Wait, of course you can. You hail from a city where moral depravity has made men capable of any of a number of atrocities.” he walked for a moment in silence before continuing. “Mr. Carson I am many things but I am not a murderer. My anger was directed solely at my daughter’s poor decision making. I had no intention of harming that young man.”

The first part of his statement had been the truth, I detected something disingenuous about the second. Most interesting.

“Just one more thing Mr. Dunning and then I shall leave you in peace. Elizabeth has informed me that there was no funeral and that the boy’s body was quickly taken off and buried in a place she knows not where. That does seem most peculiar I must say.”

“Mr. Carson, as you have already mentioned I was not pleased with whom she chose to bestow her affections upon. The last thing I wanted was for her to mourn him for the rest of her life and pass up yet more opportunities to be wed. Likewise I do not wish to surround my estate with the stigma of death. Mr. Wright was buried as quickly as possible and in a place that Elizabeth will never find because I wish this matter to be settled and for her life to go on.” he stopped and turned to me, his face appeared unshaven for several days as it was dotted with the beginnings of grey whiskers, “Believe it or not sir I do also care for my daughter’s feelings and I thought it to bring more harm to her to see the man she loved dead of such a gruesome ending. I spared her that anguish.”

It was difficult for me to detect whether or not that last bit had been a lie or simply a half-truth. There was undoubtedly some piece of information which he intended to remain obfuscated from my prying.

“Very well then. If you would be kind enough to tell me where the boy’s body is buried then I will be on my way.”

“I most certainly will not.” he scoffed as he walked away.

The Gambian Boy

Tripti, the nanny and next in line for my questioning though she did not know it, did me the favor of rounding up the young African servant boy. She'd instructed Mrs. Kyle, who by then I'd surmised doubled as the cook in addition to her duties as maid, to warm a couple of left-over scones from breakfast for me to eat while I waited. She put them down in front of me on the large table in the dining hall that had been allocated for servants. The table was oak and quite large, looking as if it had been crafted with the intentions of seating at least twelve people. Some five or ten years previous the estate probably had at least that many in its employ. In recent years however, like with most of the wealthy houses of Britain, the number of those in service had plummeted dramatically. The world was a changing place and the idea of the wealthy few being served by those of lesser birth was slowly giving way to the pressures of those with more socialist attitudes. That suited me just fine.

Having been born with nothing and having inherited nothing I had no love for the wealthy upper-class nor any particular concern for the longevity of their fortunes. So long as regular men had the funds with which to pay for my services and to keep me in a job I was content.

I would not be content, however, to dine in the servants' hall come evening. It was doubtful that Miss Elizabeth would treat a guest as such but should she have the nerve I would kindly inform her otherwise lest I be persuaded to take my leave and return to London after demanding a small dispensation for my time. The wealthy seldom understood that more often than not they were at the mercy of those who served them and not the other way-round. You see, the rich have a weakness that common men do not share, at least not in such abundance. They have secrets, secrets which could spell doom for all that they try so desperately to hold on to.

Men such as myself have no such encumbrances. Were I to anger the family the most serious ramifications would be rumors and lies about me spread throughout the wealthier houses of London. Should they anger me too greatly I am privy to information that could mean ruin for their entire fortune.

I sat at the table for several more minutes in deep thought. I'd not yet reached a point in my investigation where my mind would become consumed with unlocking the mystery so I allowed it to wonder a bit. A few moments later Mrs. Kyle sauntered back into the dining hall and began to pour hot tea into the cup placed before me.

"Has the servant boy not been summoned?" I queried.

Confirming my earlier suspicions that the maid was simply a crass woman as opposed to my having caught her at a bad time previously she responded in an impatient manner, "Tripti has gone to fetch him. He'll be along momentarily. Now eat your scones."

Just as she'd finished pouring the sound of a bell signaled that the side door had been opened. "That'll be him now Mr. Carson."

The boy, skin dark as pitch with heavily soiled clothing, barreled into the hall with all of the energy and callousness typical of youth. He bumped into a serving cart, causing its dirty silverware to clatter about noisily. Mrs. Kyle gave him a glare of irritation.

"Tell me Mrs. Kyle. Is the attitude to which I have been greeted with since my arrival your usual disposition or do you reserve some extra disdain for me?"

The lady's face was one of utter surprise. She knew not what to say to such a quip, nor do I believe that she expected it from a stranger.

"I'm simply trying to ascertain whether you are simply crass of nature, angry at me for something I have yet to discover or if I have merely caught you on a day in which you are not in the best of moods."

For a moment I did think her to slap me but finally she spoke, "I'll have you know that I am perfectly amicable to those who employ me Mr. Carson. Those who have come simply to poke their noses into business that is none of theirs I have not the patience to oblige."

"Ah, so that's it. You think I'm interfering in the affairs of the estate?"

"To be quite blunt Mr. Carson, yes. That's what you inspectors do isn't it?"

I smiled, a gesture which seemed to only further irritate the older lady. Her round face, framed by the grey locks which hung down from under her cap, pursed into a sour expression as her cheeks flushed. The dimness of her green eyes, the bags under them and the small indentation upon her left ring finger between the knuckle and the palm where a wedding ring had until fairly recently been worn told me all that I needed to know. I stood from my chair to meet the lady's gaze. She was nearly of the same height as myself so I required only the slightest downward tilt of my head to do so.

"Allow me to make some suppositions Mrs. Kyle." I paused, "What is your given name?"

"Edith." she scoffed, "Why does it matter?"

"Very well Edith. I will call you that because I assume that your married name no longer carries with it the romance that it once did. From what I have observed of you and your overwhelmingly evident distaste for my vocation I shall venture to say that recently, but not too recently...perhaps in the last three months or so, you employed the services of an inspector yourself. I will further deduce that you retained his services for the purpose of discovering some secret about your husband, a secret that you now wished you had never uncovered. Am I close?"

With no restraint she slapped me clear across the face. It was not the first time I'd been slapped by a lady and very likely not the last lest some tragedy befall me on my trip back to London.

"How...how did you do that?" she asked, completely shaken.

I grinned as I rubbed the cheek which she has just struck. "Very simple. Your appearance, though neat in dress, is that of someone who has recently spent many nights sleepless. Trust me when I say that it is a face that I recognize all too well Edith. What's more, the finger on your left hand that would normally carry a wedding ring is suspiciously absent of one. Were I another man I may accept the explanation you have no-doubt given to your employers and friends, that it was lost and that you have yet been able to afford a replacement. The indentation left behind on the finger tells me that it was worn for many years but has in the last few months been removed. That fact coupled with your clear disdain for men of my profession clearly tells me that you regret having ever hired one to uncover your husband's secret."

"But...how could you know I simply didn't remove my ring to wash dishes?"

I grabbed her left hand and lifted it to her face. "While the indentation from the ring remains the lightening of the skin under where it once sat has since vanished. It has been at least two weeks removed, likely more."

The maid stood there for a moment in awe, or at least that's what my sometimes admittedly over-inflated ego chose to believe at the time. When finally she did speak she leaned in to me and did it with a hushed tone so that the boy, by then seated at the table and observing the whole interaction, could not hear.

“Listen to me very carefully Inspector. While it would be apparent to even the most dull-witted individual that you are indeed talented you will not bring shame upon this house. Not so long as I draw breath.”

“Then you care nothing for the truth, let alone the young Miss Elizabeth’s feelings?” I whispered in response.

Edith’s stern expression quickly returned, “I care more for that young lady’s feelings than you could possibly image. I have been with her since she was a child. That in no way changes the facts of what happened here.”

“Facts, my dear lady, are precisely what I seek. They are the unwavering, unchangeable truth of things..”

“Then here is one for you. Young Mr. Wright died in an accident.”

“Did you witness the scene yourself?”

“Oh no Mr. Carson, you will not question me. Drink your tea and eat your scones and be kind enough to steer well clear of me.”

With that she turned and walked quickly out of the dining hall. When I turned to face Kwame I saw his right hand come to touch the table, having previously been raised.

“What is it boy?” I asked.

“Nothing sir.” he spoke in a heavy accent but took the time to annunciate his words carefully.

“Nonsense. Speak up.”

“I was going to ask Mrs. Kyle for a cup of tea sir.” he said coyly with his eyes slightly averted from my own.

“Lift your eyes from that table boy.” I commanded as I took my seat. “I am not your master nor do I wish to be treated as such.”

He hesitated only momentarily before lifting his eyes. They were of a brown so dark I could hardly distinguish them from the black of his pupils. Still, there was a youthful brightness to them that made me envy him his vitality. Surely life as a servant on a well-appointed estate could be no worse than the back of my drunken father’s hand or the feculence of an orphanage.

“So Kwame, as I understand it the master Dunning brought you back with him after a business trip to Gambia. Is that correct?”

“Yes sir.”

“You were an orphan?”

“Yes...” he hesitated, “well, for what it matters sir.”

“Care to explain what that means to me Kwame?” I was genuinely intrigued.

“My father was still alive but he beat me terribly. It was Mr. Dunning that stayed his hand one day as he lashed me in the market.”

“He was beating you in a marketplace?”

“Yes sir. We were there to sell some fish my father had caught. I gave a small one to a boy younger than myself who was very hungry and my father became extremely angry at me. He began to beat me severely with a stick and it was Mr. Dunning who asked him to stop.”

“And he did as requested?”

“No.”

“Then how did master Dunning bring the incident to a conclusion?”

“He yelled at my father, told him that he would buy me if he would stop beating me.”

“Your father sold you to him?”

The boy nodded nervously. The entire subject seemed to be making him rather uncomfortable.

“You went freely?”

He looked up and locked eyes with me, “Of course. I was only six years old but I knew that I would rather be an Englishman’s slave than my father’s whipping boy.”

“Had you no other family?”

“My mother died when I was very young. I always thought, as did my aunt, that my father had beaten her to death.”

“So you had an aunt. Did she not offer to take you in?”

“Yes, many times. My father would not allow it. He needed someone to help him in his fishing boat and would not let me go.”

“I suppose that Mr. Dunning’s offer was generous enough to change his mind.”

“I do not know sir. I only know that I was glad to be free of him.”

I leaned across the table so that I no longer towered over the boy but was closer to the level of his gaze. “I am terribly sorry to hear of your suffering young man. My father was very much the same. He had far too much affection for the bottle and after imbibing far too much affection for beating me senseless.”

Suddenly the boy seemed less apprehensive. “How did you escape him?”

“He dispatched of my mother, not by killing her but by sending her away, and then decided he had had enough of me as well. I was sent to live in an orphanage with all of the other unwanted children.”

“Did...did anyone take you in?”

“I’m afraid not.” I said as I sat back into my chair, “There I remained until I was old enough to be freed upon my own recognizance.

To my utter surprise the boy’s eyes welled up as if he would cry, though he did not. “I’m sorry that no family wanted to take care of you sir. It must have been terrible.”

“Indeed.” I said, choking down my own emotion at the thought of those years spent feeling utterly worthless. “Tell me about Mr. Dunning. He bought you from your father and then what?”

The boy seemed to then perk up, “He brought me back to the hotel he was staying at and had one of the maids bathe me. She was an angry lady.” he laughed, “They gave me some simple but very clean clothes and Mr. Dunning had me follow him about for the three days that he remained in my country.”

“As a servant.” I stated.

“Somewhat...” he began, “he told me that when we returned to England that he’d not hold me as a slave as that was not allowed by law nor would he even want to do so but that if I wanted to work on his estate that he would feed and clothe me and give me an education. For most of the days before boarding the ship I simply followed him about doing small tasks as he requested and then on the third day helped to load his baggage onto the carriage.”

“Has he kept his promise? Does he treat you well?”

“Oh absolutely sir. I am tasked with a great many things but I am always well fed and I sleep in a warm and comfortable bed every night.”

“What of the education he mentioned?”

Kwame shook his head enthusiastically. “Miss Tripti gives me private lessons twice per week. I have even learned to read and the master allows me to borrow books from the library to read in the evenings after my chores are done.”

“Then you are happy with your decision to leave your home?”

“This is the only time I have ever had a home sir.” the boy, though not exceptionally well spoken, certainly was intelligent and knew how to convey his thoughts.

“What of the Dunning children, how do they treat you?”

“They ask me to do things for them but it is seldom a demand.”

“And the other servants?”

“Mrs. Kyle likes to tell me what to do, so does Mr. Findlay but neither has ever laid hand on me. The others are quite kind.”

“What of Mr. Wright?”

The very mention of the stable-tender seemed to evoke an immediate physiological response. His eyes began to dart about and his breathing became more shallow. He also removed his hands from the table and placed them in his lap, no-doubt an instinctual reaction to hide his sweating palms. Of course this told me little, after all he was the one who had discovered Colin’s body and simply the recollection of such a traumatic event could cause a fear response like the one he was exhibiting.

“He was extremely kind although somewhat peculiar.” the boy swallowed hard.

“Peculiar? In what fashion?”

“He...mostly liked to work alone, preferring me to do my chores in the stable before he arrived in the morning.”

“Perhaps he was merely not a conversationalist. Is not Master Dunning of similar disposition?”

“It’s not that.” he shook his head. I had foolishly sat facing the large window that overlooked the western lawn so the boy’s face was somewhat in shadow, making it more difficult to read his expressions. “He acted strangely around myself but also the young Master Cyril. It was as if he did not know how to speak to children.”

“That is not quite as strange as it may seem.”

“He also woke at strange hours of the night.”

“Insomnia perhaps?”

“Possibly. I’d hear him come in and out of the servants quarters. One night curiosity got the best of me and I followed him.”

Then surely he knew of Mr. Wright’s visits to Miss Elizabeth’s chambers. “Where did he go?”

“Out into the woods.”

Not the answer I had expected.

“Did you follow him?”

“Once.”

“And what was he doing in the woods?”

“Nothing.”

“What do you mean ‘nothing’?”

“He was just sitting there on a fallen tree. He sat perfectly still for some ten minutes or so. Eventually I left and returned to my bed.”

“Perhaps he merely enjoyed the quiet of the forest?”

The boy’s eyes darted about. There was something more he would not say.

“Surely there is more, yes?”

“I heard strange noises that night as I walked back to the house. I turned back and saw strange lights in the forest but when I returned to where he had been sitting he was no longer there.”

A most interesting detail. “Tell me about the sounds in detail...the lights as well.”

“The sound was...” he seemed to be struggling to find an analogue, “something like a whistle but many of them and of a low pitch.”

“Go on.”

“The light was of an orange color and flashed on and off quickly in time with the whistles.”

“Lanterns emanate an orange light dear boy. Perhaps he was merely sleepless and toying with the light of the one he’d brought along.”

“No sir.” the boy insisted, “It was bright, brighter than any lamp I’d ever seen and when I’d found him sitting on the tree he’d not even had one with him.”

“So he’d walked into the forest at night alone and with no lantern?” I queried.

“Yes sir. That is exactly how I saw it.”

“While I suppose there are any number of logical explanations I must admit that if what you say is true then it truly was an odd occurrence.”

“It is truth sir, I swear it.”

“There must be more, however, if you considered him a peculiar man.”

He nodded quickly and in an anxious fashion. “Whenever he would hurt himself, while shoeing horses mostly, he would run away to his room and would let no one attend to his wounds.”

“Why?” I felt it was time to press the boy.

“I do not know.”

“Of course you do. You found him that morning did you not? Dead upon the pitchfork.”

Kwame became agitated and would not look me in the eye. He likely thought I did not notice his subtle rocking back and forth in his chair but it did not escape my attention.

“Yes sir. What has that to do with it?”

“Well, he was rather injured that morning. Were he keeping some secret that was relevant surely you would have seen it no?” I could only surmise some disease of the blood that he would wish to hide. Methemoglobinemia, perhaps, which results in a brownish colored blood which could be quite startling to onlookers unaware of the condition. Hemophilia was also a possibility, surely he would not wish the family who employs him to know of his frailty.

“Sir I...” he began to sob, “He was just dead. It was terrible.”

“Any strange appearance to the blood?”

“No.” the language of his body betrayed him. His reaction to my query was unmistakable, it was a flat-out lie.

“We shall step back for a moment my dear boy. Please relate to me in detail the events of the morning when you found Mr. Wright dead in the stable.”

The boy took a moment to calm himself and then spoke, “It was very cold that morning. Mrs. Kyle served breakfast while complaining about how the chill was making her bones ache. We’d all sat down to eat but Mr. Wright was nowhere to be found. He was always at breakfast so she sent me to see if he was still in his room. He was not. I told her and she demanded that I check the stable, not even allowing me time to fetch my coat. I ran out there as quickly as I could and when I entered I found him upon the pitchfork. He was already dead and had been so for a while.”

“Rigor mortis?”

“Sir?”

“Was he, upon finding him, already stiff?”

“Yes sir.”

“A pool of blood beneath him?”

“Yes.”

“Was anything in the area disturbed? Tossed about?”

“No sir. The stable looked to be in order save for that horror.”

“I see.” I said as I bit into one of the scones. “So there was nothing unusual whatsoever about the state of the place nor of the body itself?”

“No sir.”

Even his lies provided me some amount of information. For instance, he claimed that he had been dispatched when Colin had failed to appear at breakfast yet only moments before he had attested that he typically tended to morning chores in the stable before Mr. Wright came in. Surely he would have seen the body then; his story, it was obvious, was a fabrication.

“Was that the last time you saw the body?”

“No sir.”

“Tell me of the last time you saw him.”

“Master Dunning, Master Adrian, and their agent asked me to help remove the pitchfork and load his body into a cart. I did and after that never saw him again.”

“You had nothing to do with the burial?”

“No sir.”

“Do you know where the body was buried?”

“No sir.”

“Very well then young Kwame,” I said abruptly, “I am done with you for now. Should I have further questions I will have you summoned again.”

The boy finished his tea with a gulp and behaved as though he could not vacate my presence quickly enough. There were details he was not revealing, that much was glaringly apparent. Once I had gleaned sufficient information from the other witnesses so as to catch him in a bald-faced lie I knew that I could wrestle them from him. In the meantime his testimony had left me with some interesting mysteries. Lights and sounds in the forest most clearly pointed to secret rendezvous. It was not with Miss Elizabeth, since their clandestine meetings had long-since been replaced with rather brazen visits to her bed-chamber.

Were he in the employ of a noble family or one affiliated with the workings of government my mind would have instantly jumped to the conclusion that he was a spy for a foreign power. That seemed unlikely; perhaps meetings with yet another lover? Were I to find that the case then even Miss Dunning would become suspect. It was not beyond the realm of possibility that she herself, as a spurned lover, could have plotted his demise and then hired an inspector, hoping to implicate one of her siblings in the murder. A convenient way to rid herself of an unfaithful partner and an impediment to her inheritance in one fell stroke.

Of course there was the issue of his odd behavior when being injured. It was not unreasonable, however, to assume that the two had nothing to do with one another. Any working man with an affliction of the blood would wish to hide such an malady. I could think of no other reason for the man to refuse treatment at the hands of others but to hide an ailment. I made quick work of my second scone as I contemplated the facts that had thus-far been revealed. The mystery only seemed to deepen with each round of probing but it troubled me not. Discovering the answer to a profound riddle was one of the few things in life that tickled my fancy even more than narcotic ministrations. It was a grand game and one that I took much joy in proving to all involved that I was a player of the highest caliber.



With no restraint she slapped me clear across the face. It was not the first time I'd been slapped by a lady and very likely not the last lest some tragedy befall me on my trip back to London.

Nanny, Nurse, Educator

Shortly after I'd completed my line of questioning with the boy Mrs. Kyle informed me that she was about to serve lunch and inquired as to whether I'd wish to eat with the servants. I declined but directed her to enlighten the family that I would be taking dinner with them in the evening. She scoffed at the notion but I held fast and eventually she begrudgingly agreed to do so.

I departed the kitchen set upon the idea of a brief walk. The cool country air was refreshing and it also granted me an opportunity to observe the estate's master from a discrete distance. After locating him I spent some fifteen or so minutes furtively surveilling his actions.

He did little save for sit upon a large garden stone and stare into the brush of the nearby tree line. He appeared to be listening to the songs of the birds which inhabited it as several times I watched as he pursed his lips and seemed, though I could not quite hear him, to respond to their calls. His humor seemed of a most tranquil nature, periodically he would close his eyes as a breeze would stir and rustle the mane of grizzled grey and black hair that was brushed back and hung down well past his ears in a style that most gentlemen no longer wore.

What was his poison? Laudanum would be the depravity of typical employment by men such as he yet I detected no odor of it upon him when we had met earlier on the walking path. Of course had he indeed managed to keep his addiction unknown to his family for many years, as my conversation with Mr. Peterson seemed to indicate, then he would surely have learned to disguise the scent in some manner.

In short order my curiosity was satisfied as I saw him draw from his pocket a small brown bottle with an orange label and black writing and press it to his lips before taking a small nip. Immediately after returning it to the left-hand inside pocket of his coat he pulled forth a tobacco pipe, deposited it between his lips, struck a match and touched the flame to its top. He drew heavily on it in rapid succession then unexpectedly ceased and set it upon the large stone next to him. How queer, a man who was clearly not addicted to the powerful lure of tobacco yet who used it as a means to cover an even more sinister corruption.

Despite my frequent patronage of the dens of Chinamen to engage in the consumption of their most wicked of delights while watching them participate in games of chance and speak in a tongue I could no more decipher than the hieroglyphs of Egypt I had always maintained the fortitude to withdraw periodically so as not to allow my physiology to become addicted to the substance. The desire, that mental thirst, was of course always with me but I refused to allow my body to require the drug to function. I treated my other vices similarly, often switching one for the other lest I become dependent like so many of the fiends I had come to be acquainted with over the course of recent years. My sins had made me nearly unfit for proper society, I would not, however, allow them finish the task.

My curiosity of Michael Dunning temporarily abated I sat in the garden for a moment and gave the pipe that Mr. Peterson had gifted me another go. I was, after all, in no hurry to complete my investigation. The compensation, which was promised to be of a generous nature, I had foolishly forgotten to speak to Miss Elizabeth about. It was certainly a matter of some import but in the meantime I meant to take pleasure in my surroundings. The incessant noise of the city had done my nerves few favors over the years and despite my presence on the estate being a matter

of business I still felt a calm settle upon me like none I'd felt in years, save for those induced by my narcotic remedies, of course.

When I had finished smoking I made for the library through the side door that the young Mr. Kwame had come running through only a short time earlier. All of the servants, including those I had yet to formally greet, were seated at the dinner table and were engaged in lively and mildly inappropriate banter when I interrupted. I announced to Mrs. Kyle that I would be in the library and that she was to send the servants to speak with me in the order that I had scrawled upon a piece of paper which I handed her.

She, as usual, looked none too pleased with me but agreed to do as she was instructed. I held hope that the servants had not seen my intrusion as disrespectful, nor my declining the offer to take lunch with them. It had not been in any way that I had felt above them, I was simply not hungry after the refreshment of tea and scones. Likewise I demanded to dine with the family not because I felt myself better than those in employ but because I would not allow the client to feel herself my better. Maintaining respect was essential to my profession, something I'd admittedly done little to help on frequent occasion with my questionable behavior.

I was sitting in the library for only a short period of time, no more than ten minutes by my watch, when the nanny, Tripti, entered and with a small curtsy took a seat across from me. To say that her loveliness caught my eye would be an understatement. It was typical of me to fancy women with blonde hair and creamy-white skin but the woman had a smile that was absolutely enchanting. She also had eyes that seemed like nothing less than dark pools of mystery that a man could get lost in. Her dress was very conservative and she kept her black hair pulled back save for a few strands that were curled and hung neatly to frame her well-proportioned face.

"From what I hear there seem to be few limits to the talents which your employers enjoy from your service with them Miss. I pray that you are rewarded handsomely for your efforts."

"I want for very little Mr. Carson. I have a lovely home and employers who are very kind to me."

"That is good to hear. Tell me, your accent is impeccable, how long have you been in England?"

She pursed her lips in thought before replying, "I'm sure there are those who would disagree with you but I cherish the compliment. I came to work for the Dunnings some twenty-three years ago this spring."

I scoffed, "My good lady surely you are little older than twenty-five yourself."

She smiled and looked down at the floor for a moment then returned a playful gaze, "Dear Inspector I have just had my fortieth birthday this last week."

I paused to make sure my mouth was not hanging agape, "Miss Tripti then may I say that you have an incredibly youthful appearance. The years have treated you remarkably well."

"Oh sir you are too kind."

I sincerely hoped that my comments and mannerisms had not come across as flirtatious, that was not my intent. "How is it that you came to England and to be in the service of the Dunning family?"

"My grandfather was English sir. Being the only child of my mother and father, as my mother was incapable of bearing more children, and being the only girl in the family my grandfather took a special interest in raising me like a proper English lady as he had done with my mother. As luck would have it he was an old business partner of Master Dunning and when he'd learned from his colleague that there was an opening for a governess on his estate he asked me if I would like to visit England. My grandfather and my mother traveled with me and we

toured London as well as much of the countryside before they came with me here. They promised that should I ever desire to return to India that they would arrange passage for me without question. That was twenty-three years ago.”

“You have never returned to visit?”

“Oh of course,” she beamed, “but I’ve usually not stayed long. I enjoy England quite a bit and I have relatives in both London and Cornwall that I visit on regular occasion and for holidays.”

“So by your length of service I will assume that you had a hand in rearing even the older of the Dunning children.”

“Yes. Despite being mostly a child myself, aged only 17 when I arrived, my grandfather vouched for my diligence and I can only assume by my continued presence that the family is satisfied with me.”

“Indeed. I have heard nothing but praise for you my dear.”

“That is reassuring to hear.”

“Being so young when you arrived here at Larchwood I can only assume that many of your talents are self-taught.”

“You assume correctly Inspector. I am a voracious reader and enjoy learning anything that I can.”

Unlike the servant boy who’d been very anxious when speaking with me Miss Tripti seemed peculiarly calm, no doubt in some fashion owing to the patience she had acquired from years of schooling petulant children. Her demeanor was a refreshing departure from most that I questioned yet I found it troubled me somewhat for if she was capable of maintaining such a stoic facade I faced difficulty in determining her true emotional state.

I did, however, easily note her eyes darting toward the large windows at the other side of the room. They were not glances of nervousness, rather she seemed to be looking at something she wished not to draw my attention to. Thusly my mind connected the sounds it had until then dismissed with her subtly darting gaze and I looked over to see drops of rain hitting the glass. This was not, however, what the governess had been looking at. Across the yard, in a rather undignified run for a person of his stature, came the good master Dunning. He held his coat partially over his head and splashed through the soggy grass very ungracefully. Even from such a distance I could make out the bottoms of his trousers clearly covered in mud.

“I am sorry sir. Master Dunning is at times a trifle unconventional.” Tripti apologized for something which gave me no offense.

“He’s an opium addict.” I ejaculated. She turned to me in astonishment at the brazen statement about her long-time employer. “Laudanum to be more precise.”

“Mr. Carson I have no clue what leads you to such a preposterous conclusion but you’ll remove it from your head this instance. Mr. Dunning is a good man, better than most.”

“Perhaps, but one whom I spied sipping from a laudanum bottle not twenty minutes ago. Have none of you ever checked to see what it is that he does all day?”

“Of course not. Spying is not something that is held in high regard in a proper household.”

“Nonsense. I’m sure spying, intentional or otherwise, is commonplace amongst the servants of this house as well as the wealthy family who has little to pass the time of their long days, unencumbered by such commonplace things as work.”

She straightened up, attempting some of that stoic resolve. “Perhaps Mr. Dunning simply has a cough that he is attempting to remedy.”

“Miss Tripti,” I smiled at her, “I am all too familiar with the signs of narcotic addiction both from encounters in my professional life and in my personal one as well. His addiction is not only truth but it has been for some many years now.”

“It does little to change the character of the man in question.”

“You’ll get no disagreement there. Even the most good-natured man can fall victim to the irresistible temptation of drug or drink.” I leaned in slightly hoping to get her to look me in the eye, she did, “For what it means I apologize for startling you with that revelation. I found your demeanor quite relaxed for someone under questioning and needed to see if I were capable of provoking an emotional response.”

“For what purpose sir?”

“Our emotions tell the truth that our words may be attempting to conceal.”

“We were only speaking of my background and how I came to be here at the estate. Surely nothing I would have cause to lie about.”

“Indeed. Still, I have witnessed falsehoods spoken of matters of even less importance. Also there are half-truths. You yourself have just spoken one to me. Your reason for leaving India involved a forbidden romance did it not?”

She did not speak for a moment then quickly changed the subject, “Would we not have smelled it at some point, the laudanum?”

“He disguises it my dear.”

“How?”

“With a very clever two-fold approach. Firstly he always indulges out-of-doors so that the scent does not linger. Secondly he draws heavily from his pipe immediately afterwards to cover what little might remain.”

“Mr. Dunning has smoked a pipe for years Inspector, there is nothing out of the ordinary about that.”

“Have you ever watched him smoke?”

“As I said spying is not the hallmark of pleasant society.”

“Have you ever seen him smoke, even in the house?”

“He does smoke in the house, in this library to be precise.”

“Only at night after everyone else has retired for the evening?”

She sat motionless for a while, deep in thought. “You are a clever one aren’t you Mr. Carson?” there was something mildly coquettish about her smile.

“Indeed,” I began, “I am. Therefore like everyone to whom I will be speaking I suggest nothing but honesty from you. I am a hard man to deceive.”

“Well then, that shall work out just fine for I have no cause to deceive you.”

“It is my sincere desire that what you say is indeed the case Madame. Contrary to what some may believe I am not here to prove anyone’s guilt or culpability in the matter at hand. Once I have examined the facts, should they show that no criminal deeds whatsoever have transpired, then I will be on my way all-the-merrier with the knowledge that no one of murderous disposition resides at this manor.”

“Have you not been well received sir? Your demeanor suggests to me that you’ve thus-far had a difficult time.”

I shook my head, “I have not been molested or harassed my good lady, however I have not been welcomed with open arms either.”

“I would imagine that is a rather typical reception for you Inspector.”

“Indeed. All men from royalty down to the lowliest of laborers keep their secrets, ones they prefer not ever come into the light of day. What’s more, your reaction to the revelation of Master Dunning’s opium addiction demonstrates the inclination of those near and dear to the accused to fail to notice small details, unknowingly of course.”

“An insult Mr. Carson?”

“Of course not Miss Tripti. Simply a fact.”

She sat quietly for a moment, expecting another question. I posed none.

“Do you truly believe that Mr. Wright’s death was anything but a foul turn of luck? Surely it was an accident just as was reported by everyone who came upon the scene.”

“Did you, Miss Tripti, come upon the scene?”

“No sir. They wished me not to see.”

“You act as nurse upon the estate do you not?”

“Colin had been long-dead by the time he was found sir. Master Dunning and his boy wished to spare me the horror of such a sight.”

“I see.” I rubbed at my side-whiskers in thought. Out in the hall I could hear the noises of the youngest Dunning, Cyril, reveling in the freedom he was seldom afforded. I saw his teacher turn to the sound and for a moment thought that she would rise and go to scold him but she did not.

“I apologize Inspector.” she smiled at me, “The young master is a bit precocious.”

“I have yet to make his acquaintance. Pray tell me, is he a good student?”

“Oh yes sir. He is remarkably bright as are all of the children.”

“What of Miss Elizabeth. Do you believe her decision to become romantically involved with someone as far below her station in life as the groom to have been an example of good decision making?”

She appeared to take offense at the question just as I had intended her to. Then the anger cleared from her face and she responded, “Sir I will answer your questions truthfully but I will not engage in a psychological battle of wills with you. You will find that years of dealing with children have made me keen on the subtleties of deception.”

I must admit that she had caught me completely off my guard. Very few individuals had ever been clever enough to see through my process of interrogation. I rather admired it if I had to be above-board.

“Forgive me my dear, it is rare occasion that I am greeted with a will or intellect that rivals my own.” I paused, realizing how grandiose my ego must have sounded at that moment, “Please understand that it is not vanity...”

“The average person is simply not that competent.” she finished my sentence with a devious smirk.

“Fascinating.” I uttered, almost below my breath. The lady smiled enchantingly and waited kindly for me to continue. “Well, now that we’ve discovered that my usual methods have no place in our interaction I will modify my inquiry to consist of nothing more than a simple string of questions.”

“I appreciate the consideration Mr. Carson.” said she.

I would not be able to manipulate her emotional state and use it against her, it had taken only a few moments for her to see through that particular tactic. Nevertheless I was confident in my ability to detect bald-faced lies. Besides, in some perverse manner I seemed to have gained her confidence.

“Tell me about Mr. Wright. What was your opinion of him?”

She spent a moment collecting herself. I did not perceive that she was steadying herself to tell a falsehood but rather settling in to answer my questions in a calm and informative manner. “Colin was a very gentle man. He seemed to always be concerned for others. From what little I saw of him performing his duties he appeared to be diligent in them. I heard no complaints of his service from either my masters or any of the other staff.”

“He was concerned for others, so he was a sociable chap?”

She shook her head, first at the sound of her pupil once again making noise in the hallway and then at my question. “I would not venture to call him that sir.”

“So he was unsociable?”

“Not exactly. He simply seemed to be a quiet man who preferred his solitude.”

“Save for the late-night company of Miss Elizabeth.” I remarked.

With the wag of a finger she reminded me that my attempts to fluster her would be fruitless. My apologies miss. You will forgive me if I momentarily forget myself.”

She bowed her head, communicating that I had her exoneration.

“Would you say that he was unusual?”

“In which ways do you mean sir?”

“Oh in any ways that may have made an impression upon you. His mannerisms, his appearance, his behavior...”

“I have found that most men of lower classes tend toward the boisterous so I would say that his thoughtful and silent demeanor was something that struck me as peculiar but I can think of nothing else.”

“Was he evasive? Did he avoid questions?”

“To be honest Inspector it was rare occasion when I spoke with him at all so I could not say.”

“Do you take dinner with the servants or with the family?”

“Oh with the family of course. I always have sir.”

“I see, so you did not socialize with him in the servants’ area?”

“No sir. I do not even reside there, my room is near the children.”

“I see. It comes to my attention that Mr. Wright may have partaken in night-time walks, perhaps into the woods or around the grounds. Did you ever have chance to witness this?”

“If you are alluding to the fact that he visited Miss Elizabeth almost nightly then you are attempting another one of your manipulations as you are no-doubt aware that I knew very well of the affair.”

“No Miss Tripti it was not my intention to stir you. My question is genuine and unrelated to his rendezvous with Elizabeth Dunning.”

She shook her head in confusion. “I am afraid not Inspector, I have no knowledge of any such events. My nature compels me to bed at an early hour.”

“What about strange lights or sounds from the forest at night? Have any such happenings ever woke you from your sleep?”

She pursed her chocolate-hued lips in thought for a moment then spoke, “Not that I can recall. You will understand if I inquire as to why you would ask such a strange question.”

“The boy, Kwame, related to me that one evening he followed young Mr. Colin into the forest upon where he observed the man sitting alone on a fallen log and making no sound or movements whatsoever. What’s more, he claimed that upon turning back to the servants’ quarters a series of sounds he could not identify drew his attention back to the forest where he was greeted with the sight of strange lights flashing through the trees from the general vicinity that he’d last seen Mr. Wright.”

“If what he says is true and not merely the fanciful imagination of a young boy then it is indeed peculiar but I cannot see what bearing such an instance would have upon the investigation into the stable-boy’s death.”

I brought my right foot to the floor, down from where it had been crossed upon my left knee, and turned in my chair so that I could mirror the position. I then reached into my pocket and pulled free the pipe which still contained a small amount of tobacco. “Do you mind?”

“As a matter of fact I do sir. I do not find tobacco smoke to be agreeable.”

“Then say no more, I wish not to put you out in any way.” I returned the small wooden object to the pocket in which it had come from. “I shall enlighten you Miss Tripti but first pray answer one more question. Would the dealings of Mr. Dunning or any of his associates who frequent the house be of interest to a spy?”

“A spy?” she seemed astonished, “None that I could conceive sir. The master’s business is only that of the estate itself. Are you declaring that you suspect Mr. Wright of espionage?”

“I am only attempting to be as thorough as possible with the information that has come into my possession Miss. As you yourself have said it is entirely possible that the stories of the servant boy are simply that, stories, and no more. Nevertheless the events that Kwame described would most closely identify with the clandestine rendezvous of a spy with his handler. You say that Mr. Dunning deals with no matters of import save for those of the estate. To your knowledge does any of your master’s influence upon industry stretch beyond the simple farms and mills of his property?”

“I do not believe so....however I cannot be certain as he is a rather secretive man in his own right.”

“As I have discovered.”

“You have spoken with him?”

“Indeed. More accurately I would say that I spoke to him and that he occasionally grunted or groaned in acknowledgment.”

She smiled and held back a small laugh, out of respect I assumed.

“Are any of the business associates that come to meet with him recognizable to you?”

“I am afraid not sir but I am not exactly a gazetteer when it comes to knowledge of wealthy industrialists and financiers.”

I allowed myself a small chuckle before proceeding. “Of course not. Should you have recognized any of them, however, it may have been deserving of my time to look into their affairs to rule whether or not their secrets would have been worth anything in the eyes of Mr. Wright or whomever it was that he may have been working for.”

“An industrial spy, that is what you are suggesting is it not?”

“I am suggesting nothing at all, however it is my duty to pursue all avenues. Were your stable-boy indeed an agent for a competitor of one of Mr. Dunning’s colleagues and he were to have been found out that could very well have led directly to his meeting such an unfortunate ending.”

“Do you truly have any evidence that his death was anything but accidental?”

“In a word...no. Not as yet, at least. At the present the facts do not point to murder but there is still more than enough peculiarity in the circumstances to warrant the continuation of my investigation into the matter.”

“Other than Kwame’s stories what peculiarity do you refer to Inspector?”

“Do you not find it odd that neither you nor Miss Elizabeth were allowed to see the body?”

“He was in a terrible state, the men simply wished not to put such stress upon us.”

“What of the remains after they had been taken from the stable? Surely there would be no harm in allowing you to see his body once it had been prepared for burial.”

She said nothing.

“What of the act of burying him in extreme haste with no wake and in a location which was kept confidential? Does that not strike you as extremely peculiar?”

“If I were to say that I did not find it unusual at all I would be telling an untruth Inspector, still it does not necessarily make me conclude that the details of his death were of a nefarious nature. Despite having begrudgingly accepted the relationship between Miss Elizabeth and Mr. Wright the entire affair was still quite scandalous and I believe that the haste in which he was buried had more to do with attempting to keep the matter private than anything else. The Dunnings are one of the richest families in the county and as such are keen to keep their affairs to themselves.”

“Understandable, indeed. Still the possibility of Mr. Wright meeting an unsavory end remains. Let me ask you another question. Were there any cross words between the stable-boy and his lover, Miss Elizabeth, in the days or weeks leading up to his death?”

“None at all Inspector. They were always so loving and gentle when they were together. Never once did I witness either of them raise their voices to the other. Do you suggest a lover’s quarrel could be responsible? I can assure that Miss Elizabeth would have nothing to do with the death of the man whom she was madly in love with. Besides, if that were the case she would not have hired you to investigate the matter.”

“Perhaps. With the coroner so quick to rule the death accidental and the body disposed of the matter does seem laid to rest. I have already surmised that Mr. Wright had no family to come looking for him so had Miss Elizabeth been culpable in his death simply letting the incident rest would have been the wisest course of action. Still...had they been involved in an argument Colin could have stumbled back in his distress and impaled himself upon the tool. With wealth comes power and connections and a summary ruling of accidental death by a friendly coroner would quickly exonerate Mr. Dunning’s daughter of any wrong-doing whatsoever. Hiring me to investigate, knowing that I would turn up nothing, would only further solidify the case and put to rest any suspicions that should ever come forward in the future.”

“To say that you are astute Mr. Carson would do you disservice, however you do not know the Dunnings like I do. Should Miss Elizabeth have been responsible for Colin’s death, even indirectly as you describe, she would have thrown herself upon that very same pitchfork and gladly followed her lover into death’s embrace for dually she is such an honest person as well as the reality that upon learning of his demise she sank into a depression so severe that I feared it would with her taking her own life.”

“Yes but what of Mr. Adrian? Would he not have an interest in seeing that his sister never marry a stable boy?”

“Adrian may be at times, admittedly, a bit misguided but he is not of a violent nature. Certainly not that I have ever observed. Much to his own chagrin, as well, he has long come to terms with the fact that his sister will never marry into a wealthy family and thus further secure the Dunning legacy.”

“And Michael Dunning?”

“As you have already observed he is a somewhat distant gentleman...”

“To say the least.” I caught myself in the act of attempting to rouse her emotionally, “...I am sorry, I momentarily forgot my manners. Pray continue.”

“He has been known to show some engagement when it concerns his daughter and her marriage prospects, at times even becoming quite flustered, but he adores her and no matter how strongly he may disagree with her choice I do not believe him to be capable of purposefully breaking her heart by committing such an act against of aggression the man she loved.”

“No history of violence whatsoever? Even in his youth?”

“Not that I have ever heard of.”

“What about his practices. Surely having been upon the estate for so many years you have learned something of his business affairs. Would you consider him a well-meaning man when it comes to matters of money?”

She bowed her head in thought for a moment before replying. “While I am not the most intrusive sort and not prone to gossip I do, however, hear quite a bit of it from Mrs. Kyle and at times from the others. It would seem that most of Mr. Dunning’s business matters are strictly confidential but on occasion something is overheard during a dinner with one of his associates or while they are walking the grounds or hallways together. If I had to classify my master’s dealings, mind you only from hearsay, I would say that he was very...astute.”

“Meaning?” she was not going to satiate me with such an ambiguous answer.

“It would seem that when necessary he is capable of being a rather ruthless and shrewd businessman, in order to protect his family’s fortune, of course.”

“Of course.”

“It does seem, however, that he attempts to avoid such situations. Several arguments have been overheard which would seem to indicate that he was rather upset about having little choice other than to be so brutal.”

“And would you say that parallels your experience with the man’s disposition in general?”

“Yes. Like all men he has occasion to let his temper become aroused but being of a more agreeable humor seems to be his preferred state.”

“His humor appeared anything but agreeable when I chanced to meet him along the footpath earlier.”

“Ah yes,” she began, “but his disagreeable temperament only solidifies my testimony to his disposition.”

“How, my good lady, do you surmise that?”

“As I have stated he is not without the ability to become angry or upset but that he usually reserves such bouts of bellicosity for the circumstances when he is left little other choice.”

“So you believe him to be a calm and centered man and that my prodding agitated him. I infer that this is what you believe.”

“Yes.”

“So despite being such a collected individual the one thing capable of rousing his temper is the very thought of becoming agitated itself?”

“Yes. My master relishes his peace. From what I have come to know of him his anger only shows itself when others wish to disturb his own tranquil nature.”

We spoke for a few moments more on Michael Dunning. I gleaned little else that seemed to be useful but I desired to be certain that I knew precisely who I was dealing with. There was every chance that, were the incident indeed foul play, he had no foreknowledge of it but being the master of the estate I had little doubt that he would have learned about it after the fact. I found it very likely that whatever the outcome of my investigation it ultimately hinged on my ability to get Michael Dunning to speak.

“Give me your opinions, briefly, on the other servants. Mostly, should I take their testimonies for fact?”

“Well...” she began, “the boy, Kwame, is just that, a boy. I have myself caught him in falsehoods but generally he is a good lad. Never have I known him to tell a lie regarding any subject of real importance.”

“Continue.”

“Mrs. Kyle. Well, as you’ve no-doubt noticed she can be rather unpleasant at times, especially to the help and especially of late. She also has quite the penchant for gossip and rumor yet I’ve not known her to be a liar. There is also Mr. Findlay, the grounds-keeper. He seldom comes into the house, preferring the solitude of his tool shed, and he has quite the reputation as a brawler.”

“As I have heard.”

“In many years together here at Larchwood I have spoken to him only in passing. I could not vouch for his character Inspector, I apologize.”

“Think nothing of it. You are not the first person that I have heard refer to Mr. Findlay as violent. Are you aware of his relationship with Mr. Wright? Did they get on?”

She nodded. “I believe so sir...though I could not swear to it. Most of their interactions that I chanced to witness were from a distance, through the window of the study I would see them conversing out on the grounds. Obviously I could not hear what they were speaking of but their relaxed postures always indicated to me a friendly conversation. Colin, though somewhat reserved, was liked by everyone here Inspector.”

“Not so much with the family I would dare venture.”

“No, you have it wrong sir. Before their relationship became open knowledge he and Master Adrian were on very friendly terms...as friendly as I’d ever seen Adrian with *anyone* in fact. Of course when other wealthy young men visited he would turn his back on poor Colin but he always seemed quick to apologize.”

“And after he came to learn of his sister’s relationship with Mr. Wright?”

“He was angry, that much was clear. At first he spoke to Colin quite harshly but after some time he seemed to forget himself on occasion and have a cordial interaction with him. He cared very much for Mr. Wright I believe. He simply did not wish for him to court his sister.”

“Does Adrian Dunning not have close friends, those of higher social standing?”

A queer expression briefly crossed the lovely lady’s face. “Though he has quite a number of acquaintances who visit the estate regularly to hunt or to share with him some brandy I do not think them to be friends, at least not any of very close confidence.”

“Interesting. Do you believe it to be the lad’s thorny disposition that prevents him from establishing meaningful friendships?”

“No Inspector. With those who come calling he is remarkably amiable.”

“Then have you any explanation why he has little in the way of companions of his own standing yet so thoroughly bonded with a stable-boy?”

She shook her head. “I regret that I cannot say sir. Of all of the children he is the one that I had the least hand in rearing but still I feel that I know him quite well. He is in no way aloof like his father, he is very comfortable in social settings.”

“Yet he is unmarried.” I remarked. “Rather peculiar for a reasonably handsome young man with money would you not agree?”

Tripti only nodded in agreement. She paused, as if to say something, but did not. It was at that moment that a most interesting thought crossed into my mind.

“Tell me, and pray be totally honest, in all of your years here has Adrian Dunning ever attempted to seduce you?”

She was taken aback. “Why of course not Mr. Carson!”

“Flirtatious glances then? Even compliments that seemed to be directed in a romantic or flirtatious context?”

“Certainly not, nor would I have tolerated it.”

“Forgive me. You are a handsome woman and near to his own age. I meant no disrespect nor did I wish to imply anything unbecoming. I simply desired to glean whether or not you had taken notice of Mr. Adrian having any kind of attraction toward you.”

She resumed her stolid demeanor and spoke matter-of-factly. “Not even once have I caught a lustful glance from him. He has always been a perfect gentleman toward me.”

“What of others? Surely he has courted young ladies before. Why has he not married any of them?”

“Inspector, truly, what can any of this have to do with your investigation?”

“I ask only that you exercise some patience with me Miss. You have my assurance that there is a point to it all.”

“Well...when he was quite young, eighteen or perhaps nineteen, he was briefly engaged to a young lady from York. She was the heiress to a large fortune, the type of which type I now forget.”

“And what came of it?”

“As I understand the facts he came to learn that his young lady had been romantically involved her family’s retained solicitor, a gentleman easily twice her years. Mr. Adrian broke off the engagement at once and never spoke to her again.”

“He has not been engaged again?”

“Yes. There was a beautiful young Swedish lady whose father Master Dunning had met on a business trip to the continent. She and her father came five times to the estate. On the third occasion Mr. Adrian proposed marriage but on the fifth they had a falling out and the wedding was called off.”

“What was the reason given?”

“I was aware of none save that they had experienced a falling out.”

“Had he seemed taken with her on previous visits or do you believe it to have simply been an arrangement between Mr. Dunning and his Swedish counterpart?”

“Adrian had a talent for making the young lady laugh and she appeared to fancy him quite a bit but I am not sure if he truly reciprocated those feelings. I saw him hold her hand when they would go for walks together but I witnessed little else in the way of affection, specifically in the direction of him to her.”

“Do you believe that perhaps he is simply waiting to inherit the estate and live out his days as a wealthy bachelor and patriarch of the Dunning clan?”

“I do not know Mr. Carson. He does express interest in the running of the estate and seems to care more for business than he does for romance.”

“Surely a young man...has certain...needs. Would you not agree?”

A bit of shame flashed across her face but she quickly recovered and it was replaced by a wry smile. “I’m sure I have no idea to what you are referring Inspector.”

Nonsense. She knew precisely to what I was referring, her grin made it quite apparent.

“The inquiry that I wish to posit has little chance of being taken as anything but offensive so I will merely pose it. Does he visit any ladies in town, perhaps those of a certain ancient but quite frowned upon profession?”

“Mr. Carson, in dealing with wealthy employers I have taken on quite a bit of their modesty but you will understand that in my home country such prudishness is not as ubiquitous. I take it that you are referring to prostitutes. No, to my knowledge Master Adrian does not frequent their establishments nor do I have any information which would lead me to believe that he keeps a mistress. Despite the general consensus, sir, not all men have such wanton desires just as it is true that not all women do not.”

Despite my commitment to remain completely professional I could not keep my mind from shortly pondering that particular lady’s wanton desires. Surely she had needs of her own that seemed little met at the estate. Her playful nature spurred me on, I decided to ask.

“What of you Miss Tripti? Have you no young man?”

“No sir.” she smiled, then continued, “I did have a somewhat protracted courtship with a young telegraph operator from Leeds but we are no longer seeing one another. Does that answer your question or would you care to dig further into my private affairs.”

“Not at all Miss. Now, I have but a few more questions and then you may be on your way.”

The remainder of my inquiry took likely less than five minutes. At such a manor, where it was a trifle to locate a witness for further questioning, I had little reason to exhaust any particular person with hours of interrogation. The nanny’s testimony had mostly acted as confirmation of the many things that I had previously learned from others.

There was one matter, however, that I found most interesting. While I had in the past witnessed other inspectors, especially those belonging to the police force, shy away from certain conjectures simply because it offended their own sense of morality, I did not. The possibility that Mr. Adrian Dunning remained unmarried because he fancied men rather than women was remote yet could not be ignored. Had his interest in Colin Wright been more than mere friendship a whole new perspective on events could be seen by the attentive observer. Was his anger at the stable-boy that of an overly protective brother or the indignation of a scorned lover?

The Stables

There remains little doubt in my mind that the servant boy Kwame was rather surprised when I came to him in a rush and pulled him from his duties stacking firewood. Taking him by the hand I led him quickly to the stables. I wanted to give him no chance to prepare mentally for the barrage of questions that I would have for him once we had reached the scene of Mr. Wright's untimely death. The rain had subsided but the day remained every bit as grey as it had been since the start, the bitter wind still biting into us as we walked hurriedly.

The boy protested in as polite a manner as he could muster but I paid him no heed. We burst into the stable after crossing the distance between it and the house and I shoved him inside. I left the door open so as to illuminate the space as well as could be expected with the meager amount of sunlight coming through the clouds of the afternoon sky and motioned for young Kwame to throw open the shutters on the opposite wall. He did so without hesitation.

He was dressed very poorly, only trousers and a short-sleeved shirt, for the current weather but I attributed that to his being a boy and to little else. Before entering my twenties I remember having quite the tolerance for the cold as well, typically becoming overheated rather easily when wearing heavier clothing.

"Good boy." I waved him closer, "Now come here." he did as he was instructed, though it was quite evident that my tactic of pulling him hurriedly to the site had worked and his nerves were frayed. "Remain where you are now, so as not to trample the floor any further than it has already been."

He shook his head in agreement, "Yes sir."

"Now...show me, rather point out to me, precisely where Mr. Wright's body was on the morning that you found him deceased."

He pointed to the 4 inch by 4 inch timber that I was standing next to. To my left the door, to my right the windows, in front of me the stable stalls. They were closed but with no horses in them. Behind me was the open area, floor covered in a loose mat of straw, where the horses were taken to be groomed and shod.

"So on the morning that you entered the stable to summon him to breakfast you found the young Mr. Wright, Colin, upon a pitchfork that was resting against this very beam?"

"Yessir." he shook his head nervously.

I spun on my heels to inspect it. No blood was upon it but despite being marred by years of accidental bumps and knocks there was a distinct impression in the wood of about the right shape and at about the right height to match that of the head of a pitchfork having been pressed into it with some weight and for several hours' time at least. I indicated the mark upon the wood and the boy merely nodded. I examined the wood closely and even after having pulled my glass from my coat pocket could not discern the stains of any bodily fluids upon it.

My attention turned next to the floor. It was dirt and all of it, save for a circle roughly two feet across and centered on the wooden beam against which the pitchfork had rested lay covered in straw of varying degrees of density. My eyes could clearly see that the entire vicinity had been heavily disturbed. That I had expected. Likewise, now that I knew that it was the site of Mr. Wright's death I could clearly make out marks in the soil indicating the heels of his boots. His body had been dragged out through the door the boy and I had just moments before entered

through. Still...why had the straw been cleared in such a neat circle around the spot on which the stable-boy had met his end? Cleaning of the blood which had pooled at the bottom of the post, I assumed. Regardless of the deed's aim it seemed something that would be tasked with the lowest ranking member of the household. I looked up at the Gambian boy accusingly.

"You were the one who cleared the straw in this area. Why?"

"I did not sir." he protested.

"You will find that I am quite a difficult target for deception boy. The ground has obviously been cleared. What is more, it was obviously done by someone with either delicate or small fingers from the looks of the impressions in the dirt from where individual pieces of straw were lifted." I had deduced nothing of the such from the patch of Earth but the boy need not know that.

Kwame went to step forward but I put up a hand to halt him, reminding him that I wished him not to move, lest we disturb the scene even further. His eyes darted back and forth, refusing to lock with mine. I had him cornered and with no master present to look to for guidance any deception he had been attempting would quickly crumble under my unwavering scrutiny. I asked my question once more but again he refused to answer. I decided to let the matter rest for a moment while I inspected the rest of the surroundings. Those who had come to remove the body had been quite careless and either by accident or by design had made sure that the entire vicinity had been disturbed so profoundly so as to leave little clue of what had truly transpired.

Just outside of the cleared circle of straw there appeared to be two smaller patches of bare ground with a bit of straw tossed about just outside of them. They were indented into the soil which seemed to have been tilled up by the vigorous motion of something. Colin's feet, I presumed, as he had kicked and struggled for life briefly before ceasing his pained convulsions. I inspected the nearby work table, still covered in tools, for any other clues and found little save for two dark specks nearest the edge closest to the post. Upon closer examination my curiosity was roused when I discovered a third on the table's leg that looked to be smudged, as if someone had attempted to wipe it clean but had been less than diligent. It's appearance reminded me of some of the slapdash efforts I had seen before when investigating other crimes, incidents that had involved the attempted removal of blood stains.

Using a fingernail I scraped at one of the tiny spots on the surface of the table. It was so small that I doubted whoever had attempted to remove the rest of it had even took notice of such a slight speck. They, however, were not looking for it as keenly as I was. Of course the possibility also existed that they had made their attempt at night when the stable was not so well lit. Lifting my nail closer to my face I peered at the speck through my glass. My cynical mind expected, of course, a deep crimson but I was greeted instead with a spot of dark blue. Not blood after all; perhaps paint that Mr. Wright had been working with though I saw nothing inside of the stable painted in the same color.

Kwame caught a glimpse of my frustration but quickly looked away, still avoiding eye contact with me. This time, however, it was his eyes themselves that betrayed him. As he turned his gaze away from me I saw his dark brown eyes engage with something in the corner nearest the door. His face displayed a twinge so slight that most would not have caught it. I found, though, that more often than not people would lead me to the evidence I sought so I made habit of studying them closely. When his eyes darted away from the corner that had provoked the reaction I knew that he had seen something he had likely missed before. Something that, if he had been the one tasked to rid the area of evidence, he should have noticed and removed long before I had arrived.

I dashed to the small circle of darkened straw that the boy had brought to my attention. I felt instantly that I knew precisely what had caused it but as I stooped and brought some of the charred straw to my nose I had confirmation. Lamp oil. Someone had knocked their lantern over and had started a small fire which they had quickly extinguished. The scent of the fuel was discernible but only just, it had not happened in the last few days, rather sometime in the last few weeks.

I turned to the boy, "My dear boy did you drop your lamp in fright when you came upon Mr. Wright's lifeless body?"

"Yes! I was so very frightened that I dropped it and it burned a small patch before I could stamp it out with the soles of my boots."

I stood and smiled. The dark skinned boy tensed as he realized his mistake.

"You dropped the lantern, the lit lantern, that you were carrying with you at breakfast time?"

"Well I..." the boy seemed lost for words. His gaze continued to dart as if looking for one of his masters to instruct him as to what to say next. "It happened as you say sir."

"Then either you think me a fool for believing such a story or you believe me to think you a fool for carrying a lamp at such an hour. Neither answer is satisfactory. You will tell me..." I interrupted my own thoughts as I glimpsed something in the straw between myself and Kwame. I fell to my hands and knees as I searched through it and pulled free the piece that had caught my eye. There was something upon it that very much looked like a splatter of blood. What's more there appeared to be several other pieces of straw with similar markings. By the shape of them I could surmise that were they indeed blood spots that had been tossed forward by a struggling Mr. Wright...right in the direction of...the lamp! There had been someone present in his dying moments and he had been reaching out to that person for help!

The color of the stain was not apparent on the dirty fiber of straw but the shape of the marking as well as the thickness with which it had dried seemed to indicate something of the consistency of blood. I could not be certain, of course, at such an early juncture but the idea that the servant boy had come upon and surprised Mr. Wright, causing him to become startled and fall upon the pitchfork, seemed more likely than ever before.

"You did not come to summon Mr. Wright to breakfast did you boy? You came upon him in the dark of night and startled him, perhaps by clumsily dropping the lantern? He then fell back and impaled himself. Is that the totality of this mystery, that your masters are simply trying to protect their African servant boy from any type of reprisal for what was only an unfortunate mishap?"

The fact that the boy's nerves had been rattled I was well aware of for I had seen to it on purpose but never did I expect him to take flight. Without a word he ran past me before I could grab hold of him. I rose to give chase but he was much more fleet of foot than I and in an instant was gone into the garden behind the house. I pocketed the piece of straw that I had been holding and turned to go back through the door into the stable. Examining in more detail the scene of Mr. Wright's death revealed that not only had the area beneath the support timber against which he had died been cleared of straw but that the post had also been washed thoroughly. The soil in its immediate vicinity demonstrated features that were typical of having been doused with a fairly sizable amount of water.

Eventually my inspection brought me to an apparently disused stall that had served as a repository for surplus straw. In the large pile situated near the rear I found, much to my pleasure, the pitchfork in question. Oh I knew not at first that it was that particular instrument but after

bringing it out into the daylight and lying it upon a nearby work table I was able to discern with my glass what looked like dried blood around the pin that fastened the head to the handle.

I removed a small metal pick from my pocket and prodded about until I'd managed to dislodge a sample. Lifting it to the sky I was startled to once again be greeted with what looked like dried dark blue paint. In a dash I flew back into the stable and began to collect straw from all around the circle that had been cleared. I ran back out into the diffused afternoon daylight and held the pieces up. It was very faint but there was no mistake...a slight blue tinge could be seen on a few of them. They were lighter in color than the other samples I had found, likely because whatever the original substance was it had been partially washed away by the water that had been used to clean the area prior to my arrival. If only I could locate the straw that had been removed from the base of the post. Likely, however, it had been either burned or buried

There was no doubt about it, the next day would require a visit to the library in town. I would need to pore through medical texts to identify what rare condition or what type of poison could cause a man's blood to become tainted such an odd hue as had the poor soul's that had died in that stable. I could think of no other explanation for the origin of the blue substance.

The Lion's Den

“You know, Inspector, my friend Mr. Woodcliffe who came to see me about a matter of business some hours ago told me about your exploits aboard the train to Leeds. Most intriguing sir!”

It would seem that the three glasses of wine that Michael Dunning had partaken in, all before the main course was even served mind you, did much to change his demeanor from one of hostility to one of downright sociability. I, of course, never mastered precisely how to behave in pleasant company so typically I took the approach of silence in a social setting. Were I to indulge in a few alcoholic drinks, however, my tongue was known to loosen. This was not always for the best. Having been raised by a drunkard and then by nuns I knew little of polite conversation and had habit of swinging between being overly reserved to wildly inappropriate with little personal understanding of the difference between the two.

I had, of course, taken note of Mr. Dunning's visitor and had in fact spied upon them as they spoke in the library. It had been for naught. What the master of the house had called a business meeting had in fact been little more than an occasion for idle gossip and the drinking of two glasses of brandy each.

“Nonsense.” I spoke up. “The jewel thief made a crucial error and I just so happened to be in the correct place at the correct time to notice it.”

Michael Dunning scoffed, “You're too modest Inspector. The story I was told speaks volumes about your talent. Speaking of which, you've no doubt deduced by now that everything here is precisely as we have all told you repeatedly. Again I apologize for my daughter's foolishness in summoning you but you are welcome to stay on for a few days should you care to take in some of the countryside and I'll of course compensate you for your time and any expenses you have incurred.”

His comment carried with it a certain amount of frustration toward his daughter Elizabeth. He sneered at her as he spoke to which she responded only by looking away. She was dressed elegantly but of course still in the monotone colors of mourning. I, as the guest, sat at one end of the dining table with Mr. Dunning opposite me. To his right sat Adrian, to his right Elizabeth and to her's the nanny, Tripti. To Michael Dunning's left, to my surprise, sat his wife with their youngest son seated beside her. I thought to take the opportunity to speak with her but Michael Dunning's glaring expression when she had first entered the room told me that it would not be wise. I would wait to find a more opportune time or at least until we had all drank more heavily of the wine.

“As everyone who has had occasion to speak with me so far will no doubt attest, sir, I am not prone to obfuscating my true intent. The simple fact is that I have indeed found evidence that events did not unfold precisely as I have been informed. Of course I do not imply any type of misconduct...likewise I do not discount the possibility either.”

Adrian Dunning smiled grimly as he sipped his wine, “Inspector I may remind you that it is only due to my father's fair temperament that you have been allowed to even stay here on the estate.” he looked up and locked his gaze with mine, “Were it my decision I would have had you escorted from the property immediately.” he finished with a slick smile, an attempt to mask his contempt within a vein of upper-class sarcasm. It did not succeed.

I saw his mother glower at him disapprovingly. "You will forgive my son Inspector. His manners seem to have taken leave of him this evening."

"Think nothing of it." I assured her, "As to your father's graces, Mr. Adrian, they were anything but present only a few hours ago when I chanced to speak with him on the grounds." I expected an angry stare in response but it seemed as though nothing could break Michael Dunning's pleasant mood. "As to why I remain that is solely the purview of your sister, Elizabeth."

"Who had no right to call for the prying eyes and meddling hands of a man of your profession if I do say so myself." he chuckled, expecting his father to join in but the elder Dunning, though not the most welcoming individual himself, refused to do so.

"I had every right." Elizabeth finally spoke up, her soft voice attempting not to become elevated but her frustration was evident. The way that her lovely features and fair skin seemed to suddenly come to life with vigorous passion told me that, even had I not detected it in her tone. "I will see to it that if anything devious has happened to Colin the responsible party will pay dearly for it." she turned directly to Adrian and gave him a wicked stare.

The mother looked appalled and even their father put down his glass and came to attention.

"Foolish little games. That's all this is. A distraction from real life is all this is for you isn't it sister?"

"You murdered my lover!" she yelled at the brother seated next to her as her voice began to break.

Mr. Dunning rose from his seat and slammed a fist onto the table, an act which startled everyone present save for myself. "See here! Such ridiculous accusations have no place at my dinner table!" he then looked at Adrian, "And neither do your petty arguments."

Elizabeth eyed her father harshly and though it was hard to discern through the rippling air coming off of the candles that lined the center of the table I thought I caught sight of tears welling up in her eyes.

"I will not let the matter rest." she spoke with a more subdued and respectful tone, "If I find that anyone in this household" she looked around at all, "had a hand in Colin's death rest assured that I will see him or her brought to justice."

"So many tears for the stable boy...a distraction from her duty to marry a man of good standing and help secure this family's fortune." Adrian said smartly.

With no hesitation at all Elizabeth slapped her brother squarely across the cheek and stood to leave the table. "Then what is your excuse brother? Is it that no decent lady will have you or that your interest lies elsewhere?"

"Enough!" Michael Dunning yelled then turned and looked straight in my direction, "Pray Inspector, that you will ignore this most inexcusable conduct. I can assure you that it is not typical of my family's behavior. Since Mr. Wright's death my two eldest children have done nothing but squabble. I may not have welcomed your arrival but to force you to be witness to such a display is outside the boundaries of polite society. If you wish it you may be shown to your room and I will have the maid bring you your dinner."

The simple truth was that I reveled in their bickering. Upon every slip of the tongue rode the possibility of some little detail being revealed, something that could assist in my investigation. To my dismay, however, both children quickly apologized and agreed that such arguments should be reserved for times other than dinner. By her comment I gleaned that Miss Elizabeth shared my suspicion about her brother's sexual preferences. It was enlightening and only lent further credence to the notion. As to Mr. Dunning, I began to understand how he could hide his

long-standing opiate addiction so well. A few clever tactics to conceal the actual imbibing of the substance coupled with a wife who was in no position to take notice, children too busy bickering to care, and a penchant for wine which made him more than social at dinner disguised it well. Far be it for me, of all people, to judge someone based solely on the weakness of character that addiction more often than not brought with it but my past dealings with those of similar frailty had taught me that it was difficult to trust them completely.

Adrian was more difficult to read. His true emotions lay under a deep facade of sarcasm and wit. Despite the Petersons' providing their glowing opinion of the man I could observe little but a spoiled and insecure brat, long in need of a good spanking from parents who no-doubt played little role in his rearing. I believed the Petersons' affections to have stood in the way of their fair judgment. From Miss Elizabeth intelligence and compassion was evident to even the most dim-witted of souls but her brother, though possibly wise in the way of study, displayed none of her poise or sincerity.

"So tell me Inspector. Where did you attend university?" Michael Dunning began to speak just as Mrs. Kyle entered with a cart full of serving trays. Young Kwame entered behind her dressed in the livery of a footman and carrying himself with a grace I had not witnessed earlier in the day.

"I did not attend university sir."

Adrian scoffed and put down his glass of wine. "You did not? Surely you are joking Inspector. Every gentleman attends university."

"I find it interesting that you consider me a gentleman Mr. Adrian. Thus far you have appeared to have quite an unfavorable opinion of me."

"You will forgive my brashness sir. I have a tendency to speak my mind. Please do not mistake my strong belief that you have no business here for rudeness or my having any personal quarrel with you."

He was taking a new approach, I recognized the tactic well for it was one of my own. Being overly brash with me had done nothing but raise my ire, now he would consider a more political approach and attempt to convince me that I truly was wasting my time.

"That is good to hear. I too wish no altercation. I am merely fulfilling the duties of my vocation."

"As much as I may believe your investigation to be unnecessary I shall do no more to hinder you sir. I can see that you will not be daunted by the likes of me." with that he let forth an insincere chuckle as he raised his glass to me. I did the same but made sure that my expression was visibly less than genuine. I wished him to be uncertain whether or not his ruse had succeeded.

"So if you did not attend university..." Michael Dunning began but was interrupted by the protestations of his youngest son who was giving the lady of the house some trouble as she tried to tuck his napkin into his collar. "If you did not attend university then how, may I ask, did you acquire the skills that you possess?"

"God-given talent and a bit of good fortune sir." I responded.

The master smiled as he glanced around at his family. "I have always upheld that true talent cannot be taught and that some of the most successful men in history have been of the variety that took it upon themselves to seek out their own path in life."

Miss Elizabeth chuckled as the maid placed her plate down in front of her.

"What do you find so humorous my dear?" he asked of her.

"Nothing Father." replied she while attempting to regain her stolid facade.

“Nonsense,” he spoke up, “if there’s something amusing then out with it.” his tone was not accusatory, he sounded honestly curious.

“If that is what you believe then why did Adrian waste five years’ worth of tuition at Oxford?”

Adrian gave her a scowl but said nothing. That time it seemed more playful, as if for just a moment they were children squabbling instead of obstinate adults.

“Despite his overwhelming success at extra-curricular activities he’s obviously not a businessman, no matter how much he’d like to profess it so.” the entire family seemed to chuckle at that statement, even Tripti who tried desperately not to.

“Now just a...”

Adrian’s protestations were silenced by my question, “What, pray-tell, were his extra-curricular activities?”

“Ballroom dancing.” she barely finished the sentence before erupting into a laughter I had hardly expected of an upper-class lady. Even her father and mother joined in and Tripti could do little to prevent her own laughter.

“I was very good wasn’t I?” Adrian smirked and let out a little laughter himself as he mocked bowing his head and extending his hand to a dancing partner, “Still, I take great offense at my skills in being derided.”

I had obviously judged Mr. Adrian wrongly. He was not completely without a sense of humor. I had been told that at times he could do quite well in social gatherings when the need arose. Still, underneath his suddenly more pleasant facade I sensed a selfish and vindictive nature.

The rest of our dinner was filled with mostly polite conversation. I steered clear of inquiries about the matter at hand and instead attempted to better gauge the personalities of my hosts. Save for her brief, and minor by most standards, outburst earlier in the evening Miss Elizabeth was the paragon of both her sex and station in life. She was typically soft-spoken and of the highest order of intelligence but there was also intense passion and a certain nearly unbecoming stubbornness that lay directly beneath the surface.

Her brother, Adrian, was indeed capable of being quite charming and even entertaining when it suited him but I surmised that it was but a clever act, one that fooled most but did not me. The makings of a sociopath were evident in the subtleties of his behavior. As to the father, it was precisely as I had gleaned earlier. He seemed to be a mostly fair and kind man but one who cherished his privacy and peace, quick to become roused when it was threatened. Years of opiate addiction had only made his mood swings more wild but he masked them with drink when in the company of family and close friends.

The boy, Cyril, was exactly that, a boy. The spoiled son of a wealthy man who yearned for more of his parents’ affection and suffered for lack of their discipline. Not a bad child, mind you, but the outbursts that Miss Tripti did a fair job at controlling showed my intuition to be truth. Tripti herself played the part she was cast into well. She dined with the family and engaged them in conversation but maintained a distance that was expected of someone in her peculiar position. As a nanny she was both kin and employee. I had seen many a woman of her profession struggle with the balancing act that was necessary to sustain a healthy rapport with both the household that she served as well as the fellow servants who she was both above, in terms of status, yet at the same time equal too.

The more I observed the lady of the house, Madame Dunning, the more I sensed that there was little information to be had from an interrogation of the afflicted woman. I saw upon her no

signs that would lead me to believe that her dreadful condition was brought upon by any type of purposeful malice, notably long-term poisoning with low doses of substances such as arsenic or mercury. Her once-lovely face showed the weight of many years of suffering and the infrequency with which she spoke said volumes about how little she would be likely to know of any sort of conspiracy, even within her own household. Still, should the chance arise I would of course pose a few questions to her.

After a succulent dinner of roasted quail and far more entremets than I even have the facilities to remember Mr. Dunning, his son Adrian, and I retired to the library for an after-dinner brandy. In a still-pleasant, but somewhat more firm tone, he reiterated that I was wasting my time and that I should conclude my investigation. He made promises of organizing a fox hunt, or some other aristocratic distraction, that I would enjoy. Upon the revelation that I had never participated in such a hunt he and his son seemed all the more dogged in their determination that they should arrange one but I protested vigorously that not only did I have no interest in hunting fox but that I, in fact, knew not even how to ride a horse. This drew quite an eruption of laughter and Adrian insisted that on the morrow he would summon some of the horses back from where they were being put up and that he would instruct me in the gentlemanly art of horseback riding.

Both men only stared at me queerly when I protested that though I was far more learned and skilled than a common man I did not either consider myself a gentleman, at least not by their standards. I believed their protestations to be more a reflection upon their own character than of anything else. Surely they could not take dinner with anyone less than a gentleman nor permit him to speak to them as equals. Considering me as so was more for their own comfort than for any respect they held for me.

When Michael Dunning rose, at half past ten to retire to bed, Adrian insisted that I join him on the rear terrace for a night cap. Once his father had left the room he made promise of something a little stronger than brandy. He implied, quite correctly I might add, that I seemed the type of gentleman to have a taste for more potent intoxicants. He took his leave of me to fetch whatever poison it was he had stashed away as I made my way out of doors. It was some ten minutes later when he opened the door and stepped out onto the terrace and approached the table at which I sat. Onto it he placed two glasses, already filled, and onto the table behind where he planned to sit a bottle of extremely fine scotch the likes of which I had seldom had the good fortune to enjoy. He sat and lifted his glass. I did likewise.

“To you Inspector. May your little jaunt out to the countryside be nothing more than a relaxing vacation.”

“Indeed.” I responded with a sinister smile before putting the glass to my lips. At once I reasoned precisely why he had positioned the bottle on the other table and not upon the one at which we currently sat. Perhaps he thought himself clever but the smell of the laudanum in my drink, despite the potent aroma of scotch, was easily detectable. He schemed to get me intoxicated to the point that my wits would leave me. For what purpose though? Surely whatever devious intentions he had he’d not calculated into them my remarkably high tolerance for intoxicants.

“Thirty year old scotch Mr. Carson. The finest in my father’s collection. Just a little something to tickle your innards.”

With no further hesitation I knocked back the drink and set the empty glass upon the table at which the boy smiled. “Without a doubt the finest I’ve had occasion to sample. Another please.”

He seemed surprised but delighted. Grabbing my glass he stood and turned to the table on which the bottle sat. His back was of course to me so that I would not notice him slip more of the

medicine into it. He could not have known that he was in fact providing me with the very thing I'd thought impossible to acquire so far out from the city. I smiled wickedly while he was unable to see my expression.

As he turned back to me and placed the glass down he spoke, "So how long do you believe you'll be on with us here sir?"

"Tell me, Mr. Dunning, do you truly believe your sudden shift from abrasive to welcoming to have eluded my attention or to hold any sway upon the facts when I have concluded my investigation?"

"Pardon?"

"You're clever and have a talent for deception. Or did you think I took no notice?"

A half-smile crossed his lips, "Like my father I can have episodes of severe crassness but I ask that you not take it as a complete measure of my temperament."

"No Mr. Adrian. You are not like your father. I take both of you to be clever men but your penchant for deception is one of a more manipulative nature than his."

"How so?"

"Your family perhaps takes your swings of mood as nothing more than mild childishness, forgive me for saying, but a more cleverly trained observer deduces more than that."

"And what precisely is it that you deduce about me?" he took a drink and then locked his gaze with mine.

"You sir demonstrate, at least on the surface, the qualities of a sociopath. Of course without a proper evaluation I could be completely mistaken."

"You will understand if I find your words terribly insulting and if I may say so you do not come off as the epitome of virtue yourself sir."

"I am only rendering my opinion based upon the facts that I have thus-far observed. While I myself do harbor a talent for deception my typical approach is to be quite blunt Mr. Adrian. I prefer to be honest about precisely who and what I am. Unlike yourself."

Out on the terrace Adrian Dunning believed himself to be engaged in some plot to either injure or embarrass me, little did he know that I was seizing the opportunity to catch him off his guard and press him for answers.

"Whatever do you mean Inspector?"

"Mr. Wright, how did you feel about him?"

"Why I was upset that he took it upon himself to seduce my sister; a woman with which he had not the social standing to be associated with."

"Yet he was perfectly fit to associate with you." I commented sarcastically as I sipped on my second drink.

The young man seemed taken aback. A reaction that said more than his words could. "Just precisely what is it that you are implying Mr. Carson?"

"Why that you were rather close friends with Colin, closer even than those of your own class with whom you purport to be friends."

His posture relaxed. "Well yes, Mr. Wright and I did get on quite well until his association with Elizabeth became common knowledge."

"And afterwards, from what I have come to understand, you held quite a grievance against him."

"Of course, he had no business being romantically involved with Elizabeth!"

"Despite your disdain for the situation, however, may I assume that you would never take it upon yourself to harm Mr. Wright in any way?"

“Never. I may have something of a temper but I am not a violent man.”

“Even should your heart be terribly broken?”

He pondered my words for a moment before pushing from the table and rising quickly. “I take your insinuation to be extremely offensive sir!”

“What insinuation would that be?”

“That I am a...” he looked down in shame, “...nancy-boy sir.”

“Ah, but I was only implying that you were heartbroken over the fact that your sister had taken fancy to a common man.” I then finished my second drink, placed the glass onto the table and rose, “Of course your rather severe protestations only lead me to conclude that your preferences do indeed lie in that direction.”

He appeared to be terribly shaken.

“Your sister apparently suspects as such, if her comment at dinner is anything to go on. Do you not believe that others have begun to come to the same conclusion?”

By the clenching of his fist and the watering of his eyes, barely detectable in the faint moonlight, it was evident he was attempting not to act upon the voice in his head urging him to violence.

“Where is the body?” I demanded.

“Leave! Leave now lest I force you to do so!” he yelled in a voice so loud that surely those in the house could have heard.

“I thought you not to be a violent man Adrian. Show me you are not and show me that you are in fact a trustworthy fellow and tell me where Mr. Wright’s body is buried and all of this shall be forgotten.”

“I will only say it once more. Go to your room, grab your things and leave. I shall arrange your transport immediately sir. I have tolerated your insults long enough.”

“Or what, you shall attack me and prove to everyone that you are capable of violence when properly roused?”

I had apparently pressed him too far. My calculation had been that he would reveal something crucial in the midst of his drunken ire but instead he reached back and threw a strong right directly at my jaw. Despite many drinks and the beginnings of opium intoxication my reactions were still faster than his. Years of dealing with violence had honed my skills and I deftly dodged his attack and rebutted with a quick fist to his sternum. My blow was enough to knock the wind from him. He reached out for his chair and I dashed to help him. I wished not to engage in a full-blown fight with the man. He expressed some surprise and gratitude that I would not continue to assault him despite him having lost his temper and begun the conflict himself.

“I apologize Inspector. I do not know what came over me.”

“I spoke too harshly.” I waved off the apology, “It does not excuse your behavior, mind you, but I can certainly see now that I did much to rouse your anger and after a night of drink that is not wise with any man.”

“Another drink then?” he pleaded. Despite his claims to the opposite I could tell that he did not genuinely feel sorry for his attack upon me but the swift response I had dealt him had diffused any notions he had of doing it again.

“Certainly, so long as you are willing to speak frankly with me upon the matter that I wish to discuss.”

“Very well.” he said as he rose slowly to pour another drink. That time I made out the sound of the laudanum bottle’s cork being removed, my blow and his state of intoxication were making

him more sloppy in his methods. After he had set my third glass upon the table he once again took his seat.

“So. Where is it that Mr. Wright’s body is buried? Tell me this fact and it will go a long way to alleviating my suspicion of you.”

“Alas I cannot say. My father and Mr. Daidley took him to his final resting place.”

I had expected a lie, yet that is not what I perceived from Adrian Dunning, lest my faculties were being overly dulled by drink I felt certain that what he spoke was the truth.

“Mr. Daidley is...?”

“My father’s agent.”

“I see. What reason do you believe there to be that his body has been placed in a spot that will not be revealed to any who ask?”

“That I could not tell you.”

“A lie. You will find that I am difficult to deceive. Best that I have the truth from you.”

“I have told you the truth, it is not my concern if you fail to believe it to be so.”

“Then what of the body itself? How was he when you came upon him?”

“He was in a most unnerving state. He had fallen upon the pitchfork and its points were protruding from his chest. It was the most horrific site that I have ever seen.”

“Was there anything unusual about the area or the body itself?”

“Beside the fact that our stable-boy lie dead in such a terrible fashion?” he asked as he rubbed his sore sternum.

“Yes.”

“Not that I can recall.”

I took another sip of whisky. I began to feel quite strongly the warmth of the laudanum washing over my body. “What was the color of the young man’s blood?”

He seemed startled by the question. “Why...it was the color of blood Inspector.”

“So it was not of a deep blue tint?”

“No...why would you pose such a peculiar question?”

“Because just as before you are lying and I have found evidence of a blue material upon the instrument of death and in the area where Mr. Wright met his end, both of which have the consistency of dried blood. What’s more someone appears to have attempted to wash away all traces of it from the area and the implement, poorly mind you.”

“I say again that his blood was normal though there was quite a bit of it. If his blood were to have been such an odd shade, however, what bearing would it have on your investigation or on any suspicion of malicious circumstances surrounding his death?”

“I have not deduced so much as of yet but of course all facts are relevant when dealing with a matter as serious as a potential homicide. Poison, of course, could be a factor capable of changing the color of blood and one I should choose not to overlook. Now, besides yourself and your father, both of whom have clear motive to wish the stable-boy gone, are there any others upon the estate who may have had quarrel with Colin Wright?”

“I cannot think of any sir.”

We continued to speak for what my watch indicated was another half of an hour but I learned little else save for what I had already gleaned about the personality of Adrian Dunning. I made clear my desire to go into the city in the morning to visit the library and that he should arrange my transport, no silly horseback riding for me. Shortly before mid-night we parted company and I made my way to the room which had been prepared for me. After making myself comfortable I lied in the bed, infinitely more comfortable than the one I had back home above the bakery, for

what was likely an hour before succumbing to both exhaustion and the effects of quite a large intake of laudanum. I slept harder than I ever had in my life, precisely how hard would be apparent the very next morning.

A Rude Awakening

“Aahh!” I sat up with a start, surprised both by the splash of water and the scowling face of Mrs. Kyle.

“Mr. Carson! How could you?” she said in her most chiding tone.

Confused, I wiped the water from my eyes and looked around. I was in the barn lying upon a bale of hay. What’s worse, I was not alone. The nanny Tripti laid at my side slowly coming to consciousness herself. My waistcoat and shirt were unbuttoned as was the top of her dress and we were both in a most disheveled state. I knew not what to say but by the time I got to my feet I knew precisely who to blame for it.

I saw through the open barn doors, approaching from the main house some one hundred and fifty yards away, Michael and Adrian Dunning. I set off in a quick march toward them, buttoning my shirt as I went. Thanks to the elder Dunning’s cane I closed the distance between us before they’d managed to get very far.

“You see Father, just as Kwame said! He’s had his way with the nanny.”

“Mr. Carson this is inexcusable!” Michael Dunning proclaimed but I marched right past both of them. Elizabeth, Cyril, Kwame and even the lady of the house stood near the side door watching the spectacle. Adrian and Michael caught up to me as I approached the house.

“Sir I will have to demand that you leave my estate immediately!” the master of the house piped up from behind me. I spun to face him.

“I saw he and Tripti exchanging sultry glances at dinner last night father.” Adrian added. This I could not deny, the nanny had smiled at me on several occasions and I had returned her favorable expression eagerly.

“My good sir,” I ejaculated, “were I to have a go at Miss Tripti’s notch I can assure you it’d be in the comfort and warmth of her room, not atop a pile of hay in a drafty old barn.”

Both men were speechless at my crass use of words, likewise I heard a gasp emanate from one of the ladies behind me.

“Now see here, watch your tongue in the presence of the women.” Mr. Dunning demanded.

“No sir I shall not. Not after being drugged with laudanum by your son and framed for an affair with the lovely Miss Tripti. A woman that, should I desire, I could likely have but chose not to since she does not deserve to be sullied by a man such as me.”

“How dare you accuse my son of such an offense?” the lady of the house spoke up.

I turned to face her just as Mrs. Kyle came running up behind the two men I’d been engaged with. “I can understand that a mother may not wish to see her child in such a light, yet still it is truth.”

“Where would he even procure laudanum?”

“From your husband’s private repository.” I was in no mood to dawdle any longer, if the Dunnings were at each other’s throats then perhaps my task would be made all the more easy. “Or did you not know of your husband’s long-term addiction to opiates? Check the left-hand inside pocket of his coat this very minute if you do not believe me.”

“You sir are a despicable liar and...”

I silenced the eldest son with a wave of my hand and interjected, “I suggest you choose a more defenseless target the next time you engage in a futile attempt at framing someone for

inordinateness. Did you truly think me a fool? Quite the contrary sir, in a battle of wits you will find me a heavily armed opponent. Now be quiet before I do something ill-mannered like reveal to your entire family that you are unmarried because you are in fact a homosexual.”

The lady Dunning knew not what to say. Even Miss Elizabeth stood speechless. I turned to face Mr. Dunning and barked an order. “See to it that my transport to town is ready to leave in one hour.” then to Mrs. Kyle, “Bitch the pot woman, I require strong tea!”

With that I walked away and left all of them in dismay. The maid followed me in a few moments later and put the kettle on. Outside I could hear the sound of hushed argument but within a few minutes it faded away. Shortly thereafter Tripti came walking in the side door and I helped her to the table. I told her that I would assure that the Dunnings took no action against her and that it had all been a plot by Adrian. Her collar still held the vague scent of spilled laudanum, no doubt issued after she had been rendered unconscious by chloroform or the like.

As I had demanded my transport arrived precisely one hour later and I was waiting for it in the front of the house, smoking my pipe, when it pulled down the drive. As I recognized the cab driver and took my seat I briefly pondered the morning’s events. I had not thought Mr. Adrian to be so bold. I had erroneously presumed the evening prior that his attempts to drug me were part of some attempt to embarrass me be way of simply implying my affliction. He’d slip in to my room and place a mostly-empty bottle of laudanum on my night table then try to have me roused in the morning, to which I would not respond, and that would be the end of his plotting.

Others, suspecting his sexual preferences, might have assumed it an attempt at seduction via very unsavory means but whether or not the young man was indeed a mandrake it did not seem his character nor did I perceive any attraction to me on his part. Whether or not the young man did indeed fancy the company of other young men I could hardly care less. Having spent years examining some of the most vile deeds mankind was capable of simply having an affinity for those of the same sex no longer seemed much an offense to my eyes. If that be your preference then so be it. I can see little harm in it nor am I the man to judge.

Still, despite there being wide gulf between Adrian’s little plot and the crime of murder, what he had done had demonstrated to me a capacity for criminal intent. Though I had as yet no evidence to suggest that Mr. Wright’s death had indeed been murder were I to find some Adrian Dunning had placed himself squarely at the top of my list of likely suspects.

The ride back in to Leeds was incredibly pleasant. The dimness of the day previous had succumbed to the charms of early morning sunlight on my second day in the country. Birds chirped from spots hidden amongst the trees that lined the road. I took the time to let my body settle comfortably into the seat and soak in the ambiance of my surroundings. It truly was lovely and I found my mind contemplating the notion that the first day’s investigation had been rushed and that as a result I’d cheated myself of some of the relaxation I’d anticipated when I had departed the city. Perhaps it had been the weather that had played a hand or perhaps my own avidity had gotten the best of me.

I vowed then that I would proceed with a bit more unhurriedness and upon stepping from the cab onto the curb of Woodhouse Lane I set my course into action. Prior to visiting the University of Leeds’ library I took what turned into a nearly hour-long constitutional, touring the lovely grounds of an institution I’d never before had chance to visit. I chortled to myself as I watched students run about frantically; late no-doubt to some lecture given by a pompous professor who deemed it exceedingly important to their education.

I do not decry the education system, mind you, I simply feel that for many it is a crutch. Rather than invest the genuine effort and chance utter failure by striking out upon one’s own it is

much easier, especially when descending from a clan with considerable wealth, to simply listen to some old man prattle on about theory and in the end be handed a piece of paper that validated to the world that you indeed hold some value. The possibility that I am and always have been in some capacity quite mad does not escape me. My views may very well be the result of a deranged mind...still, I prefer the path of self-validation. I need no one to tell me my own worth or to acknowledge that I have achieved a certain level of aptitude in a specific endeavor.

Upon finishing my tour of the grounds I made my way to the sciences library where I spent the better part of six hours digging through texts with the assistance of an eager young cohort who'd chanced to inquire what I was working on and became enthralled. Ennis Griswold was his name, a wiry young chap with curly light-brown hair and spectacles that hung from his nose in a most haphazard fashion. Our search, however, appeared to be for naught. Despite our lengthy research and even taking it upon ourselves to consult a couple of professors who might have been able to assist us we found nothing.

There stood no condition on record that I could find which resulted in the blood of the afflicted taking on a blue tint. I also managed to rule out any form of poisoning. The look upon the faces of those professors as I began to question them about all manner of toxins and their effect on the blood was quite an interesting one. Obviously neither of them had ever been consulted upon matters of a criminal nature before.

Sometime nearing four in the afternoon I parted from my new friend Mr. Griswold and found a bit of lunch. Afterwards I did a little research on Larchwood Estate, or should I say Eight Hill Estate? It seemed that mystery was no stranger to the grounds. The original property was named as such because of eight puzzling mounds of Earth, found there in the fifteenth century. They laid in a straight line and each was about two meters in height and four across. They were thought to be of Roman origin though no one had ever been permitted to excavate in order to draw a scientific conclusion.

My mild historical curiosity satiated I thought then to return to the estate but as I attempted to hail a cab a thought struck me. Not one hour previous I had been standing in the laboratory of a university chemist but had failed to remember the sample of the blue material that I carried in my pocket. I ran back as quickly as I could, managing to knock the books from the arms of only one unlucky student as I went, and was able to catch the professor before he left for the evening. I produced the small fleck of matter and handed it to him. He promptly set about putting it to the test yet his results were more baffling than they were enlightening. Whatever the material was it certainly was not of a chemically produced nature. That ruled out paint or varnish. It was a natural and biological substance and one that closely resembled blood yet it was not blood. What was I to make of it?



The lady Dunning knew not what to say. Even Miss Elizabeth stood speechless. I turned to face Mr. Dunning and barked an order. “See to it that my transport to town is ready to leave in one hour.” then to Mrs. Kyle, “Bitch the pot woman, I require strong tea!”

Starry Night

None of the hostilities of the previous evening's dinner were existent at my second meal with the family. Mrs. Dunning was not present, likely I thought, due to severe migraine brought about by hours spent arguing with her delinquent son. My crassness before departing for Leeds that morning had given all of them a shock but it seemed to be one which they had all badly needed.

Elizabeth and her older brother spoke no ill words between them, instead resorting to the forced politeness that had been drilled into them since their youth. The elder Dunning, Michael, was not as boisterous as he'd been the evening before but still he was sociable. The majority of our conversation consisted of me being asked to recount tales of my exploits in London, something they seemed to be quite fascinated with, as I spent what was likely more than an hour doing so. Rather than bicker the Dunnings appeared content to let their father keep a continuous stream of stories flowing from my lips. Of course there was also the odd question about the city itself; only Michael and Adrian had ever visited it themselves and even then only briefly upon matters of business.

I did perceive a certain sadness in Miss Elizabeth's features so immediately following dinner I asked if she would join me in the library. I temporarily declined Michael Dunning's offer to go with him for a smoke in the garden so that I could speak with the young lady.

"I believe that I owe you a few moments of my time." I said as I took my seat across from her.

"I would be most appreciative if you could enlighten me as to what you have deduced thus far Inspector." she replied in her most lady-like tone. She seemed to be making a renewed attempt to restore her aristocratic visage, one that she likely felt had been tarnished by her recent emotional outbursts.

"I still have yet to conclude for certain whether or not your young man's tragic end was purely accidental or the result of some plot against him. There would seem to be some evidence to support either possibility at this point."

Her faced showed a bit of impatience, "I wish to know what evidence you have found Inspector."

"First, pray answer a question for me."

"Certainly."

"If someone in this house did indeed murder Mr. Wright who would you yourself be most inclined to suspect?"

She hesitated for a moment before speaking, "Sadly, Mr. Carson, my suspicion would fall squarely on my very own brother, Adrian. Furthermore I would not rule out involvement by my father."

"Let me begin by saying that I would agree with that assessment. Each possesses a motive, the wish for you to marry into a wealthy family and not to end up the bride of a stable-boy. Further, there is the possibility that your brother may have perhaps had feelings that went beyond that of friendship for Mr. Wright and therefore he could have acted out of resentment rather than some familial sense of duty, or perhaps a combination of the two."

"While I believe your assessment of my brother's...preferences...to be true, as I have long suspected myself, do you really think him to have been in love with Colin?"

I shook my head, "Of that I have no proof, but the circumstances make it a possibility. I am told that Adrian and Mr. Wright were quite close friends until knowledge of your affair came to light. Of course he could simply have been angry at the young man for brotherly reasons but I cannot completely discount the second possibility either."

"Would there be any way to know for sure short of Adrian admitting it himself, something that he would never do?"

I rubbed my side-whiskers for a moment in thought. "Does your brother keep a journal?"

Her brow wrinkled in thought. "I must admit Mr. Carson, I do not know. I could perhaps, however, arrange for a time that you could search his room."

"That may be very revealing my dear. Surely if he does keep a journal he would not be so callous as to write in it about a murder plot but he may have left other clues that could be of use."

"Then I shall attempt to do so. Now what else have you discovered?"

"Firstly, the area where your dear Mr. Colin met his end seems to have been hastily cleaned of any evidence of blood save for tiny spots that the average observer would not notice."

"But you are not the average observer are you Inspector. I take it that you found something?"

"Perhaps," I began, careful to make no mention of the mysterious blue substance, "some evidence seems to indicate that another person may have been present at the time of death and that Mr. Wright may have been reaching out for their help."

She seemed surprised. "Surely if someone had murdered him he would not be reaching out for their help would he?"

"Instinct Miss, it is human instinct to call out for help even if it is from the very hands that are wrapped around your neck."

"I see. What else have you learned?"

"Nothing conclusive as of yet, save for the obvious fact that your brother has further implicated himself in any wrong-doing by way of his shameless actions this very morning."

She only shook her head. "Believe me when I say that I truly hope that neither my brother nor my father had any hand in this awful incident. Still, their peculiar behavior and secretiveness only lend to my suspicions."

"As to mine. Now my dear, I must bid you good night. Your father has asked me to join him in the garden for a smoke and I must take this opportunity to probe him for further information. You have my word that as soon as any further details are revealed I shall report them to you at once. I apologize for not having more to relate to you at the present time, but I prefer to come to you with facts and not just wild speculation."

"Thank you Inspector. I pray that you have a more restful night than the last."

"As do I." I said as I rose from my chair.

Stepping from the interior of the house onto the terrace my eyes took a few moments to adjust to the darkness of the night. Once they had done so I stumbled through the yard and into the garden, carefully so as not to trip over some unfamiliar obstruction. As I did so a voice called out to me, that of Mr. Dunning.

"Over here Inspector."

I could see some distance away the dim glow of a coal, Michael Dunning's pipe. I made my way toward it and found him sitting upon a stone bench. He motioned for me to join him.

"I shall wager that you cannot see the stars so clearly from your place in London."

I looked up and was greeted with the clearest view of the heavens I had ever seen. A beautiful ribbon of stars were splashed across the black canvas of the sky, as if put there by some

heavenly painter. Never had I imagined there to be so very many of them. More than a man could count were he given a lifetime to do nothing else.

“The country has its charms does it not Mr. Carson?”

“Indeed.” was my only reply.

He nudged me in the ribcage with his left elbow. Looking over my eyes were drawn to what he was holding in his hand, the small brown bottle. With a dulcet smile he extended it to me.

“Go ahead sir. I should be furious with you for exposing my weakness to my wife and children, but somehow I find I am not. Rather, instead I feel a small amount of gratitude.”

“Gratitude?” I asked as I gently took the bottle from his aged hands.

“My affliction is no longer a secret for whose revelation I fear.”

“Then why smoke?” I motioned toward his pipe, ember still smoldering, in his right hand.

“An old habit I suppose, little more.”

“I see.”

“I must also say Inspector, it is refreshing to be in the presence of a man who knows the burden of my weakness.”

I had taken the bottle from him without thought. Never had I admitted to him that I frequently indulged in opiate use myself, rather he had deduced it himself. I had suffered a lapse in judgment that had revealed to the man something that I preferred clients not know about my character. Damage done I supposed. I uncorked the bottle and drank from it lightly. The acrid smell of Mr. Dunning’s tobacco was still upon it from when he had last imbibed.

“I appreciate your generosity sir but I am afraid that your assumption is incorrect.” said I.

“How so?” he asked.

“While it is true that I have the unfortunate habit of frequent narcotic binges I am not as you, I am not an addict.”

“And how have you managed this? My addiction began after using it only for a short time to treat a persistent cough.”

“Never more than three days in one week sir and never two weeks in a row. As to you, may I ask, did you cease completely once the cough had subsided?”

“I did...for two days or so.”

“Then why did you once again medicate yourself?”

“After having been on the medication for some weeks I came to feel as though the sensation it gave me was normal in some way. A few days without it and I greatly missed the contentment that I felt when I took it.”

“As if some deep hole in your very being were finally filled up and you could allow yourself to be truly happy...if only for a few hours?”

“Precisely!” the old man blurted out. He sat motionless for a few moments, save for puffing on his pipe, then turned to me. “May I confide in you Mr. Carson?”

I was somewhat surprised but nodded my acceptance.

“When I was a younger man I filled that emptiness I felt inside myself with guilty pleasures, far more guilty than the one that I turn to today. I frequented...unsavory places to indulge in pleasures of the flesh more than I care to admit. Then I was married and for a time I satiated my desires with a very willing young bride. Despite having no lack of lust between the two of us, however, my wife and I were never truly in love you see. We were married to satisfy the demands of our parents so when she fell ill and no longer shared my wanton desires I returned to my previous outlet of debauchery. It would seem, however, that even though I was never madly in love with the woman I still cared for her deeply and within a short time felt quite despicable

for having betrayed her. So for many years I lived with the emptiness inside, that is until a bout of pneumonia brought me to where I am now.”

“You say that were never were truly in love with Mrs. Dunning, then surely you can understand that your daughter may have wished not to marry simply for political or financial reasons.”

“Oh I do Mr. Carson, believe me when I say that. Still, it is part of the burden we must bear.”

I scoffed. The older man eyed me peculiarly.

“You have no love for the upper class, do you Inspector?”

“I would not dishonor a man who has shared his laudanum with me by being disingenuous. You are correct sir. Having lived my entire life in the shadow and service of those who have so much and to see the ways in which they frequently treat those to whom they should be eternally grateful I cannot say that I have much love for the wealthy in this country.”

“Then you would likely be surprised to know that many times I have considered how it would be to have been born with nothing.”

“Do you then? To be raised in an orphanage, to beg for food and never know when it is that you will eat again all-the-while the wealth of others being on parade for you to see?”

He sat quiet for a moment. “I suppose I never thought of it in that fashion.”

“Of course not, you considered the life of a middle-class man, not the life of one who is truly poor.”

“That is true, however I feel you have also misjudged Mr. Carson. Just as I have sometimes thought poverty to equate to freedom so have you figured wealth to equate to the same. The truth is, Mr. Carson, that regardless of our positions we live our lives in chains.”

“Perhaps. Still there is something to be said for a gilded cage.”

“Can you really see no purpose for the upper-classes in England?”

“I’m afraid that I cannot.”

“We live our lives as if they are not our own. We marry not for love but for status. We spend our time absent from our family so that we can secure our fortune...not only for our own comforts, you understand, but for those who depend upon us.”

My puzzled look must have been apparent even in the dim moonlight for he elaborated. “Sir, on my estate alone there are employed some seventy-eight people. My colleagues who own factories, mines, and the like employ many more times that number. Should they be foolish enough to lose their fortune then all who depend upon them for employment no longer have that security.”

I laughed then took another swig from the bottle before handing it back to its owner. “Mr. Dunning, truly I do not wish to offend you, but I am afraid that seeing things from the top-down has given you a false perspective on the world. You see, it is not the lower classes that depend on the upper but quite the other way around. Were all of your servants, your farmers, etcetera to simply leave your employment and none stepped up to take their place would you not quickly lose your fortune?”

“Well...I suppose so.”

“You are absolutely correct when you state that the poor rely on your wealth to furnish employment, but only because the ignorant masses have for far too long allowed it to be so.”

That time it was Michael Dunning who laughed, his breath fogging the cold evening air as he did so. “A socialist revolutionary are you Mr. Carson?”

I had never considered myself as such but I suppose that in some way he was right. Surely there was enough in the world to be shared amongst all men rather than be locked away by the few and then miserly rationed out to the rest of humanity.

I did not respond so the old man eventually spoke again, "I meant not to insult your Inspector. You are correct in one thing, our respective positions in life have obviously distorted our views on reality. Perhaps the truth lies somewhere in between?"

"The truth." I muttered, "Speaking of such, I'm afraid that I must ask again. Where is the body of Mr. Colin Wright buried?"

"That is a question you may ask," he chuckled, "as many times as you like but never will there be an answer for it."

With that he rose and bid me good night. I made for my comfortable bed hoping that night to actually be left to sleep in it.



Never had I admitted to him that I frequently indulged in opiate use myself, rather he had deduced it himself. I had suffered a lapse in judgment that had revealed to this man something that I preferred clients not know about my character.

The Grounds-keeper

I rose from my bed with a terrible start. What was that noise? I ran into the hallway and nearly bowled over Mrs. Kyle who was carrying an armful of folded towels.

“What’s going on?” I demanded.

The lady stared me up and down for I was in my dressing gown. “What on Earth are you talking about Inspector?” she seemed to have completely lost her patience with me by that point.

“That God-awful noise woman! It sounded like someone calling out in pain.”

She paused for a moment and then proceeded to laugh heartily at my expense. “Oh Mr. Carson, that was the peacock.”

“Peacock?” I asked, baffled.

“Yes, you’ve heard of them haven’t you? Large bird, long feathers...”

“Yes.” I waved her away and turned for my door but paused, “Mrs. Kyle, did I not give you a list of whom I wished to speak with when I first arrived?”

“Why yes.” she responded.

“Very well. I know that yesterday I was in town most of the day but I would like to resume my questioning today if possible.”

“Certainly sir.” she said with a bit of sarcasm before giving me an acerbic curtsy and walking away.

As I reentered my room and closed the door behind me my thoughts turned back to the bird which had awoken me. How was I to know they had a peacock on the grounds? More-so how was I to know that they made such horrendous noises? After all, I’d never before seen one in person. I thought to dress hurriedly and run outside in an attempt to catch sight of the creature, but I determined that my boy-like curiosity would have to be put on hold. I was hungry and could smell breakfast being prepared.

As I dressed myself I had all intentions of joining the family upstairs around the table but was distracted once again by another commotion coming from the lawn. That time it was the sound of Mr. Findlay, the grounds-keeper, hauling a cart full of tools which made the most dreadful clattering as he went. I had but a few questions for the man and catching him at such a time, when he expected hot breakfast and not an interrogation, was likely to reap the most benefit. With his temper roused I would have an easier time prying honest answers from him.

His task, apparently that of putting away tools and implements into the shed that lay only a short distance from the stable, was complete by the time that I managed to dress and scurry out of the house’s side door. I intercepted him half-way across the lawn, wet with the typical English morning dew, and introduced myself.

“Mr. Findlay.” I said as I thrust my right hand forward in greeting, “My name is Inspector Robert Carson.”

The strength of the grip that met mine was of no surprise. Despite being what I took to be slightly past middle-aged the Scotsman boasted an impressively muscular build, one of a man a couple of decades younger than himself. “Ah know who ye are. ‘Tis a pleasure ta make ye acquaintance sir.” He spoke in an accent so thick I would have sworn it had been rehearsed. If I were to guess I would say that the man took note of how strongly his accent had taken me aback,

and as if to assure me that it was not put on purely for affectation he spoke again, "Somethin' t'matter boyo? 'Ave ye never seen a Scotsman before lad?"

I allowed myself a broad smile as I loosened my hand from the man's grip. "Indeed I have met and known many sir but never, I must say, one with such a thick veneer of Scot upon his tongue."

At that the grounds-keeper chuckled and slapped me squarely upon my left shoulder. "Well, now ye 'ave. Ah was told ye'd be coomin' ta see me, but ta be 'onest with ye sir, 'tis time fer brekfast and ah'm in no mood ta be missin' it."

"Nor would I wish you to do so. Still, I must demand five minutes of your time and then I shall, with any luck, have no need to trouble you again."

Mr. Findlay appeared none too pleased about being disturbed so early in the morning but he maintained his proper bearing and to my surprise showed more patience with my intrusion than I had expected. Upon my request he turned and walked for the stable so that I might ask him about the state that it lay in. From behind I saw that his somewhat unkempt mane of reddish-brown hair did little to hide the fact that he was rapidly going bald. He also wore a beard, one that told me that he was a heavy smoker for its coloration had faded mostly to white save for brownish patches below his nostrils where night after night of smoke exhalation had thus stained it so with the tar of tobacco.

No wedding ring was upon his finger, that coupled with the fact that he lived on the estate and was mucking about with his tools in the early hours of the morning as well as the spotless appearance of all of the grounds that I had thus-far chanced to view told me that he had no romantic commitments. Polite in pleasant company perhaps, but with Mr. Peterson's description of his drinking and rabble-rousing I took him for something of a knave when left to his own devices.

As we approached the door to the large wooden building I asked him to stop. I pointed over to the pitchfork still lying on the outside work table where I had left it. "I chanced to this implement, the very one involved in Mr. Wright's tragic death, rested against a wall in the disused stall where hay is kept. Were you the one to put it there?"

"No sir, ah didn'a."

"But you no-doubt noticed it placed there, correct?"

"Aye, the day after it 'appened ah saw it there but no idea 'ow it got there."

"When was the last time you saw it prior to it being placed in that spot?"

He rubbed at his beard in thought, "Must've been the day before when ah was workin' in the stable."

"You were working in the stable?" I asked as I approached the man, "Pray tell, what precisely were you doing that day and where was the pitchfork when last you saw it?"

"Ah 'ad gone in some time in th'afternoon, perhaps around three or four, ta change the electric light bulb. Mr. Wright 'ad complained early that morning that the one in the stable 'ad burned oot." the Scotsman then paused as he tasked his memory, "As to the fork...ah knocked it over when ah went ta retrieve a stool ta stand on from the stall where all of the 'ay is kept. T'was a little dark, the light being oot and all, and ah tripped over the bloody thin'."

"Yes?"

"In me anger ah believe ah flung it over near the shoein' area."

"And there you left it, lying upon the ground?"

He shook his head, "Ah may 'ave a temper at times Mr. Carson but ah'm not inconsiderate. After ah'd replaced the bulb ah picked the thin' up and placed it against a post."

“Forks up or forks down?” he visibly cringed at the intensity of both my question and of my stare.

“Why...ah do’na recall.”

“Mr. Findlay did you assist in the removal of Mr. Wright’s body from the stable?”

“No sir. Ah’d gone into town the very night that ‘e passed away and ‘ad’na returned yet.”

I looked at him quizzically. “With grounds so immaculate as these and seeing as how you were at work shortly after the sun had risen this very morning I cannot think what would have kept you from your duties. You are not lying to me are you sir?”

“Assuredly not!” he protested. “Tis somethin’ ah prefer not discuss but leave it ta say that ah was indisposed that mornin’ and in no condition ta be workin’.”

“Drink, I shall assume.” the man rose to protest but I silenced him with a wave of my hand, “Fear not dear grounds-keeper, for I am a man of far more heinous vices than strong drink. I believe you when you say that you were not present for the discovery of the stable-boy’s body nor his removal from the stables. Am I to understand that you also played no part in his burial as well?”

“Aye. T’was some time closer ta two in th’afternoon when ah returned that day.”

“Were you not in a spot of trouble with your employer for having not attended to your morning duties?”

The man’s grizzled old face showed his honest surprise, “Aye, ah strongly expected a firm reprimand from Mr. Dunnin’ but received nothin’ of the sort. Imagine me surprise when ah found oot that Colin ‘ad died in the night and that the entire ‘ouse was in a tizzy over it. Tis with no pride that ah admit ta ‘avin’ used the confusion ta get back ta me duties with little notice of me absence.”

“Surely Mr. Dunning and Mr. Daidley could have used your assistance in burying the boy. Did your master not once say so to you?”

“No, never once ‘as ‘e mentioned it sir.”

“What of the stable itself? It would seem that someone has gone to great lengths to clean all traces of blood from the area, were you given that task?”

“No Inspector.”

“Have you set foot at all in the stable since the day of the accident?”

“Aye.” he shook his head in the affirmative. “Ah ‘elped get the ‘orses ready ta move ta the farm and ah’ve gone in once or twice fer a particular tool but ah’ve spent no real time in there.”

“Did you have a chance to witness the scene of the death before it was tidied?”

“Ah didn’a. As it lays now is ‘ow ah saw it after th’accident.”

“I am told that you had a friendship with Colin. Did you know him well?”

“Ah wouldn’a call it a friendship exactly sir, but we did speak on occasion.”

“Pray tell me what it was you spoke of.”

“Colin ‘ad a bit of curiosity about some of me duties. ‘E liked to ask about some of the plants around the gardens and such.”

“Nothing personal? He never spoke of family or perhaps of his hobbies or likes?”

“Not that ah can recall sir. We spoke mostly about the garden and on occasion about the weather or somethin’ of that nature but little else.”

“But you were aware of his relationship with Miss Elizabeth?”

Before he could respond I heard the door of the house open in the distance and the voice of young Kwame call out to the grounds-keeper, telling him that Mrs. Kyle had finished preparing breakfast. I turned and looked at the boy who quickly ducked back inside. Turning back Mr.

Findlay's expression told me that the man's patience was nearing its end so I implored him to answer only a couple more of my questions before I would release him.

"Yes, ah knew 'bout 'e and Miss Elizabeth. T'was not a secret anymore Mr. Carson."

"Very well. Your breakfast is no-doubt growing colder by the minute so I shall waste no more of your time, I shall simply be blunt. Have you reason to believe that anyone here on the estate could have been party to a plot to murder Mr. Wright?"

"Ah will tell ye that Master Adrian and Colin 'ad quite a fallin' oot but even though that boy is a little on the shady side ah canna believe 'im ta be capable of somethin' that foul. 'E may be a bit of a shit but as far as ah'm concerned 'e's not a murderer either."

"Very well." I said as I stepped out of his way. "Please go and enjoy your breakfast and forgive me for taking up your valuable time."

The Scotsman walked past me with a friendly nod and headed for the side-door of the house.

"I may call upon you again, though Mr. Findlay and if you remember anything peculiar about the day that Mr. Wright passed away, please do make sure to bring it to my attention."

He paused about twenty feet from me and turned, "Ah do seem ta recall one thin' that stood oot in me mind. Early in the evenin', while ah was still lyin' low and tryin' not ta be noticed, a gentleman whom ah've never laid eyes on before came callin'."

"Was that peculiar?" I asked, raising my tone to cover the distance.

"Only in the fact that 'e stayed fer no more than five minutes before departin' as quickly as 'e'd come."

"Thank you Mr. Findlay. I shall look into the matter more deeply. Now, pray go and enjoy your breakfast."

Too Easy A Hunt

Knowing full-well that the family had been served before the staff I was no-doubt too late to take breakfast with the Dunnings so I decided instead to eat quickly in the servant hall, after which I grasped Mrs. Kyle by the arm and inquired about the mystery caller the night that Colin was buried. She had nothing to add but confirmed what the grounds-keeper had said; that a stranger had come that evening but stayed only for a few brief minutes before riding off at speed. This, of course, raised a good deal of suspicion in a mind such as mine.

Likewise, however, Mr. Findlay's failure to remember whether or not he had placed the pitchfork with forks up or down concerned me every bit as much. One would have expected him to remember instantly and to proclaim that he'd placed the tool in the proper forks-down position. The fact that he did not said to me that either he was ignorant, angry at the time, or perhaps under the weather from partaking in too much drink the night before. Ignorance I did not believe, the man had worked around farm implements his entire adult life, he knew the proper way in which to rest a pitchfork. I suspected a combination of the latter was what resulted in his hasty placing of the implement and his resultant lack of memory regarding such. If that were the case, and in his frustration and haste the grounds-keeper had placed the tool in an un-safe position, resting against the beam with its forks up, then the case for Mr. Wright's death being accidental looked all the more plausible.

One thing was certain, the stable-boy's body needed to be found. I therefore instructed Mrs. Kyle to forgo rounding up witnesses for my interrogation and to instead pack me a lunch, something that would fit into my messenger bag. It was around that time that I became aware of a steadily increasing amount of noise coming from the front of the house.

I was met in one of the hallways leading from the servants' dining hall to the family sitting rooms by none other than Miss Elizabeth.

"Good morning Mr. Carson. I trust you slept well?"

"Indeed Miss Dunning, I slept like a newborn baby, and yourself?"

"I fear I have not slept well since this entire affair began."

I looked past her and saw what looked to be several young men in the sitting room chatting each other up quite loudly and in pompous and arrogant form typical of the type to wear hunting jackets and riding boots.

"Friends of your brother I presume?"

"Yes. That is why I have come to fetch you Inspector."

"Certainly not so that I should join them?" I asked suspiciously.

"Of course not." she leaned in, "So that you may take this opportunity to inspect my brother's room and hopefully find his journal."

Just then I heard a familiar voice. It was that of Mr. Peterson. There he was, clad in the same ridiculous getup as the rest of them, shaking hands with a young man who I could not identify.

"Samuel Peterson?" I asked her.

"Yes. It's been some time since he's come on a hunt and Adrian simply demanded that he come along."

"I see. Will he stay on for a time afterwards? I'd like to have a word with him later if at all possible."

“I’m sure that he will.” she smiled sincerely, “Uncle isn’t much of a hunter but is of course humoring Adrian. He’ll likely stay around for supper.”

“Excellent. Now point me to your brother’s room so that I may investigate whilst he is distracted.”

A few moments later she was leading me down a hallway not too far from where the guest room that I had been occupying laid. She pointed out her own room, that of Miss Tripti, and then finally the one which belonged to Adrian. I bid her goodbye, tasking her with making sure that her brother did not return to his room for any reason, and let myself in.

As I dug through the young man’s belongings I heard in the distance the sound of yelling and dogs barking and knew that the hunt had gotten underway. Such a savage thing, I always thought, not true hunting at all. What sport was there in pursuing an animal that had no chance of escape? As it took mere moments to find Adrian’s journal, which was poorly hidden, the thought crossed my mind that perhaps what I was doing at the moment was equally unfair. What hope did such a fool have of keeping his secrets from my prying eyes?

The Search

The scribblings contained within Adrian Dunning's private journal did not detail a murderous plot but they were still every bit as enlightening, and disturbing, as I had hoped. More certain than ever that the final piece to the puzzle was nothing other than the body of Colin Wright itself I grabbed my bag, loaded with the lunch that Mrs. Kyle had provided, and sometime shortly after ten in the morning I set off. I knew it not at the time but distant eyes stared at me through a pair of binoculars, those of the most devious eldest son of the Dunning clan.

As I passed by Mr. Findlay, who'd returned to his work in the garden, I paused to ask him one more question. "Sir, have you seen Mr. Daidley about? I wish to ask the agent some questions regarding the matter I am here to investigate."

"Th'last ah heard 'e left fer 'oliday in France."

"Oh." my surprise was no-doubt palpable, "Have you any idea when he shall be returning?"

"Ah'm afraid ah've no idea sir but 'e left just t'other day so ah'd imagine it may be some time."

"Do you remember the day that he left?"

"Aye, t'was the day that ye arrived sir. 'Eard Mrs. Kyle yammerin' on 'bout it in the servant's dinin' 'all at supper."

"Thank you." I said before walking away, clutching the messenger bag that carried not only my lunch and my glass but also the service revolver that once belonged to my departed friend Mr. Parney. I detest the use of firearms but one must always be prepared. Being from the city I had no idea as to what type of creatures I may come across whilst wondering around the countryside and I had no intention of becoming the afternoon snack of any one of them.

The Dunning estate was incredibly large, far more than I could cover in a single day but that did not disturb me. I planned to enjoy the sights and sounds of nature and if my search took several days then so be it. I would work my way out from the house in a spiraling fashion, looking for any patches of Earth that appeared to have been disturbed. I knew full-well that my chances of simply stumbling upon the grave were somewhat remote but it seemed as though the few who knew precisely where it was were in no mood to reveal its location to me. Were I able to find it on my own I could force their hand and quickly get to the heart of the matter. Was the death an accident or a foul plot? Plotting, I was certain, had indeed taken place but had it resulted in the boy's death? What was the mysterious blue substance? Was Mr. Wright engaged in some sort of espionage? Who precisely was the young Mr. Wright, a man who talked little of his past and behaved in strange ways for which there were no explanations?

I had plenty of time to contemplate those points as I walked the grounds. Shortly before my spiraling search pattern took me away from the vicinity of the house I caught sight of Michael Dunning sitting upon a bench under an oak tree along the walking path. He apparently saw me as well for he gave me a tentative wave to accompany his accusatory stare.

By the time my watch showed fifteen-after-one I'd come upon the cabin wherein I'd been told Miss Elizabeth had engaged in unsavory acts with the young banker from town. It seemed still to be deserted so I made my way inside. Wiping off what appeared to be years of dust from the kitchen table I pulled up a chair and laid out the spartan lunch the maid had prepared for me.

A sandwich, an apple, and a left-over scone from breakfast would serve to hold me up until dinner time.

A cursory glance around the room showed that not all of it had been untouched. A bed in the far corner of the one-room cottage laid in a state of disarray with its coverings tossed about. A candle on the night-stand nearest it and a box of matches appeared to have been moved around in the recent past for there were trails in the thick dust that covered the surface. No-doubt the cabin had been visited in recent months by Miss Elizabeth and her lover, lest there was another couple somewhere on the estate using it as a romantic rendezvous. I had, of course, been regaled with tales of the wickedness of farmers' daughters, but whether or not such accounts were pure fiction or not I could not say; one of the many things I pondered as I slowly ate my lunch.

Saving the apple for last I picked it from the table and polished its skin against the fabric of my waistcoat. I twirled it 'round in my fingers, it was a lovely specimen, lovelier than any of those I'd found at the markets in London. Amazing, but not surprising, that wealth could allow a household to enjoy such wonderful and fresh produce in the depths of winter. I lifted the fruit to my mouth but out of the corner of my eye, and through the filthy glass of the cabin's window, I perceived the movement of something outside.

My mind went immediately to the thought of a wild animal and seeing as how I'd left the front door open to allow in some of the delightfully mild morning air I jumped from my seat to close it. Grabbing the knob in hand I poked my head out of the doorway and glanced around with great brevity before turning to pull it shut. Before it latched, however, I felt the impact of something quite weighty against the outside of it. Without warning it came crashing back open and there in the doorway stood a tall figure, its face partially obscured beneath a scarf and its head topped with a wide-brimmed hat.

Before I could react the man struck me upon the cheek with a swift blow from his right hand and I tumbled backwards onto the floor and landed in between two of the chairs that sat on the opposite side of the table from where I had taken my lunch. The zing of metal echoed through the small and mostly-barren cabin as he produced a dagger from his belt and pointed it squarely at me.

"What are you doing here?" the figure demanded.

I rubbed my jaw and spat back, "I am Inspector Robert Carson of London. I'm here investigating a matter for the Dunning family, who in the hell are you?"

The man stood silent for a moment, then spoke in the same raspy tone he'd used before, no-doubt attempting to disguise his voice. "You are trespassing here." With that he pulled free a set of irons from his belt and tossed them at my feet. "Put them on."

"I can assure you that's not going to happen sir. Now kindly leave me be lest I subdue and detain you for the charge of being a highwayman as I can see no other reason for you to be running about the countryside in disguise."

The figure bent to a squat and thrust the dagger closer to my person. "Now!"

Just then a loud cracking sound from the doorway made my attacker turn. With a precise kick I knocked the blade from his hand and sent it flying toward the stove. As he dove for it I likewise leapt for my bag, which was resting only a foot or so away, near the chair that I had been sitting in. Rifling through it quickly I produced the revolver and spun, still on the floor under the table, bringing the pistol to bear on my assailant.

He'd recovered the dagger and was lunging for me so I did the only sensible thing that came to me at the moment. I fired a single shot into the man's shoulder. He fell back onto his bottom with a thud that shook the entire cabin and I jumped to my feet without wasting a moment. A

quick glance revealed, much to my surprise, that the man who stood in the door was none other than Samuel Peterson. He had swatted his cane hard against the doorjamb to provide me with a suitable distraction. His mouth was agape as he watched me kick the blade away from the mugger's hand. I walked over to the stove and retrieved a poker which I then used to remove the scarf from the struggling man's face. Some part of me had expected it to be Adrian Dunning, it was not.

"Who are you? Come on, speak!" I demanded as I waved the revolver at him.

The man said nothing, he only clutched at the wound in his left shoulder. Taking matters into my own hands I kneeled to rifle through his pockets and upon removing his wallet I emptied its contents onto the floor. Daidley! Several of the pieces of paper in his wallet had the name Daidley on them.

"On holiday in France are we?"

"My goodness!" Mr. Peterson finally spoke as he approached the two of us. "Daidley what in the hell are you doing?"

Again the man said nothing. Being framed for an illicit affair with a governess was one thing but being assaulted by the property's agent was another. I was furious and no longer wished to partake in any of the games that were being played on the Dunning estate. Tossing the poker aside I picked up the dagger and brandished it in front of the man.

"Now Inspector, calm down!" Samuel pleaded with me. I paid him little attention.

"I shall assume by the design of this dagger that you spent some time in India...in the service of the military perhaps? No...a military man would have had more skill in his attack, of course unless you never meant to actually harm me but instead to simply run me off or kidnap me and drop me in a gutter somewhere far away."

I leaned in close and touched the blade to his chin, "You will tell me precisely what I want to know and you will tell it to me right now. I am an Inspector, I know very well how to dispose of evidence or a dead body in such a manner that no one will ever find it."

"Heaven's sake!" Mr. Peterson blurted out.

I was, of course, bluffing. I would not take the man's life over something so relatively trivial. That did not mean, however, that I would not leave him a little worse for wear. His refusal to speak prompted me to lift him to his feet and deposit him into one of the nearby chairs. I reached back and with all of my strength punched him squarely in the face so hard that his chair lifted off the front legs and fell backwards until it was leaning against the table.

"Was it Adrian? Did he task you with chasing me off or was it the father, Michael Dunning? Perhaps more, to put me into an unmarked grave like the late Mr. Wright?"

Defiantly he spat at my feet. I allowed my temper to seethe over and I jumped at him, dagger to his throat. "Tell me!"

He remained silent and a moment later I felt Mr. Peterson's gentle touch upon my shoulder. Catching myself I returned to a standing position. I adjusted my coat and scarf, I would not let my emotions override my better judgment. There was a better chance of making the man talk if I remained composed and allowed him to be the one to lose control.

"You are right Samuel, I overreacted. Thank you." I whispered to my friend, "Not that I am ungrateful for your most well-timed interruption but what on Earth are you doing here?"

"We were out on the hunt when our fox darted in an unexpected direction and I noticed something that I felt warranted your immediate attention Robert. The soil of one of the eight hills appears to have been disturbed recently. I rode off looking for you and when I saw the open door I figured you were here in the cottage"

“Not alone, as you can see.” I gestured toward Daidley.

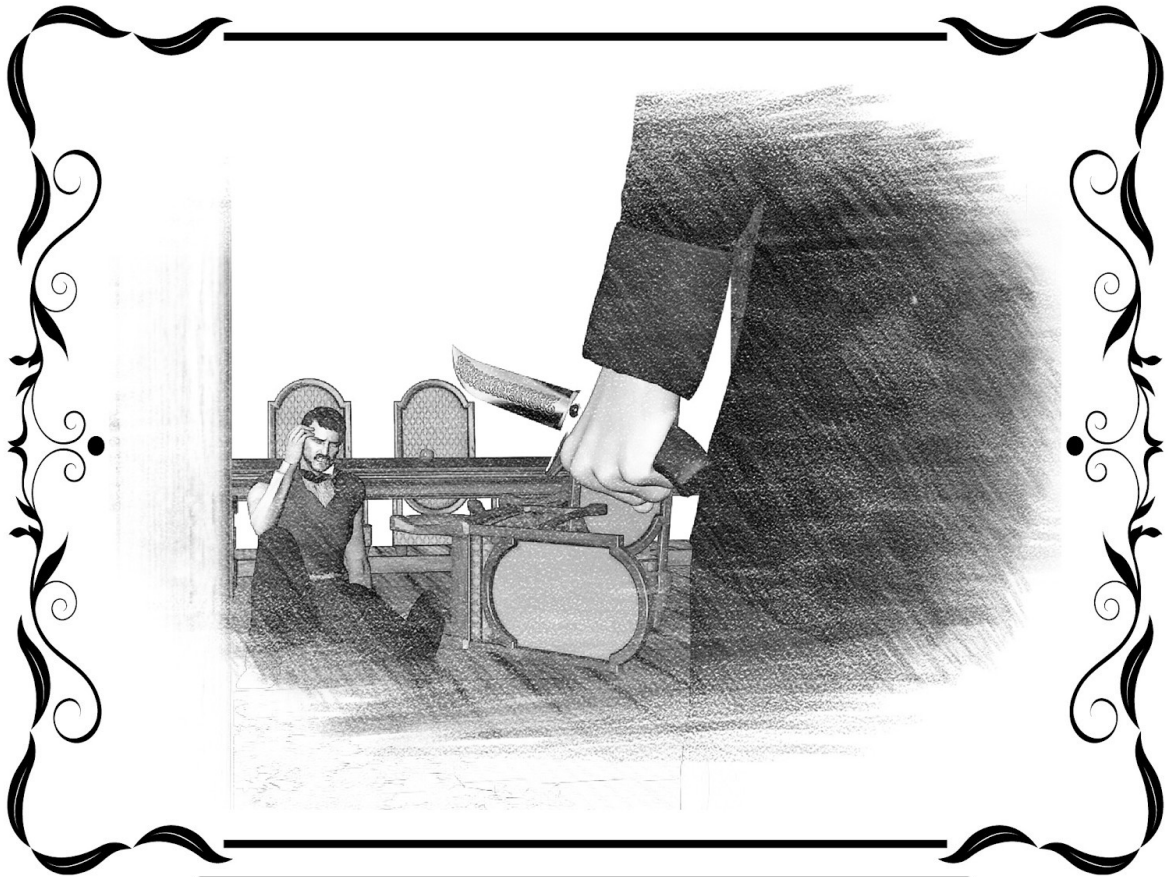
“Yes, well as I was dismounting I heard what sounded like a scuffle coming from inside. As I walked up I saw someone dressed in black assaulting you and gave the door a nice hard rap with my cane to catch his attention.”

“For which you will have my eternal gratitude, I assure you.” I smiled and then turned back to face my attacker.

“So Daidley...perhaps it was you who had a personal grievance with Mr. Wright. You killed the boy, and now you’re attempting to cover your own tracks.” I did not believe that statement for one moment and the agent apparently picked up on my lack of conviction for he scoffed at the very notion.

“Very well. I shall ask you one more question. This one you will answer or I will beat you to within an inch of your life. Where is the body buried?”

I struck him again, not wildly like an animal but precisely, as a means of extracting information. Normally I would never resort to any type of violence to obtain what I needed but having just been assaulted by the man I felt it was not unduly deserved. Again he remained silent. I then lifted a boot and planted it firmly into the shoulder in which he’d been shot only moments before. This broke his silence but not in the way in which I had wished. He screamed in agony and promptly proceeded to faint.



Before it latched, however, I felt the impact of something quite weighty against the outside of it. Without warning it came crashing back open and there in the doorway stood a tall figure, its face partially obscured beneath a scarf and its head topped with a wide-brimmed hat.

A Final Demand

I tore through the garden and approached the rear of the house in a march so brisk it bordered on a canter. Miss Elizabeth was sitting on the back patio with a book from which she looked up, startled, as I plowed through one of the hedges.

“Mr. Carson, are you all right?” she asked, clearly alarmed at how bedraggled I was in appearance.

I continued to storm past her toward the house. “Yes, fine my dear. I fear that I shall have an answer for you on the matter of concern very shortly. Carry on.”

I burst through the rear door so forcefully that I startled old Mrs. Kyle into dropping the pile of linens that she had been walking past with.

She stared at me in horror, her gaze darting from my face to my hands, each of which grasped a weapon. “Mr. Carson, what on Earth are you doing?!”

“Finding some answers my dear lady. Now where is the master of the house? He is nowhere on the lawn.”

“He’s...” she hesitated, “he’s in the library.”

“Thank you then.” I said as I tore past her.

Shortly down the hallway Mr. Adrian, still dressed in his hunting attire, came around the corner and my temper ignited. I slid the revolver into my left coat pocket, the dagger into my right.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going Inspector?”

I said nothing.

“Inspector!” he yelled and put himself into a position so as to block my path.

With a single powerful blow from my right hand I dropped the man, some several inches taller than myself, to the hard marble floor. In a flash I unraveled the scarf from ‘round my neck and deftly flipped him onto his back and bound his hands as tightly as I could. I gave little thought to his comfort or even circulation.

When the doors of the library flung open Michael Dunning jumped with a visible start and clutched at his chest as if I’d nearly given him a cardiac episode. I walked over to where he was sitting and tossed the ornate dagger onto one of the side tables.

“Does this item look familiar to you sir?”

He was so taken aback that it took him a moment to respond. When finally he managed to close his jaw, which had been hanging agape, he glanced over at the wall nearest the fireplace and then back to me. “Why yes Inspector...it’s one of my daggers. It was a gift from Miss Tripti’s grandfather some years back...but how?”

“I was just assaulted with it in the old cottage near the edge of the forest.”

“Surely not! By whom?”

“By your very own Mr. Daidley.” I stared at him accusingly.

“But...he’s on holiday in France.” there was an honesty in the man’s response. All along I had felt there to be a burdensome secret that he was concealing from me but he appeared genuinely surprised by news of his agent still being in the country and even more-so having participated in a violent attack.

“Nevertheless these...” I tossed them to the floor, “are his papers. Ones that I retrieved off of his person not more than ten minutes ago.”

“And he came at you with one of my daggers?”

“Yes. While storming back to the house to confront you sir I remembered having seen one of a similar design in your library. Now, as we both can see, one of them is missing. It lies here now” I pointed to the table, “and was recently brandished at my very person.”

The elder Dunning struggled to get to his feet. “Mr. Carson, what is going on here?”

“I wish to ask the same thing of you sir.”

“You believe me to have had a hand in this?”

“No, actually I do not. I believe it was your son, Adrian, who arranged for Mr. Daidley’s ‘holiday’ so that he could use him as an auxiliary means of getting rid of me should I begin to dig too deeply and refuse to leave.”

“My son would not set violence upon you Inspector nor would I believe Mr. Daidley capable of such a thing.”

“Then you would not believe that upon my first night here at the estate not only did your son drug me and attempt to implicate me in an unsavory affair but that he also physically attacked me upon the rear terrace.”

“No...I would not.”

“That does not make it any less the truth.” I scoffed.

“And Mr. Daidley?”

“His job security threatened by your son I should assume.”

“Then...” he stammered, “then if you believe Adrian capable of these things then no-doubt you also think him guilty of killing the stable-boy.”

“No, I do not.”

My statement seemed to catch him off guard.

“I do not believe Mr. Wright’s death to have been murder. Yet...there is something amiss here and we shall not leave this room until it is settled.”

“Then you believe me? That it was an accident?”

“Yes. Now where is the body?”

“No...I can’t sir.”

“Where is the body?!” I shouted.

“I...I can’t, I can’t.” he protested, then turned away from me and raised his fist to his jaw and bit down upon it. He was shaking visibly.

“We can lay this all to rest Mr. Dunning and it can be forgotten, just tell me where you buried that boy.”

“It’s...all too terrible, you see. I cannot reveal his location for the truth would break my family...my daughter...into so many pieces that she should never be put back together again.”

“Your daughter,” I proclaimed loudly, knowing not what else to do at that moment, “is pregnant by the very man who’s grave you keep hidden!”

The old man let out an audible gasp and fell forward. I rushed to help and was able, if only just, to catch him in time to prevent him from hitting his head on the floor. I guided him into his chair and he grasped onto my hands with his, they were shaking terribly. “Tell me it’s not so! Tell me it’s not so, please!”

I said nothing but freed myself from his grasp and went for the brandy. I poured him a glass and pressed it to his lips. He drank heavily from it until the glass was dry. Kneeling beside him I held one of his hands in mine.

“I understand that you wish the best for you daughter, you wish to see her married off to a wealthy man who can provide the type of lifestyle that she is accustomed to but...”

“That’s not it!” Michael Dunning snapped and then began to sob. “That’s not why this is a terror from which there is no return for both her or our family.”

“Then what is it? What happened?” I demanded.

He looked up at me and through watery eyes began to speak, “You were right to suspect conspiracy but not of the type that you may have initially thought. My son Adrian and I did indeed plot against the stable-boy but it was not to see him murdered. We engaged the services of a man from London to kidnap Colin and take him to one of the far corners of Ireland, whereupon he would be provided with a good job and some money to begin a new life. Our agent was instructed not to harm him but to make threats against his life if he ever thought of returning. Of course even then the intention was never to carry through with such an intimidation.”

I thought for a moment, “The man was late wasn’t he?”

“Yes! How did you know?”

“The servants spoke of a man who arrived the evening after Mr. Wright was found deceased. They stated that he remained for only a few moments and then rode off in quite a dash. That was your hired man was it not?”

“Yes...” the old man’s speech was breaking up, “he...was held up and did not arrive at the scheduled time.”

“Then let me surmise what truly happened to Colin Wright. The night of February 16th, around nine in the evening, you dispatched the Gambian boy Kwame to the stable to ensure that Mr. Wright had been snatched away and that the deed was complete. Upon entering he startled the stable-boy, causing him to lose his balance and fall backwards onto a pitchfork which had been laid improperly earlier in the day by the grounds-keeper Mr. Findlay, forks-up against a post.”

“The sight of the man dying in such a horrific fashion caused the boy to drop his lantern, igniting a small patch of hay. As he fought to extinguish it, lest the entire stable go up in flames, the young Mr. Wright thrashed wildly at the boy begging for help but possibly from fear of reprisal for his involvement young Kwame instead chose to ignore his pleas and fled the building after snuffing the flames. He then reported back to either you or Adrian, whereupon he was instructed to wait until morning and to profess that he had found the body after Colin had been late to breakfast. That still leaves me with a massive mystery, however; why on Earth was the young man’s body hastened away from the site and buried at Eight Hill with all evidence of his death shortly thereafter both hurriedly and haphazardly purged?”

Between his sobs Michael Dunning, master of his domain turned weeping heap of a man, managed to speak. “You are wrong about Eight Hill Inspector. We went to bury him there but found it to be already occupied.”

“Already occupied?”

He grimaced for a moment before speaking again. “There is an old elm, southwest of the house and about one hundred yards into the tree line. At the bottom of it you will find what you are looking for Inspector. Go there...and you will see for yourself my reasons. Then leave my house and never return.”

“Thank you sir.” was all that I could manage.

“Piss off! I never wish to lay eyes on you again!”

A Semblance Of Resolution

My rap upon the lady's door went unanswered for a moment, Miss Elizabeth no-doubt tidying herself, before she bid me enter. I turned the brass knob and opened the door slowly, peaking inside to ensure that she was decent. Her room was quite elegant and still adorned in the fashion of the by-gone Era of Queen Victoria. The young lady obviously had taste, or at least the person who had decorated her chamber did. The space was mostly dark save for what faint light emanated from an electric lamp that sat on her vanity as well a bit of remaining daylight coming in through the eastern window. There was a lot of dust in the air, as if she'd quickly straightened up either herself or her bed and had, in the process, kicked up quite a bit.

"My brother is most upset Inspector." she said with a wry smile that explained to me fully how much that fact delighted her.

"You will forgive me if I feel little remorse for I have more often been the victim of his solecism than he of mine."

"My brother is a retch, I shed not a tear for his feelings. You said that you would have an answer for me yet it has been some four hours since you met with my father. I implore you sir, tell me what you have learned so that my heart may finally be at rest."

I strode further into the room and took up a position nearest the window that looked out over the east garden. The day had turned dark and the sky was even greyer than when I had first arrived at Larchwood The rain had let up but still there hung a mist in the air, some of which was pouring through the window, and which I had only moments before mistaken for dust.

Reluctant, was I, to share what I had learned with the young lady for fear not only of the impact it may have upon her but also of the likelihood that she would not believe my words even if I spoke them. I hesitated. Few people in the world had ever had chance to see my behavior become so sheepish and it felt alien to me. I found it difficult to fix my gaze to hers.

"I have found, after much inquiry and examination, that Mr. Colin Wright's death was the result of a most tragic accident."

There was a visible weight lifted from the young lady but as I had expected she was not satisfied with such a simple answer. "By the look upon your face Inspector there is more that your investigation revealed, more that you are reluctant to speak of."

"Indeed Miss Dunning, for this has been a case most peculiar. Details...have presented themselves the likes of which, even in my great deal of experience, were quite surprising to say the least."

"Such as?"

"Being assaulted by your brother on the terrace, being framed for indecent conduct with the nanny...an attack by the estate's agent..."

"Mr. Daidley?! Surely not!"

"It is as I say."

She approached me and took my hands into hers. "I am terribly sorry that you have been met with such unkindness here. I shall make doubly sure that you are rewarded for your efforts. Now, please tell me precisely how my love met his end. Only then may I have some small measure of closure."

The immediate facts surrounding the death of the stable-boy I revealed without reservation. He had stumbled, frightened by the sudden appearance of the servant boy, and out of terror young Kwame had fled the scene and allowed him to die.

“And what of the secrecy? Why was he carted off with little regard for a proper wake and why, still, do they obscure the location of his grave from me?”

I reached into my coat pocket and pulled forth the letter that I had prepared before visiting her chamber. It was written using the fine paper and ink available in the library and adorned with a wax seal. Into it was pressed the Indian symbol for well-being, created by the signet ring that I wore on my left hand, a gift from a client some years past. I handed to her the carefully prepared epistle and finally summoned the courage to let my eyes meet hers but before allowing the paper to slip from my fingers I grasped her left hand and spoke.

“My dear to say that there is nothing more to this story would be fiction. This letter contains within its words the absolute reality of what has transpired here at your family’s estate. It contains truths about your father, your brother and of your lover that you are not aware. I will leave it in your stead but warn you that your life, of which there is hopefully a good deal left, would be all the better should you toss it into the fire and forget that it ever existed. My suggestion would be to rest comfortable in the notion that you do not live in the company of murderers and leave it at that.”

“What of the grave site. Surely you will share that information with me? So that I may at least properly mourn my young man.”

“For reasons that I cannot reveal lest I skirt the possibility of tainting your future happiness I have chosen to include that information only in the letter that you now hold in your hands.”

“So is that it? I am expected to pay you a handsome bounty when all you have done is confirm what my father and brother have told me all along?”

The intensity of my stare caught her off-guard. She looked down at the letter and seemed to take note of my fingernails, still crusted in Earth and muck. For just a moment I perceived that she caught a glimpse in my eyes of just how disturbing the nature of the truth truly was.

After a moment I released the letter and she looked me over keenly before speaking, “If whatever it is that you have learned has affected you so deeply then I can only imagine that the impact on myself would be ten-fold.”

“You have no idea my dear. You have no idea.”

With that I turned and walked for the door.

“Thank you Inspector.” she sobbed, “I know that your time here has been trying and for your honorable desire to protect my innocence I should be grateful.”

“Think nothing of it my good lady. When you are certain, however, go to your father and ensure him that you are not in-fact with child. I regret to say that I had to fabricate the likely untruth that you were pregnant in order to loosen his tongue.”

She gasped and put her hand to her mouth then nodded in agreement.

“I wish you a long and happy life Miss Elizabeth. When I leave in the morning I pray that you shall be able to put this chapter of your life firmly in the past.”

Without another word I walked from the room, shutting the door behind myself. Shortly down the hall I came to hear the familiar sound of sobbing. The door to her room was open and Miss Tripti had several suitcases strewn about her bed.

“Pardon the interruption Miss, may I ask where you are going?”

She looked up quickly at the sound of my voice. “Inspector Carson you startled me.”

“It was not my intent. I would ask if you were going on holiday but from your tears I deduce that it is something rather more serious that provokes your departure.”

“After the other morning...” she wiped tears from her lovely eyes, “I am afraid that, despite my attachment, I am no longer comfortable being in the service of the Dunning family.”

“Worry not Miss Tripti, I have made it immensely clear to every member of the staff and family that nothing unbecoming took place. The blame falls squarely on the actions of Mr. Adrian and not upon yourself nor I.”

She shook her head. “That is precisely my point. I care little what their opinion is of me, I am much more concerned with being in the employ of a spoiled child who has no qualms about drugging me in my sleep and dragging my unconscious body into the barn. I shall not reside in such a place. I’ve dispatched a message to my father and told him to expect my return to India shortly.”

“I see.” I nodded. “Then may I say that it was lovely to have met you?”

“As it was you Inspector. What now, back to London?”

“Yes, I will be leaving in the morning.”

“Well, then good luck in your practice. Perhaps one day I shall read about your exploits?”

I laughed, “I suppose I would need a biographer. It seems rather unlikely for me to find an individual willing to tolerate me for such protracted lengths of time.”

She smiled, “You’re not as disagreeable as you might fancy yourself you know?”

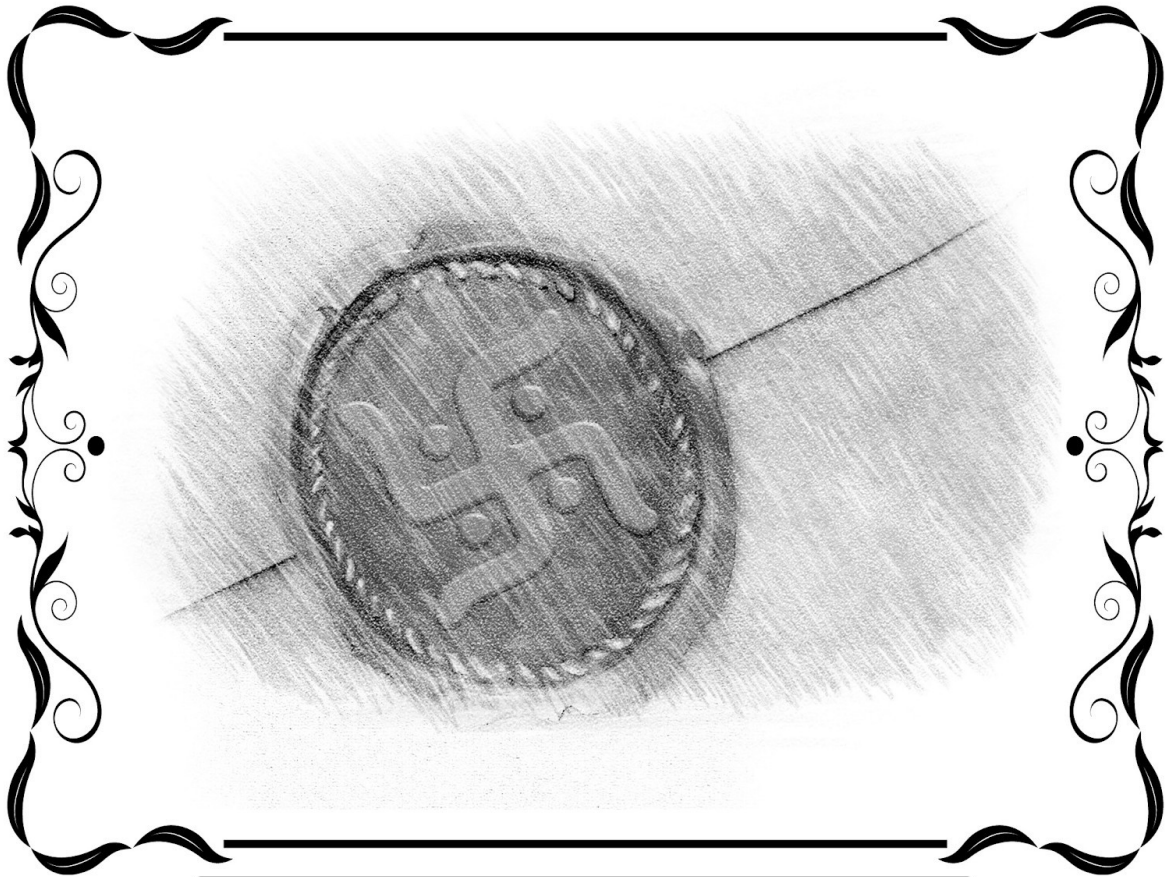
“Is that so?”

“Yes.” her face beamed largely, “As a matter of fact I quite enjoy your company.” she then hesitated for a moment before making a most surprising proposition, “I don’t suppose you’d like to come with me, to India? You’ve never been have you? I am sure there are many a mystery to challenge you in my country.”

I walked over to her and reached out to take one of her hands in mine. “My dear never have I been presented with such a tempting offer. Alas there is much about myself that needs improvement before I become a burden to any lady.”

Without speaking she leaned closer and kissed me softly on the cheek. I smiled broadly at her and caressed hers before turning for the door. As I left her room I spoke without looking back, “Just so you know, had you attempted to lure me into the barn of your own accord I would not have been able to resist.”

The sound of a girlish giggle escaping her lips echoed down the hall as I walked away.



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Epilogue

As I departed the following morning I implored once more for Miss Elizabeth to leave the letter sealed and its contents in the past. As luck turned out I had the good fortune to share my coach with Tripti on the ride back into Leeds. Unknown to me, until I took the time to unpack my bags once back in my flat in London, she had slipped into my messenger a small slip of paper that contained an address at which she could be contacted. Over a glass of scotch I decided that I would, in time, write her. I also gave thought to what she had said in her room, that some of my adventures needed chronicling. Under most circumstances I would have disagreed but having just partaken in a series of events so bizarre that they were hardly believable my opinion deviated from the norm.

It is thanks to that opinion that I now sit putting pen to paper, writing the volume that you hold in your hands. It has taken some weeks yet and I find myself little more distant from the events at Larchwood Estate than when I left that dreary winter morning.

After speaking with Michael Dunning in the library that last afternoon I ran out into the weather, a heavy and ice-cold drizzle that came down with little warning and chilled me to the bone, and found the resting place of Mr. Colin Wright. It was near the elm, just as described. I had carried with me only a small shovel so exhuming his body took me the better part of an hour despite the shallowness of the grave. Wrapped in nothing but a bed sheet I found him, the cream color of it tainted with large patches of deep blue.

Throwing it asunder I found staring at me the lifeless eyes of a man, if that is what he is to be called, with massive wounds through his chest. They were frozen wide open in an expression of horror but something even more peculiar drew my attention to them. A sort of film seemed to be separating from both and as I grasped and lifted the one from his right eye I was presented with a sight most ghastly. The membrane itself held the colors of white and green but what lie underneath was black as pitch, as though his entire eye were one giant pupil.

Upon removing the other I found the same. There was also the inhuman blue fluid which had apparently seeped from every wound on the body and dried to a crust like blood. What sort of cruel joke of nature had left the man with such unusual features?

Despite my strong distaste for doing so I deemed it necessary to inspect his internal organs for further signs of deformation. Using nothing more than my pocket knife I cut open the young Mr. Wright and was horrified at what I found. I have never professed to be a medical doctor but after spending some years examining the bodies of the dead, as my profession has occasionally called me to do, I knew something of human anatomy. Not a part in that young man's body lie in the proper place. Liver, stomach, pancreas...all were either missing or misshapen.

Around the time that my hand reached where his heart should lie I must have touched something, some small cell that still held the tiniest bit of life within it, for I was overcome with a sensation for which I have little in my vocabulary to describe. It felt as though an electrical shock caused every muscle in my body to convulse and there in the misty forest I screamed out in pain as a wave of thoughts and emotions that did not belong to me flooded into my mind. Shortly thereafter I lost consciousness.

Upon waking my watch told me that I had been incapacitated for roughly twenty minutes. Of more import, however, was the fact that I seemed to have the knowledge of everything that had

transpired. I remembered the carnal embrace of Miss Elizabeth and the glaring of her brother Adrian as though I had experienced them first-hand. There were other memories as well, ones that I could not put into proper context. Another life before that of Colin Wright, or before Colin Wright existed as Colin Wright and as I stumbled from the forest they rushed at me like a series of waves crashing upon a beach.

Barely had I composed myself when I burst into the library; wet and covered in both dirt and gore. Michael Dunning was still there and ran to my aid. I told him of what had taken place and he insisted that he had warned me against looking too deeply into the matter. After he'd dispatched Mrs. Kyle for a pail of water and some rags to clean me up and his son to once again bury the stable-boy's body he'd agreed with my decision to write Elizabeth the letter. To leave the choice up to her. He told me of what they found at Eight Hill. Whatever it was that Colin Wright had been he was not the first of them to visit the English countryside.

So there lies the truth. Michael Dunning and his untrustworthy son, each with his own motive, had conspired to kidnap Colin Wright. The kidnapper had been delayed and when the servant boy had gone to see if the deed had been done he'd startled Mr. Wright who'd fallen to a most grisly death. Discovering not only the horror of the accident but the truth of Colin's otherworldly nature the master and his agent had hurried the body away to be buried before any further inquiry could be posed.

As to the matter of Mr. Wright's memories, it has taken me some time to make sense of it all. In the weeks since I have returned to London I have come to understand that what I perceived to be a life separate from that of Colin Wright's own was merely, instead, another chapter in it. Strange beings that I struggle still to describe and thoughts and emotions that seem out of place in my human mind, yet there they are. I can explain it in no manner other than that Colin Wright was a being not of this Earth. One who had come here for purposes that I may in time come to grasp and who fell in love, for I truly feel his love for Miss Elizabeth, and did his best to conceal who and what he was.

No-doubt at this point my ramblings have degenerated, in the reader's mind at least, to something out of Jules Verne or H.G. Wells but I can do little to convince you other than to write upon that which I have experienced.

I will note, however, that the entity which has miraculously been incorporated into my very being, in memory at least, has had positive effects on my disposition. Not once since returning to London have I indulged in either opium or cocaine and I have had two quite successful jobs which I delved into with a vigor I have not experienced since my partner, Mr. Parney, passed away.

So it is with this new-found optimism that I began to contemplate beginning anew. I have taken the time to sit down and write this manuscript, one that I intend to post to Mr. Peterson of Leeds before I depart London in a few days. With the incredibly generous payment from Miss Elizabeth Dunning of twenty-five hundred pounds sterling, no doubt a sum intended to anger both her father and her brother, along with a very welcome consideration of three hundred pounds sent from the railroad for my involvement in catching the jewel thief on my way to Leeds, I depart for the Americas with a profound sense of hope.

So it is, using the ticket I'd taken from the jewel thief's purse and which I'd later found in my pocket, that I have booked passage to the New York. On Wednesday, the 10th of April 1912 I shall set sail on the maiden voyage of the White Star Line's newest and most luxurious ship, the R.M.S. Titanic.



Robert Carson, 1911

About the Author



Michael Moreau is creator of series such as The Futureman Adventures, Rocket Riders of the 27th Century, and The Robert Carson Files. He is a life-long fan of science fiction and always dreamed of writing books of his own. He is a supporter of pulp-style fiction and a staunch advocate for self-publication. He is also a prolific filmmaker, photographer & artist. More information can be found at: <http://www.mmoreau.net>