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CHAPTER XII

Phyllis hardly knew what she expected a coroner's court to be like, but she certainly found it far duller and more prosaic than the perusal of certain detective fiction had led her to anticipate.

Its scene was the parish hall, which had so nearly avoided being a mortuary, and 12 good men and true who constituted the jury had been mainly recruited from the yokel class, intelligence obviously not being their strong suit, though a sprinkling of small tradesmen, slightly more alert, saved them from appearing utterly bovine as a body.

The coroner himself was a local solicitor, a gaunt, humourless individual in pince-nez, who, incidentally, was conducting his first inquiry, having just been appointed to the post, and who made it quite evident from the first that it would not be his fault if the proceedings lacked in any way their due decorum.

For the rest, save for a sprinkling of local spectators, amongst whom were George Cartwright and Phyllis herself accompanied by Terrivale Wake, there was little evidence of excitement. Even the newspaper representatives were confined to the reporters of two local papers, save a somewhat grotesque, red-haired individual with a heavy ginger moustache and dark glasses which might, one would have thought, have interfered somewhat with the exercise of his profession. He had arrived by motorcycle and stated that he represented a Bristol daily.

On him Terrivale Wake's flinty gaze had rested at first with the same slightly sardonic amusement with which he obviously regarded the remainder of the proceedings. Soon, however, for some reason or other he seemed to regard him with keener interest. He made as if to edge up to him, indeed, when the coroner forestalled him by opening the proceedings.

In these Tubby Baring found himself in the position of first and most important witness, and it was evident from the first that the coroner regarded his bland, cherubic countenance with the utmost disfavour. In fact, he preceded his first question with a totally unnecessary caution.

"Now, witness," he pronounced oracularly, "kindly remember that you are on your oath, and that you have undertaken to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth."

"Yes, sir," said Tubby demurely, though a twinkle in his eye might have warned anyone who knew him better than the coroner that there were breakers ahead.

"You were, I understand, so far as is known, the first—er—living being to find the corpse?"

"No, sir," said Tubby.

The answer created a certain ripple of sensation. Even Mearcroft's eyes opened a trifle wider. Was some fresh fact to be divulged after all?

The coroner rustled his papers.

"Indeed," he observed, "this is contrary to my own information."

Then his face cleared; he regarded Tubby with what he believed to be a comprehension of that young man's mentality.

"Oh, I understand. You mean that Mr. Ashcroft was with you? His evidence will be taken later. But, apart from Mr. Ashcroft, you were the first?"

"No, sir," Tubby persisted. His expression was guileless, his manner preternaturally earnest and solemn. "Being on my oath," he added, "to speak the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, I cannot claim to be the first—er—living being to locate the corpse. There was the dog."

A titter ran around the court. The coroner's manner had commended itself to no one. The red-haired little reporter hid a smile beneath his glasses, and even Mearcroft, though he flashed a warning glance in Tubby's direction, bit his lip. One of the yokels on the jury to whom the proceedings were in the nature of "the pictures," broke into a full-throated guffaw.

"The dawg!" he chuckled. "That be a good 'un, that be—the dawg!"

The stares of the coroner and his foreman froze him into an abashed effacement, and the former then turned his disgruntled countenance upon Tubby, who was gazing blandly round him as if wondering why his answer should cause amusement.

"Are you a fool, sir?" he snapped. "When one speaks of a living being one means a human being. You and Mr. Ashcroft were, I take it, the first human beings to discover the body of the dead man?"

"Oh," said Tubby, as if relieved to have been told the distinction, "if you put it that way, I suppose we were."

With a suspicious glance at him, the coroner hurried through the rest of the evidence, and only Jimmy Ashcroft caught the almost imperceptible droop of his eyelids as he stepped down from the witness box.

"The brainless young puppy," Terrivale Wake muttered under his breath. He, at any rate, was thoroughly on the coroner's side.

Thereafter matters proceeded on a level of unrelieved dullness. Jimmy Ashcroft added his testimony to Tubby's, as did P.C. Dodson (who was glorying in his role) the Lamieys, Mearcroft and the police surgeon. Advised by the coroner in his summing up, the jury at once brought in the verdict of "murder by some person or persons unknown," and then after a pompous and lengthy harangue in which he hoped the police would both quickly establish the identity of the murdered man and bring those responsible for his death to justice, the coroner closed the court, sweeping out of it with the air of a High Court judge leaving the bench.

Immediately the little gathering broke up. George Cartwright, waiting to speak to no one, hastened off at once, as did the red-haired little journalist, presumably in a hurry to get his notes back to his paper. To Phyllis' surprise, Terrivale Wake also left her side and hurried out, and as soon as he had gone Mearcroft approached her and drew her apart.

"Miss Latham," he said, "I want you to think. Nothing was said about it just now, but I've received information that may prove important. I know you saw no one on the wreck, but did you see anyone about while you were going down to the shore?"

She shook her head.

"No," she said positively, "not a soul. I remember thinking how eerily deserted it all seemed in that fog."

"You saw no one at any time—not even Mr. Cartwright?"

"No, not even him, though I confess I was afraid at one time that he was going to offer to accompany me. He didn't though, to my relief. But why Mr. Cartwright?"

The inspector lowered his voice.

"Because," he told her, "a youngster has informed me that he saw Mr. Cartwright on the cliff just above the spot where the body was found at about the time medical evidence shows the murder was committed, a few minutes later, probably, which makes it more significant still. A path, steep but climbable, runs down to the shore at that point. I have examined it, and there is evidence that it has been lately used. But, for the present, not a word of this to anyone."

He broke off as Terrivale Wake came hurrying back, just too late to hear his concluding sentence, and it was evident that the lawyer was in no amiable humour. He had tried to head off the red-haired journalist, but the jam in the doorway had defeated him and he had got outside just in time to hear the chug-chug of his engine and to see him disappearing at a fast rate up the hilly road. There was nothing to do, however, but to re-enter the hall.

There, he surprised Phyllis by announcing his immediate return to London and again pressing her to accompany him. Seeing that she was still determined to remain, he merely shrugged his shoulders.

"As you like, my dear. And now, how can I get to Exeter? There's an express to town from there this evening."

Mearcroft overheard him.

"Easy enough, Mr. Wake," he observed, "if you care to accept a lift. I shall be driving down to Exeter myself in an hour's time."

Wake's smile was almost genial as he accepted the offer.

"Excellent, inspector," he said, "that gets me out of my difficulty. It is most important that I should get back to London to-night."

It was at this moment that Tubby Baring joined the group, to be admonished half-laughingly, half in earnest, by the inspector.

"Look here, young fellow-me-lad, you mustn't get pulling the legs of coroners in their own courts. It won't do."

Terrivale Wake, to whom Tubby was evidently as a red rag to a bull, snorted audibly.

"Gross contempt of court," he snapped, "and should be punished by imprisonment."

"Oh, come, come, Mr. Wake," protested the unrepentant culprit, "that's a bit severe, isn't it? If the fellow had not been such a pompous ass I'd have



been mummy's dear, good ickle boy in the witness box."

Then, perhaps thinking it as well, he changed the subject.

"Bad luck your not being able to catch our red-haired friend, Mr. Wake. I saw you making tracks for him."

Wake glared. His expression, if not his words, said that he considered Tubby a meddlesome interloper who saw too much. He seemed actually on the point, indeed, of advising him to mind his own business when a thought appeared to strike him.

"You know him?" he asked. "A friend of yours?"

"God forbid!" said Tubby piously. "No man with that shade of hair and those pimples round his neck could be a friend of mine."

"Pimples round his neck," Wake echoed, but only to himself—no one heard him. Yet there was a curious look in his hard eyes, as if the phrases conjured up something—or someone—that he found disturbing.

He might have had further food for reflection had he been able to follow the progress of the man on the motorcycle. In spite of his alleged association with the Bristol paper, he did not touch at that town but kept southward along the London road. Seven hours later, just about the time that Terrivale Wake's train was entering Paddington, he was chug-chugging through the lamp-lit streets of the metropolis.

Terrivale Wake reached his office early next morning, before his clerk, Alfred Jennings. He went at once to the telephone and rang up the latter's house. A woman's voice answered him—Jennings' wife.

"Was Jennings at the office yesterday?" Wake asked her.

"No, poor chap," was the glib reply. "He was away with a bad cold, but is on his way to work now."

Wake rang off and was in the outer office when the clerk arrived. He beckoned him at once into the inner room.

"Away from work, Jennings, yesterday, I hear?"

"Afraid I was, Mr. Wake. Thought I had a touch of 'flu, but I'm all right this morning."

"You lie," Terrivale Wake said quietly. "Yesterday you were at Roma Cleft masquerading as a reporter in a red wig. Why?"

For an instant fear leapt into Jennings' eyes as he faced the steely ones of his employer. Then it was replaced with a touch of braggadocio.

"And why not?" he queried, "seeing that I know who the murdered man was?"

Wake's stare was frankly incredulous. "You know who he was?"

"More than that," sneered the other. "I saw him killed."

(TO BE CONTINUED)

St. Mary's Journal-Argus: Politician: "And now, gentlemen, I wish to tax your memory." Man in Audience: "Good heavens, has it come to that?"

Northern Engineers to Meet the Minister

Conference to be Held Shortly in Regard to Summer Programme on Roads in North.

According to word from Toronto all Northern members of the Legislature, as well as all the district engineers from the various divisions of what was formerly the Department of Northern Development, but which has been taken over chiefly by the Ontario Department of Highways, are scheduled to hold a conference with Hon. T. B. McQuesten, Minister of Highways, at either North Bay or Sudbury inside the next few days. According to the Toronto despatches the meeting will be the first step which Hon. T. B. McQuesten and R. M. Smith, minister and deputy minister of highways, will make on their survey of northern roads.

The decision to have a general conference in the North was reached last week. Three cities were named as most desirable for northern members and the district engineers to converge at. They were Sault Ste. Marie, Sudbury and North Bay. Last week it appeared the choice had narrowed to either North Bay or Sudbury.

Mr. McQuesten will conclude his negotiations with Ottawa about the end of this week and will leave at once for the North. It is expected to hold the conference of northern members and district engineers immediately.

Sad news is in store for a large number of employees in minor capacities in the various district offices. With work reduced in each division to a sum of approximately \$100,000 a year, the present large staffs in these offices will not be needed. The order will go out within a few days to district engineers to cut their staffs in keeping with the reduced amount of work which will be handled.

About the Probable Fate of the Book-making Game

(From the Baltimore Sun)

Sinclair Lewis offered the American Booksellers' Association heartening words recently when he told its members: "I do not believe that anything will altogether supplant the old-fashioned printed book, which has changed so very little since Gutenberg finished printing the first book, a Bible, back in 1455."

He would be a bold and even perverse man who disagreed on this matter with the author of "It Can't Happen Here." And yet the very title of Mr. Lewis' address, "Enemies of the Book," and the tenor of his remarks—if he was fairly reported—seemed to indicate that he himself was somewhat afraid of the influence of the things which he regards as competitors of the book. "It is obvious," he said, "that people listen to the radio and go to the motion pictures instead of reading books, but there are plenty of other Cossacks on our trail—the automobile, the bridge table and night clubs." However, "I do not believe that the public will always be satisfied with the glaring screen, or that they will forever prefer the unctuous verbal caresses of radio announcers to the many-coloured pages of Dickens. I do not think that Hollywood can remain forever the New Jerusalem."

These are pretty sharp words and they give the impression, perhaps unintentionally, that Mr. Lewis seeks the influence and prosperity of literature as already assailed and hard beset by the radio, the cinema and so on.

Of course, the complaint of the author that the public is easily seduced from the printed page is very old. Boswell quotes Dr. Johnson, for example,

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as saying that "people in general do not willingly read, if they can have anything else to amuse them," and the biographer also says he thought it "strange" that with "so little reading in the world" there should be so much writing. But, in spite of all such fears and lamentations, there has been no falling off, from century to century, in the production of books, and although mankind has constantly been devising new means of diversion, it has never succeeded so well that it could afford to forget about libraries, authors and publishers.

There certainly is no reason to believe that, with the further development of motion pictures, radio and automobile, these things will threaten the book which has gone on multiplying at a tremendous rate during five centuries of change and invention.

There is scarcely any reason to suppose that they are, in any profound sense, "enemies of the book" at all. Indeed Hollywood boasts that its screen versions of "David Copperfield" and "Midsummer Night's Dream" sold thousands of copies of those two works.

Howard (Kansas) Courant:—There is a certain difference in owing money and owing a grudge. One tries to pay his grudge.

St. Mary's Journal-Argus:—From Walkerton comes word of the sad case of a man who suddenly became faint in church and had to be escorted from the edifice. With him ostensibly to render aid, but in the opinion of some, for other reasons, went a life insurance man, a banker, a druggist, and finally an undertaker. It is rumoured, according to the Herald-Times, that when he came to and recognized his companions he went off into another swoon.

Brampton Conservator:—It is not generally known that every time a smoker purchases a 25-cent package of cigarettes he contributes 16 cents to the treasury of Canada. This is one of the taxes that many persons do not feel.

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