



**THE
HOME FRONT
DETECTIVE
SERIES**

**DEEDS OF
DARKNESS**

**EDWARD
MARSTON**

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE RAILWAY DETECTIVE
SERIES





Deeds of Darkness

EDWARD MARSTON

This one is for my beloved grandfather, Albert Edward, who fought in the Great War and who resolutely kept its ugly secrets to himself.

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By Edward Marston

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CHAPTER ONE

1916

War and Charlie Chaplin did not sit easily together in the mind of the Reverend Matthew Hearn. He had a rooted objection to cinemas themselves, but he saved his fiercest condemnation for the little actor who'd forged an international reputation by playing the part of a hapless tramp. Chaplin's popularity seemed to have no bounds. Songs had been written about him. Shops sold Chaplin merchandise. Music hall artistes impersonated him. But it was the way that Chaplin featured in comics and cartoon strips that rankled with Hearn. He believed that the minds of innocent children were being polluted and that was unforgivable. When he saw two parents approaching the cinema with their young daughter, he moved across to intercept them.

'Excuse me,' he said, politely, 'but do you think it's wise to take your child to see Mr Chaplin?'

'Yes,' replied the father, looking fondly at his daughter. 'Laura adores him. We had to bring her.'

'It isn't only Laura who enjoys Charlie Chaplin,' said his wife. 'We do as well. He makes us laugh until we cry.'

'That's my point,' argued Hearn. 'Should you be laughing at a time of national calamity? There's a war on – a dreadful, bitter, shameful war that's killing our young men in untold thousands. Do you think that laughing at the antics of a clown is the most appropriate response to this crisis?'

The man shrugged. 'We like the films. They help us forget the war.'

'That's why Chaplin is so dangerous.'

'I want to go in, Daddy,' said Laura, fretting at the delay.

'Yes, darling,' said her father. 'I know.' He turned to Hearn. 'I'm sorry. We made a promise to our daughter and we can't disappoint her.'

'As you wish,' said Hearn, standing aside. 'But remember what I said.'

There was, however, no chance of their doing that. As they joined the crowd that converged on the cinema, the trio dismissed him from their minds. All that they wanted was the magic of another performance by a comic genius in the guise of a tramp, a man who could delight people of all ages and send them out of a cinema in a state of mild delirium. It was the same with everyone to whom Hearn spoke. They resented being stopped and brushed aside his objections to the entertainment they'd come to see. Of the dozens of cinema patrons he'd accosted, not a single one had been persuaded to turn back. It was dispiriting.

As he patrolled the pavement, Matthew Hearn cut an odd figure. A big, broad-shouldered shambling man in his fifties, he looked less like a priest than a farm labourer in clerical garb. Beneath the wide-brimmed black hat was a gnarled face that was positively ugly in repose. What made him less threatening to newcomers was the low, gentle, reasonable voice. It came from the heart.

A uniformed soldier approached him with a young woman on his arm.

'One moment,' he said, detaining them. 'Have you really thought about the implications of what you're doing?'

'We're going to the cinema, that's all,' said the soldier.

‘But it’s not all – that’s the trouble.’

~~Hearn launched into his denunciation of Charlie Chaplin but his words fell on stony ground~~
With a protective arm around her shoulders, the soldier hustled his girlfriend past the priest and took her into the cinema. A policeman who’d watched the encounter sauntered over to Hearn.

‘You’re wasting your time, I’m afraid,’ he remarked.

‘They just don’t realise what they’re doing.’

‘Yes, they do. They’ve come in search of some fun.’

‘There’s no place for fun when a war is on,’ insisted Hearn. ‘The soldier should have known that and so should the rest of them. Can’t they hear the sound of artillery from across the Channel? Don’t they read the casualty lists? Zeppelins are flying over London to drop bombs on us, yet all that they can do is to giggle at Charlie Chaplin.’

‘Well, he is very funny,’ said the policeman, admiringly.

‘Are you saying that you *condone* what’s going on in that cinema?’

‘It’s a free country, sir. You can’t stop people doing what they want.’

‘Cinemas are a source of evil.’

‘I can’t agree with you there.’

‘They’re places of darkness in every sense.’

The policeman looked at him shrewdly. ‘Have you ever *watched* a film?’

‘No,’ replied Hearn, ‘because I refuse to cross the threshold of places like this. Look at it,’ he went on, pointing. ‘Even the foyer is dimly lit. I’m told that it’s almost pitch-black inside. That incites people to all sorts of improprieties.’ The policeman smiled. ‘That’s not a cause for amusement,’ he said, reproachfully. ‘Your duty is to uphold the law. Cinemas are frequented by prostitutes who ply their vile trade in the darkness. Doesn’t that concern you?’

‘Yes, of course,’ said the other, ‘though I don’t think you’ll find many ladies of that kind at a Charlie Chaplin film. It brings in a family audience.’

‘You may be wrong there, Constable. In the time that I’ve been standing here, I’ve seen two or three women slipping in there alone. Cinemas lure in unaccompanied females of questionable morality. And here’s another one,’ he added with a note of censure, ‘that proves my point.’

An attractive, well-dressed woman in her twenties was hurrying towards the cinema. When she entered the foyer, she paused to check the time before buying herself a ticket. The policeman shook his head.

‘You’re mistaken there, sir,’ he said. ‘In a job like mine, you learn to pick out prostitutes at a glance and she is certainly not one of them. You’re being very unkind to her. She’s a respectable young lady who’s simply come to watch a film.’

The woman in question handed her ticket to the usherette and was shown to a seat in the back row. She immediately removed her hat and put it on the seat beside her in order to reserve it. A newsreel was flickering up on the screen but she paid no heed to the information that appeared in large capital letters. Like everyone else there, all that she was waiting for was *The Floorwalker*, the latest film starring Charlie Chaplin. Once it was on, her friend would arrive. A concerted cheer went up when the main feature finally started and the accompanist began pounding the keys of her piano. Within seconds, the audience was shaking with mirth. The woman was only half-watching the scene in front of her. She was there for something more important than a film. Hope and expectation made her tingle. The feeling did not last. After several minutes, there was no sign of him and she soon had doubts that he would come at all. Her nerve started to fail her. He’d changed his mind or – worse

still, she feared – he'd found someone else with whom to have an assignation. The very thought made her shudder. As time rolled on, the anticipatory joy she'd brought into the cinema slowly turned to acute embarrassment.

In a place where everyone else was rocking with laughter, she felt alone and utterly betrayed. She was on the verge of getting up and running out in tears when a shape was conjured out of the darkness. The man sat down beside her and reached out to hold her hand. She was so overjoyed that she didn't even mind the fact that her hat was being crushed beneath his weight. He was there. That's all that mattered. He cared for her enough to honour his promise. She was ecstatic.

After kissing her hand, he stroked her arm then moved his attention to her thigh, caressing it with increasing boldness until she felt exquisite electric shocks all over her leg. He then put an arm around her shoulders, using the other hand to fondle her breast and make the nipple harden. It burned with pleasure. By the time his lips met hers, she was giddy with sensation. She'd never been held and kissed like that before. It went on and on with gathering intensity and she lost all inhibition. Her surrender was complete.

Charlie Chaplin no longer existed. She was in another world but she was not allowed to savour its joys indefinitely. Her lover's kiss suddenly became a clamp across her mouth. His embrace tightened painfully. The hand that had explored her body with such practised skill now sought her throat and squeezed hard. Up on the screen, a chase scene was sending the audience into uproar. Chaplin's tramp was trying to run down an upward escalator and staying more or less where he was. As they cheered, yelled and laughed uncontrollably, they almost drowned out the piano's rising frenzy. It was cruel on the woman. In the general pandemonium, nobody heard her struggle or saw her frantic attempts at escape. Resistance was pointless. The man was bigger, stronger and more determined than her. Surrounded by merriment, he stuck to his task, stifling her protest with his mouth and using both murderous hands to throttle the life out of her.

When she eventually went limp, he eased her back in her seat, picked up her handbag, then vanished into the darkness.

She would have no need of the crumpled hat now.

CHAPTER TWO

‘Who found her?’

‘It was one of the usherettes. When the lights came up, everyone else left the building. The woman appeared to be asleep. The usherette shook her and she keeled over. It was obvious that she had not died by natural means.’

‘What a grim discovery to make!’

‘How on earth could it have happened?’ asked the superintendent. ‘The cinema was almost full yet nobody had the slightest inkling that a murder was taking place under their noses.’

‘Charlie Chaplin is a powerful distraction.’

‘I’ll take your word for that, Inspector.’

Marmion was surprised. ‘Have you never taken your children to a Chaplin film?’

‘No, I haven’t. As a matter of fact, they don’t go to *any* cinema. However,’ said Chatfield with a dismissive flick of the hand, ‘let’s forget my family for the moment and concentrate on the crime.’

‘Do we have any more information, sir?’

‘No, we don’t.’

‘Then I’d better get over to Coventry Street.’

Harvey Marmion had been summoned to the superintendent’s office at Scotland Yard to hear about the murder. Claude Chatfield had taken the call from the manager of the West End cinema.

‘Mr Brack was very agitated,’ he said. ‘I couldn’t understand most of what he was saying.’

‘That’s understandable, sir. It must have come as a terrible shock to him. Apart from anything else, the cinema has had to close and turn people away. In view of what’s happened, audiences might not be quite so keen to flock there now.’

‘I’ll want a full report as soon as possible.’

‘That goes without saying, Superintendent.’

‘And the commissioner is taking a personal interest in the case. Like me, he has grave reservations about the whole notion of cinema.’

‘We must agree to differ on that subject, sir.’

‘I’m not interested in your opinion, Marmion.’

‘Then I won’t presume to offer it.’

Marmion gave him a non-committal smile. There had always been unresolved tension between the two men and it had been intensified by the fact that Chatfield had been promoted over the inspector. The superintendent was a tall, thin, pale man in his forties with bulbous eyes set in a narrow face and warning signs of a bald patch. Marmion, by contrast, was muscular, well-proportioned and had a full head of hair. His features were pleasant rather than handsome and they were now composed into the expression of resigned obedience that he always reserved for Chatfield.

‘Well,’ said the superintendent, irritably, ‘don’t just stand there, man. Get over to Coventry Street with Sergeant Keedy and find out the full facts.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Most important of all, solve the mystery.’

‘Mystery?’ echoed Marmion.

‘Yes – why is it that a murder is committed in a crowded cinema yet we have absolutely no witnesses?’

‘With respect, sir, that’s not quite true.’

Chatfield’s eyes bulged even more. ‘Don’t talk nonsense.’

‘Nobody may have seen the actual murder,’ explained Marmion, ‘but we are all witnesses *after* the event. That was the killer’s intention. He deliberately left his victim on display. It would have been much easier and far less dangerous for him to dispose of her in some quiet corner or dump her in the Thames. Instead of that,’ he went on, ‘he chose to do it in public, certain that his crime would soon be revealed in all its horror and that – when the newspapers report it tomorrow morning – the whole of London will witness what he did. That’s the *real* mystery, sir.’

‘What is?’

‘Why does he feel the need to show off?’

Emmanuel Brack prowled up and down the empty foyer of the West End cinema and pulled intermittently on a cigar. He was a short, stout man in his forties with a face contorted by anguish. Dressed in an expensive, well-cut suit and sporting a bow tie, he wore gleaming black shoes that completed a picture of flabby elegance. He pulled out the white handkerchief from the top pocket of his jacket and mopped his brow. Through the glass windows, he could see the people outside, held back by uniformed policemen and wondering why they were unable to see the second showing of *The Floorwalker*. Wild rumours were already circulating, all of them detrimental to the immediate future of the cinema. Murder was bad for business.

When the detectives finally arrived by car, the manager rushed forward with gratitude and opened one of the doors for them. Marmion entered the foyer with Joe Keedy. There was a flurry of introductions and an exchange of handshakes.

‘Thank heaven you’ve come, Inspector!’ said the manager, still perspiring. ‘This has been a disaster for me.’

‘Forgive me if I reserve my sympathy for the victim,’ said Marmion, crisply. ‘Her situation is rather more serious than yours.’

‘But I’m left to suffer the consequences.’

‘Where is the body?’

‘It’s exactly where it was found. We haven’t dared to move or touch it.’

‘Good.’

‘It was Mabel – she’s one of our usherettes – who made the discovery. She almost fainted. Mabel is still recovering in my office and so is another member of my staff.’

‘We’ll need to speak to them in due course, Mr Brack,’ said Marmion. ‘First of all, we’d like to visit the scene of the crime.’

The manager stubbed out his cigar in an ashtray. ‘Follow me.’

As they fell in behind him, the detectives exchanged a glance. Tall, good-looking and lithe, Joe Keedy had come to the same conclusion as Marmion. Both of them had identified the manager as a self-important businessman whose only interest was in his cinema and who treated the death of a young woman as an ugly stain on his property that needed to be removed as soon as possible. Opening a door, Brack led them into the auditorium which was now blazing with light.

The corpse lay sprawled on the carpet between the rows of seats. When the usherette had shaken her, the woman had pitched forward onto the floor. Marmion and Keedy moved in for a closer look but the manager held back. It was Keedy who knelt beside the body to examine it. Before he joined

the Metropolitan Police Force, he'd worked in the family undertaking business and grown wearily accustomed to the sight of death. He knew its unpleasant smells and its gift for disfigurement of its victims. Marmion was happy to let the sergeant carry out the inspection. He reserved his interest for the surrounding area.

Keedy looked up at him. 'She was strangled, Inspector.'

'Poor woman!' said Marmion. 'Even though she's slightly built, she must have put up some sort of struggle.'

'Why did nobody hear her?' asked the manager.

'It was because the killer chose the film with care, sir. Charlie Chaplin always generates a barrage of noise and laughter. It would muffle her protests and the darkness would hide the pair of them from prying eyes.'

Brack turned away in disgust. 'Can you get her moved, Inspector?'

'An ambulance will be on its way. But we'll need to take photographs before that,' said Marmion, beckoning the police photographer.

'I feel sorry for her, naturally but ... well, frankly, I don't want her here.'

Keedy stood up. 'We're looking for a strong man,' he decided, 'and one who was confident in his strength. He came here to kill and he succeeded.'

'He must also be something of a charmer,' observed Marmion. 'Back rows are normally the realm of courting couples. I doubt very much if they were strangers to each other. He might have persuaded her to come here willingly. The woman would have been completely unaware of his real intentions.'

'She's wearing a wedding ring.'

'I don't think we're looking for her husband, somehow. He wouldn't give himself away so easily. What we have here, I suspect, is rather more than the result of a marital tiff.' Marmion bent down to look under the seats. 'Something is missing.'

'If you mean her hat,' said Brack, 'it's in my office. Mabel found it on the seat beside the woman. It was crushed out of shape.'

'Is that all that the usherette found?'

'A dead body and a battered hat is more than enough, Inspector.'

Marmion stood up. 'Where's her handbag?'

'There was no sign of that. Perhaps she didn't bring one.'

'Then how did she pay the fare to get her here?' asked Keedy. 'And if she was coming for what she thought was a romantic tryst, she would certainly have brought a hairbrush and a powder compact.'

'I bow to your greater experience in these matters,' said Marmion.

There was a faint irony in his voice that went unnoticed by the manager. The detectives were not simply linked together by their profession. Keedy was engaged to Marmion's daughter, Alice, so he had now effectively become one of the family. It had not been an entirely welcome development to Marmion but he'd come to accept it in time. He moved back so that the photographer could start work and he began to rehearse aloud what might have happened.

'He brings her here with a view to killing her. He lulls her into a compliant mood. Having chosen his moment with care, he dispatches her and leaves her upright in her seat so that nobody notices anything untoward when the lights come on. By that time,' said Marmion, looking around, 'he's sneaked out of the cinema with her handbag.'

'It would be conspicuous,' Keedy pointed out.

‘Exactly – so he’d take what he wanted then get rid of it.’ He turned to the manager. ‘Is there any other way out of here?’

Brack indicated some curtains at the front of the auditorium. ‘That’s the emergency exit.’

‘Then he probably left that way.’ A nod sent Keedy hurrying towards the curtains. ‘If he’d gone into the foyer with a handbag, someone would have spotted him. He planned an alternative escape.’

They heard a metallic clang as the barrier was lifted on the emergency exit. A door creaked open. In less than a minute, Keedy came back through the curtains with a bag in his hands.

‘You were right, Inspector,’ he said. ‘It was in the dustbin outside.’ He gave the handbag to Marmion. ‘Feel that leather. It’s good quality.’

Marmion opened the bag and conducted a quick search of the contents.

‘There are two things missing,’ he said. ‘The killer stole her purse and her house key. That gives us a possible motive for murder.’

‘Do we know who she is and where she lives?’ asked Keedy.

‘This may tell us, Sergeant.’ He extracted an envelope and looked at the looping calligraphy. ‘Her name is Charlotte Reid and she lives – or, at least, she *did* live – in Bayswater.’

It was a paradox. Mabel Tyler actually found the dead body but it was Iris Fielding on whom the murder had the more devastating effect. All that she’d done was to sit in her booth and issue tickets to the patrons yet she felt horribly involved in the event. Alone with Mabel in the manager’s office she was still trembling.

‘I must have *seen* him, Mabel,’ she kept saying as she wiped away tears. ‘I must have sold him – and her, of course – a ticket.’

‘Try to put it out of your mind.’

‘How can I? It’s frightening. I’ll have nightmares.’

Mabel had the same fear but she tried to control her emotions so that she could console her friend. Iris had the greater need. Mabel Tyler was a slight woman in her twenties with a birdlike habit of looking quickly in all directions as if afraid of danger. Twenty years older and several stone heavier, Iris Fielding was efficient at her job but uneasy when out of the safety of her little booth. Iris was married but Mabel remained resolutely single, even though she usually responded chirpily to male patrons who flirted with her. A troubling thought struck her.

‘You only sold him a ticket, Iris,’ she said. ‘I must have shown him to a seat and even chatted to him. Think how *that* must make me feel. I helped a killer.’

‘So did I,’ wailed Iris.

Before the older woman could wallow in self-recrimination again, the door opened abruptly and the manager entered with Keedy. He introduced the sergeant to the two women. Mabel managed a wan smile of welcome but Iris simply dabbed at her moist eyes with a handkerchief.

‘Sergeant Keedy would like to take a statement from both of you,’ said Brack. ‘Inspector Marmion is in charge of the case but he’s supervising the removal of the body.’ He heaved a sigh. ‘We’re closed for the rest of the day. Is it worth opening tomorrow, I wonder? What if nobody turns up?’

‘I’m not sure that *I* will, Mr Brack,’ said Iris.

‘Well, I’ll be here,’ volunteered Mabel.

‘Thank you,’ said Brack. ‘I’ll leave you to it, Sergeant. I want to make sure that the corpse actually leaves my cinema.’

He went out through the open door and closed it behind him. Keedy took his measure of the two

women before pulling out his notepad and pencil. Iris was seated and Mabel stood behind her. Keedy suggested that the usherette should sit down as well. When she did so, he perched on the edge of the desk.

‘I’ll start with you, Miss Tyler, if I may.’

‘I was the first one to see him,’ claimed Iris as if it gave her seniority. ‘I sold him and the woman a ticket before Mabel even set eyes on him.’

‘Can you give me an accurate description of the man?’ asked Keedy.

‘Well, no, I can’t. He was just one of dozens of faces I saw.’

‘Yes, I had a look inside that ticket booth. You can’t see very much from inside there, can you? In other words, you’re not really able to help us, are you, Mrs Fielding?’ Iris looked hurt. ‘Let’s go back to you, Miss Tyler, shall we? I know that this will be something of an ordeal for you but I’d like you to tell me what happened from the moment you entered the auditorium when the film was over.’

Mabel cleared her throat, then told her story without embellishment. Keedy was thankful for her brevity and lack of self-indulgence. Iris, he sensed, would be far more melodramatic, intent on wringing full value out of her chance encounter with the killer. He impressed on both of them the importance of not talking to the press.

‘Will I have to appear in court?’ asked Mabel, worriedly.

‘I think that’s highly unlikely,’ said Keedy. ‘What you’ve told me is useful but it’s not evidence that will lead us to make an arrest.’

‘What about me?’ demanded Iris. ‘Don’t I get interviewed like Mabel?’

‘Not unless you have something significant to add to what you’ve just heard. As you say, Mrs Fielding, faces flash past you. It would be impossible to remember any of them in detail.’ He waited for a response that never came. ‘If you do recall anything that might help us,’ he added, ‘you can contact Inspector Marmion or me at Scotland Yard.’ He put the notebook and pencil away. ‘Well, that’s it, ladies. Thank you very much. Mr Brack said that you were free to go when I’d spoken to you. My advice would be to leave by the emergency exit. Word travels fast in London. Reporters will already be lurking in wait outside.’

‘I don’t mind talking to them,’ boasted Iris.

‘Well, I do,’ said Mabel, firmly. ‘Come on, Iris. We’ll leave by the other exit. I never thought I’d hear myself saying this but, to be honest, I’ve had enough of Charlie Chaplin for one day.’

CHAPTER THREE

When the commissioner walked into his office, Claude Chatfield was seated behind his desk, poring over a document. He leapt instinctively to his feet. Sir Edward Henry waved him back into his chair.

‘Sit down, Superintendent,’ he said. ‘You’re not on parade.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

‘I just came to see if there was any more news.’

‘I’m afraid not, Sir Edward.’

‘Oh dear!’

The commissioner was an impeccably dressed man in his sixties with a curling moustache that matched his wavy hair. At an age when most men had retired, he had remained in a demanding post out of a sense of commitment and patriotism. Chatfield was ambitious enough to covet the position that the older man held but he kept his long-term aspirations well concealed.

‘Policing the capital would be so much easier,’ said Sir Edward, ‘if every one of our vehicles was equipped with telephones. Detectives could then keep in touch with us at every stage of their investigation.’ He gave a hollow laugh. ‘It won’t happen in my time, I know that. We don’t have the appropriate technology and – even if we did – I doubt if our budget would stretch to it.’

‘There is another problem.’

‘Oh?’

‘Some of our detectives would be reluctant to keep us up to date with what’s going on. I’m thinking particularly of Inspector Marmion. When he’s in charge of a case, he doesn’t make contact with me as often as I’d like.’

‘Marmion is a first-rate policeman. He gets results.’

‘He might get them even more quickly if he took me fully into his confidence. I know what it’s like to lead a murder investigation. I could be of help.’

‘I’m sure that the inspector knows that.’

‘He’s been gone for well over an hour. I’d expect a telephone call by now.’

‘Marmion will ring when he’s good and ready.’

‘He’d better,’ said Chatfield under his breath.

The commissioner stroked his moustache. ‘We’d better brace ourselves, I suppose,’ he said. ‘The press will have a field day over this. A woman goes to the cinema for what she believes to be harmless entertainment and she gets herself killed. It’s going to be on every front page tomorrow.’

‘That’s why I need all the facts at my fingertips, Sir Edward. When I hold a press conference later on, I have to be fully briefed. As for it being a harmless entertainment,’ he went on, ‘I don’t think that’s how some cinema patrons view it. They’re tempted by the opportunity to take full advantage of the darkness. Cinemas are a licence for lechery.’

‘That may be so in some cases, Superintendent, and I share your qualms about the subdued lighting. But I still believe that most people go in order to see films. I read somewhere that almost twenty million cinema tickets are sold each week. Just think of that – twenty million!’

‘We don’t need to wait until the Germans invade us,’ complained Chatfield. ‘The American film industry has already done it. And this dreadful fellow, Charlie Chaplin – born and brought up in this country – is a major part of it.’

‘In my view,’ said the commissioner, ‘we should be proud of that. Chaplin is one of our most prized exports.’

‘He’s a British citizen,’ argued Chatfield, ‘and of an age when he should be fighting for King and Country. People who fill the cinemas over here to laugh at him should realise that. They ought to be ashamed.’

Sir Edward gave a wry smile. ‘Then I suppose that I must hang my head along with the rest of them.’

‘Why is that?’

‘I belong to the misguided masses you’ve just condemned, Superintendent. I not only took my grandchildren to see a Charlie Chaplin film last year but – dare I confess this? – I thoroughly enjoyed it.’

The house was a neat villa in a tree-lined Bayswater terrace. When their car drew up outside it, the detectives got out to appraise the building. Marmion looked up at it with approval.

‘This is the sort of place you and Alice need when you get married.’

‘Then I look forward to receiving help from my father-in-law,’ said Keedy, ‘because I’m never going to afford a house like this on a sergeant’s income.’

‘You have to put something aside out of every pay packet, Joe.’

‘I have too many bills to do that.’

‘Then make economies,’ suggested Marmion. ‘Drink less beer and buy cheaper clothing. You don’t *have* to look so smart all the time.’

‘Yes, I do, Harv. It’s a matter of self-respect.’

‘Your job is to catch villains. They don’t care two hoots if you’re wearing a Savile Row suit or a loincloth with leather tassels on it.’ They’d reached the front door now. ‘I doubt very much if anyone is at home.’

‘Let’s see.’

Keedy left nothing to chance. He rang the doorbell and used the knocker. The noises reverberated throughout the house but they brought nobody to the door. When Keedy repeated the process, there was still no response. A woman walked down the street towards them. Short, fat and elderly, she had a motherly smile.

‘Can I help you?’ she enquired.

‘Do you live here?’ asked Marmion.

‘No, that’s where Mr and Mrs Reid live. I’m their neighbour. I live next door.’

‘You must know the couple well, then.’

‘Yes, I do – my name is Mrs Cinderby.’

‘Then we’re very pleased to see you, Mrs Cinderby,’ said Marmion, taking out his warrant card to show her. ‘I’m Detective Inspector Marmion and this is my colleague, Detective Sergeant Keedy.’

She was alarmed. ‘You’re policemen,’ she gasped. ‘Has Mrs Reid done anything wrong? I can’t believe that’s why you’re here, Inspector. She’s the most law-abiding woman in the world.’

‘Where might we find Mr Reid?’

‘Oh, you’ll have to go to France for that. He’s in the army.’

‘I had a feeling that he might be,’ whispered Keedy.

‘We’re anxious to speak to members of Mrs Reid’s family,’ explained Marmion. ‘But our immediate need is to get inside the house. Mrs Reid has met with an accident, you see.’

‘What sort of accident?’ asked the neighbour. ‘Is it serious?’

‘I can’t go into any detail, I’m afraid.’ He checked his watch. ‘You strike me as an observant woman, Mrs Cinderby. Have you noticed anyone outside the house in the last ... well, let’s make it two hours or so?’

‘No, I haven’t, Inspector. I spent the afternoon with my daughter who lives in Swiss Cottage. I’ve just come from there.’ The detectives looked disappointed. ‘But I can help you get inside the house, if it’s important.’

Keedy rallied. ‘It’s very important, Mrs Cinderby.’

‘Then the person you want is Mrs Bond across the road.’ She pointed to the villa opposite. ‘She and Mrs Reid are good friends. Talk to Alma Bond – she keeps a spare key to the Reid house.’

A glance from Marmion was enough to send Keedy striding across the road. Mrs Cinderby was evidently a woman who was on friendly terms with her neighbours. Marmion pressed for detail.

‘How long have Mr and Mrs Reid been married?’

‘Five or six years, I’d say.’

‘What does Mr Reid do for a living?’

‘He’s a civil servant, Inspector – or, at least, he was. Then he volunteered and they made him a lieutenant. Charlotte – that’s Mrs Reid – is very proud of him.’

‘Are they happily married?’

‘Yes,’ replied the woman with a measure of indignation. ‘Of course they are. You only have to look at them to know that. They’re wonderful neighbours and they adore each other.’

‘They have no children, I assume.’

‘No, that’s something for the future.’

Marmion’s heart lurched. Charlotte Reid’s chances of motherhood had been brutally extinguished in the back row of a cinema. He felt sorry for her neighbour. Mrs Cinderby was going to have a profound shock when she learnt the truth and the same was true of Alma Bond. The close friend opposite would have no need of the key to the Reid household now. Marmion glanced across the road. Joe Keedy was having an animated conversation with an attractive, fair-haired woman in her late twenties. After taking a key from her, he held up a palm to stop her from trying to follow him. Whatever Keedy said was unable to appease her. Alma Bond stood outside her front door with her arms folded and watched intently.

‘She insisted on letting us in,’ said Keedy, rejoining Marmion.

‘I’m glad that you kept her at bay.’

‘According to her, Mrs Reid went out shopping this afternoon.’

‘I see. Let’s take a look inside.’ He turned to Mrs Cinderby. ‘Thank you very much. You’ve been a great help.’

As he moved away, she plucked at his sleeve. ‘This accident she’s had,’ she said, face furrowed with concern. ‘It’s bad, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, Mrs Cinderby. I’m afraid that it’s very bad.’

‘You’re late, Matthew.’

‘I got held up.’

‘Did you have a long meeting at St Martin-in-the-Fields?’

‘No,’ said Hearn, ‘it was mercifully short for once. On the way there, I made a point of going down Coventry Street to that cinema. People were streaming in. I felt that I simply had to point out the insidious effect that a film like that can have.’

‘Oh, I do hope you were careful,’ said his wife, anxiously.

‘I was doing my Christian duty, my dear. I was denouncing an evil.’

‘But that can be so dangerous sometimes.’

Beatrice Hearn was a plump woman in her fifties with a handsome face marred by the deep lines etched into her skin. She wore tiny spectacles and peered over them in consternation. When they were younger, she’d always admired her husband’s bravery and willingness to stand up for his beliefs. Now that they were older, however, she wished that he would exercise more discretion.

‘Remember what happened to the vicar of All Saints,’ she advised. ‘When he admonished that soldier who was relieving himself against one of the headstones in the churchyard, he was given the most foul-mouthed abuse. War has *changed* people, Matthew. It’s coarsened them. The soldier threatened to hit the vicar.’

‘I’ll go on saying what I’m moved to say, Beatrice.’

‘I’d hate it if anything happened to you.’

‘I can look after myself,’ he promised, giving her an affectionate squeeze. ‘I feel sorry for the vicar of All Saints. Tom Redwood is a wonderful man but he also happens to be rather short and slim. I doubt if a drunken soldier would dare to threaten me,’ he continued, pulling himself up to his full height. ‘He’d have more sense.’

The Reverend Matthew Hearn had just returned to his vicarage. After hanging up his hat, he looked in the mirror so that he could smooth down some wayward grey hair. When he planted a kiss on his wife’s forehead, it failed to dispel her frown.

‘What was the film?’ she wondered.

‘Does it matter? All cinemas are an abomination.’

‘Why was the one in Coventry Street so popular?’

‘Because it had had the gall to put Charlie Chaplin up on its screen,’ he said with vehemence. ‘You know my views on that gentleman. He’s reputed to be one of the richest men in the film industry. I call that the wages of sin.’

‘Everyone talks about him. One of the ladies in the Sewing Circle admitted that her husband always takes their children to any film that Mr Chaplin is in.’

‘Then I’ll have to talk him out of it, Beatrice. It’s tantamount to heresy, in my opinion. His children’s minds will be hopelessly warped. As for Chaplin,’ he went on, grimly, ‘he may have gone too far this time.’

‘What do you mean, Matthew?’

‘After my meeting, I went back to Coventry Street.’

‘But that was only asking for trouble.’

‘I didn’t have to stop people going in there this time,’ he told her, ‘because the cinema had closed for the rest of the day. Police were on duty to turn people away. The crowd was very restive.’

‘Do you know *why* the cinema was closed?’

‘I’d like to think that it was the answer to my prayers, Beatrice, but I’m not that foolish. The rumour was that something terrible had happened inside there. An ambulance was just arriving when I got there.’

‘Was somebody injured in the crush, perhaps?’

‘It’s worse than that. One man claimed to have heard two policemen talking. The word that they used was “murder”.’

‘Good God!’ she exclaimed.

‘I did warn them. I did foresee something like this.’

She was aghast. ‘Someone was *killed* simply because they went to see a film?’

‘Apparently so.’

‘Don’t go anywhere near the place again, Matthew,’ she begged, grabbing his arm. ‘You could be walking into jeopardy.’

‘The danger was inside the cinema,’ he reminded her, ‘and you’d never get me going there. Well, perhaps they’ll listen to me now. Instead of pushing me aside so that they can watch a film, perhaps they’ll realise that cinema is, by its very nature, an abomination. It breeds corruption,’ he went on, striking the pose that he routinely used in the pulpit. ‘Charlie Chaplin is not the blameless entertainer they all say that he is. Today he was seen in his true light – as an accomplice in a murder!’

It took them seconds to confirm their expectations. The house had been burgled. Using the stolen key, someone had let himself into the Bayswater villa and left clear evidence of his visit. Drawers had been pulled out in every room. Cupboard doors had been flung open. The jewellery box in the main bedroom had been emptied. While Charlotte Reid was lying dead in a cinema, her home had been pillaged. After a quick tour of the house, Marmion and Keedy returned to the living room. On the piano that stood against one wall were some framed photographs. One of them had been taken on the wedding day of Derek and Charlotte Reid. The pair of them beamed happily at the camera as they stood outside the church porch. Their home bore the imprint of their characters. Until the burglary, it had been bright, clean, well kept and tastefully furnished. Keedy envied the couple. The villa had been an ideal place in which to start married life. He and Alice would be thrilled to own such a house.

‘She was a good-looking woman,’ said Marmion as he studied the wedding photograph. ‘And her husband is a handsome man.’

‘He’s going to be shattered when he learns what happened to his wife.’

‘Yes, Joe. It will be a double blow. Mrs Reid has not only been murdered, it looks as if she found herself an admirer while her husband was away. We’ll need to take some of these photographs,’ he continued, reaching for a frame. ‘One of them will have to be released to the press.’

‘What about their respective families?’ asked Keedy.

‘We know that her parents live in Yorkshire because that letter in her handbag was written by her mother. We’ll have to contact the police in Pickering and ask them to break the sad news.’

‘That woman across the road said that Mr Reid’s family lived in Watford.’

‘Then their address must be here somewhere. See if you can find it, Joe. The Reids seem to have been fairly organised people. There’s probably an address book or some correspondence from his parents. While you’re doing that, I want to take another look upstairs.’

‘Why is that, Harv?’

‘There’s something very odd about this burglary,’ said Marmion, removing the last photograph from its frame, ‘but I can’t put my finger on what exactly it is.’

Marmion left the room and Keedy began the search. The three drawers of the little writing bureau had been pulled out and thrown onto the floor, scattering their contents over the carpet. The lid had been pulled down and the much smaller drawers in the desk itself had also been yanked out. Keedy got down on his hands and knees to explore the debris. Above his head, he could hear Marmion moving around in the bedroom. It was not long before the inspector returned. Keedy had a present for him.

‘Hey, presto!’ he shouted, holding up a little red object. ‘I’ve found the address book.’

‘Well done, Joe!’

‘What did *you* find, Harv?’

‘It’s more a question of what I *didn’t* find,’ said Marmion. ‘What do you see when you look around this room?’

Keedy got to his feet. ‘I see a bloody awful mess.’

‘But it’s an unnecessary mess.’

‘Burglars often act out of spite, Harv. You know that. When they see a nice place like this, they can’t resist spoiling it. Some of them have been known to piss over the furniture or drop their trousers and leave an even nastier memento.’

‘I don’t think that’s the case here.’

‘So what do *you* see?’

‘I see the work of an amateur, someone who’s trying to convince us that he was burgling the house. Is it really worth killing someone to ransack a place like this? There are hardly rich pickings here. No, Joe, he’s trying to fool us,’ said Marmion, thoughtfully. ‘He didn’t really come for the jewellery and any cash that might have been left lying about. The killer was after only one thing.’

‘What was that?’

‘It didn’t register with me when we first looked in their bedroom but I had this nagging sensation. That’s why I went back up there. Mrs Reid’s underwear is missing. There’s not a stitch of it left, Joe. That’s what brought the killer here,’ concluded Marmion. ‘He came to collect some souvenirs.’

CHAPTER FOUR

Fingerprinting was an obsession with Sir Edward Henry. Once it had been established that every individual had fingerprints unique to him or her, he saw the immense potential as a source of evidence. He had experimented with it in Calcutta when he was Inspector General of the Bengal Police and a member of the Indian Civil Service. Advances in the technique of collecting and collating them were slow but steady and he'd watched developments with keen interest. When he joined Scotland Yard as Assistant Commissioner (Crime) in 1901, therefore, he set up a fingerprint bureau and the system immediately bore fruit. Some of the early results were so spectacular that they sent waves of alarm through the criminal fraternity. Sensible villains learnt to wear gloves while at work but, predictably, most of them were not sensible.

Harvey Marmion also knew the value of the fingerprints. Shortly after the ambulance had arrived at the West End cinema, a small team came in search of them. Marmion felt that the best examples of the killer's fingerprints were on the throat of his victim, but he nevertheless asked his men to check the seats adjacent to the one occupied by Charlotte Reid. He and Keedy had then been driven to Bayswater and seen the glaring evidence of a putative burglary. Since so many items had been handled then tossed on the floor, the killer's fingerprints would be everywhere. Marmion had therefore sent Joe Keedy off to the nearest police station in the car so that he could ring Scotland Yard and summon a second team to do the laborious work of taking fingerprints at the house. The inspector himself had gone across the road to talk to the best friend of the deceased. She had remained defiantly on her doorstep.

'Mrs Bond, isn't it?' he said. 'I'm Detective Inspector Marmion and my sergeant will have told you why we're here.'

'He made a point of *not* telling me,' she said, resentfully. 'What's going on?'

'Might we step inside for a moment, please?'

She considered the request, then stood reluctantly aside so that he could enter the villa. Its interior was identical to the one he'd just left, though it was vastly tidier. When they were in the living room, he waited for her to sit down then lowered himself onto the sofa opposite her. Alma Bond was a forthright woman with more than a touch of pugnacity.

'Don't lie to me, Inspector,' she warned. 'I'm old enough to be told the truth. According to Mrs Cinderby, there's been an accident. That wouldn't give you the right to search her house. Something is up and I want to know what it is.'

Marmion remembered the argument she'd had earlier with Keedy. Alma was fiercely loyal to her friend and had refused to hand over the key at first. She was also very apprehensive. When she'd looked across the road and seen the detectives flitting to and fro past the front windows, she feared that something terrible had happened to Charlotte Reid. In a sense, she'd prepared herself for dire news, so Marmion saw no point in holding it back from her. On the following day, newspapers would be telling everyone in London and beyond that a heinous crime had taken place at the West End cinema. Alma deserved to be given advance notice.

He took a deep breath. 'It's my sad duty to inform you that Mrs Reid is dead.'

'Dead!' gulped the woman, putting a hand instinctively to her chest. 'That can't be true. Charlotte was so careful with traffic.'

‘She was not killed in a road accident, Mrs Bond.’

~~‘Are you telling me that she died of a heart attack or something?’~~

‘No,’ said Marmion, gently, ‘that isn’t the case either. That fact is that ... she was murdered.’

Alma Bond was a robust woman, but the news had the impact of a blow and she reeled from it. Marmion had to reach out and steady her. Tears welled up in her eyes and she kept shaking her head in disbelief. When he felt that it was safe to let go of her, he looked around the room.

‘Do you have any brandy in the house?’ he asked.

‘I’ll be all right,’ she said, trying desperately to regain her composure. ‘Just give me some time, Inspector. I can’t take it in yet.’

‘I appreciate that, Mrs Bond.’

‘Just give me time.’

Marmion sat back and waited for a few minutes. He could see her wrestling with the implications of what she’d been told. The one thing she had not expected was that her friend had become a murder victim. When she finally spoke, her voice had none of its earlier truculence. It was barely a whisper.

‘How did it happen?’

‘Mrs Reid was strangled.’

She blinked in astonishment. ‘No, no,’ she protested, ‘not that, surely. Who could possibly want to harm Charlotte? She was the kindest person I’ve ever met. Everyone around here liked her. I’ve lost count of the number of favours she did for me and for others. When it came to helping people, she went on, ‘nothing was too much trouble for her. You ask Mrs Cinderby. She always said that Charlotte was a saint.’

‘Well, she may have to revoke her sainthood,’ thought Marmion to himself. Aloud, he was more tactful. ‘The two of you were very close, I hear.’

‘We were, Inspector. We did everything together.’

‘Then Mrs Reid would have confided in you.’

‘Yes, of course,’ she replied. ‘And I shared all my troubles with her. That’s what friends do, isn’t it?’ Realisation jolted her. ‘But we’ll never be able to do it again, will we? She’s gone for ever. I just don’t know how I’ll manage without her.’

‘You say that you shared troubles with each other,’ he probed. ‘What sort of troubles did Mrs Reid have, exactly?’

‘She was in the same position as me, Inspector. My husband joined the army at the start of the year even though there was no conscription for married men at the time. Derek – that’s Charlotte’s husband – also signed up. Their regiments are both in France. You can see why we were drawn together,’ she said. ‘We were very lonely. Charlotte was worse off than me because I have a baby daughter to keep me company. I put her to bed just before you and the sergeant arrived here. Charlotte was like a favourite aunt to Jenny. I don’t know how I’m going to explain to her that she’ll never see Aunt Charlotte again.’ She bit her lip as tears threatened, then she regained her full voice. ‘Where did it happen? I want to know,’ she continued as she saw his hesitation. ‘Nothing can be worse than the fact of her death. Don’t spare my feelings. I need the truth.’

‘Very well,’ he said, levelly. ‘We believe that Mrs Reid might have been throttled by the man with whom she went to the West End cinema in Coventry Street.’

Alma Bond goggled. ‘But she told me that she went shopping.’

‘Evidently, you were misled.’

‘Who is this man and why could he possibly want to kill her?’

‘I was hoping that you might be able to give us some clues.’

‘But I didn’t even know she was going to the cinema.’

‘Were you aware that she had an admirer?’ Face blank, she shook her head. ‘Are you sure about that, Mrs Bond? She was very attractive. We’ve seen some photographs of her. Mrs Reid was the sort of woman who could turn heads.’

‘Charlotte was married, Inspector,’ she said with emphasis. ‘She never forgot that. She was married to a man she idolised.’

‘Yet – apparently – she went to the cinema with someone else,’ he pointed out.

‘I can’t explain that.’

‘In other words, you’d say that it was out of character.’

‘Yes, I would – very much out of character.’

‘Was she in the habit of going to the cinema?’

‘No, Inspector. Charlotte and I have been a couple of times while my mother was babysitting but that was it. She’d never dream of going to see a film on her own.’

‘That’s not what she did in this case. In my opinion, it looks as if she might have accepted an invitation from a male friend.’

After grappling with the information, Alma glanced through the window.

‘What did you find in her house?’ she asked. ‘Sergeant Keedy said that you wanted the address of Derek’s parents but I had the feeling you were after something else. What was it?’

‘The purse and the house key were missing from Mrs Reid’s handbag. We had a strong feeling that the killer would come to the house itself – and he did. The place is in a dreadful state and several items are missing.’

‘You mean that he was *there* – just across the street?’

‘Yes, Mrs Bond. I’m hoping that one of your neighbours might have caught a glimpse of him coming and going. We’ll soon be doing a house-to-house search for a possible witness.’

‘This is frightening,’ she said, cheeks shedding their colour. ‘A man commits a terrible murder then burgles the house of the victim. What kind of cold-blooded monster is he? Thank heaven I didn’t see him or I’d have gone over and confronted him. Just think – I could have ended up like Charlotte.’

‘Fortunately, you didn’t,’ he said, soothingly, ‘so don’t let that possibility prey on your mind. We need to catch this man and to catch him soon. Without realising it, you may be able to help us. Let me repeat a question I put to you earlier, Mrs Bond. And before you answer, I advise you to think very carefully. Now, then,’ he went on, measuring his words, ‘were you aware that Mrs Reid had an admirer?’

‘No,’ she replied. ‘No, I wasn’t.’

She seemed hurt.

Claude Chatfield was even more irritable than usual. Having been forced to delay the press conference, he laid the blame firmly on Harvey Marmion. Now that the inspector had finally returned to Scotland Yard, Chatfield was able to issue much-anticipated information to the waiting reporters. Before he did so, he went to the commissioner’s office. Sir Edward Henry glanced through the carefully worded statement.

‘This is admirable,’ he said, giving the sheet of paper back to Chatfield. ‘You tell them enough for them to bite on without giving away too much. It’s always important to hold back certain details from the press. They do like to sensationalise things.’

‘Editors always think in terms of banner headlines.’

‘It sells newspapers.’

‘I just wish that I could have held the conference at the advertised time, but Inspector Marmion kept me waiting for hours before he finally got back here.’

‘Marmion is always very thorough. It’s one of his many assets.’

‘I should have been in possession of the main facts much sooner.’

‘These things can’t be rushed, Superintendent.’

Chatfield fumed quietly. He was always looking for ways to criticise Marmion and was annoyed that the commissioner held the inspector in such high regard. He handed over one of the photographs taken from the house in Bayswater.

‘This is a picture of the victim,’ he explained. ‘I’ve had copies made to release to the press. This crime will make people think twice about going to the cinema so blithely. It will at least have one positive consequence.’

The commissioner studied the photo with mingled interest and sadness.

‘It’s such a tragedy,’ he said with genuine sorrow. ‘She had her whole life in front of her and it’s been snuffed out like a candle. What do we know of her family?’

‘Her husband is in the army so she lives alone. Marmion is taking steps to contact Mr Reid through the War Office and to arrange for both sets of parents to be told what happened.’ He took the photograph back. ‘Thank you, Sir Edward.’

‘Some embarrassing questions are going to be raised, I fear.’

‘Quite so – what was a married woman doing at a cinema with another man? If, indeed, that’s what actually happened.’

‘Was the inspector able to find the answer?’

‘No,’ said Chatfield. ‘Mrs Reid’s closest friend appeared shocked to learn of the possible rendezvous and, even though she lives directly opposite, she saw nobody letting himself into the house. Nor, alas, did anyone else in the street, it seems. The killer came and went like a phantom.’

‘What about fingerprints?’

‘I knew you’d ask about that, Sir Edward. It’s something I’ve tried to impress on Marmion. Fingerprints could give us the breakthrough we need. Several were collected at the cinema, though we’ve no guarantee that they belong to the killer. At the house in Bayswater, however, he left copious examples. We can match those with the ones found in Coventry Street.’

‘Very good, Superintendent – you’d better go and feed something to those reporters. In situations like this, they get ravenous. No, wait,’ added the commissioner as Chatfield moved away.

‘Let me see that photograph again. It looked vaguely familiar but I couldn’t remember why.’

Chatfield passed it over. ‘Here you are, Sir Edward.’

‘She’s a very pretty young woman.’

‘I think she was also very foolish.’

‘Of course!’ said the other, snapping his fingers. ‘It’s Edna Purviance.’

‘Who?’

‘She’s the glamorous film star who appears in Charlie Chaplin’s films.’

Chatfield sniffed. ‘I wouldn’t know about that.’

‘Mrs Reid is not quite so arresting, mind you, but there’s more than a faint resemblance. To start with, she has the same hairstyle as Edna Purviance.’

‘The name is new to me, Sir Edward.’

‘It’s often in the newspapers, Superintendent. You obviously ignore anything that’s connected to

the film world.'

'I do so as a matter of principle,' said Chatfield, proudly.

'Miss Purviance is, in some sense, a mirror image of Chaplin. Both have gone from anonymity to worldwide fame. Chaplin has worked his way up from music hall, of course, so there's been a steady progression. In her case,' said the commissioner, 'the rise has been more meteoric. Charlie Chaplin met her by chance in a cafe and was struck by her beauty. He hired her immediately.'

'I find that rather troubling.'

'To some degree, I do as well,' said the commissioner, returning the photograph. 'But the film industry is a law unto itself. Strange things happen.' He smiled in apology. 'However, I'm sorry to have detained you so long. Speak to the press and, above all else, get them to appeal for witnesses to come forward who were at the West End cinema today and who may feel that they actually saw Mr Reid and her companion.'

'Nobody sitting in the back row will have witnessed anything,' said Chatfield with candid disapproval. 'I've no doubt that they were otherwise occupied.'

Even without being told, Ellen Marmion knew that a murder had been committed. It was the one thing that made her husband late home in the evening. She just hoped that the case would, at least, keep him in London. A previous assignment had involved Marmion and Joe Keedy crossing the Channel and going to Ypres in order to arrest two suspects in a rape case before bringing both men back to face justice. A more recent investigation had taken them to a prisoner-of-war camp in mid-Wales and kept them away all night. Ellen didn't mind how late it was before he finally turned up even if it meant that she'd dozed off in her chair. What she hated was the thought of sleeping in an empty bed while her husband spent the night elsewhere.

With a cup of tea beside her on the table, she was knitting absent-mindedly and thinking about her son. Earlier in the year, Paul Marmion had come home from France on leave. Ellen had been delighted to see that he'd suffered no physical injuries but there were worrying changes in him. Something had happened to Paul during his time in the army. The happy-go-lucky son with the cheerful attitude to life had come back as a subdued young man who seemed to be nursing a secret he refused to divulge. The pleasure of seeing him was therefore tempered by the difficulty of talking to him about the war. When they saw him off at the railway station, his parents had been quietly disturbed, worried that a return to the front would change their son even more, perhaps to the point where they no longer recognised him as the child they'd lovingly brought up.

The approach of a car made Ellen sit up. The vehicle halted outside the house and she heard a car door opening and shutting. As the car drove off, there was the familiar sound of Marmion's key in the lock. She went into the passageway to welcome him and to receive a kiss.

'Who is it this time?' she asked.

'A young woman in a cinema,' he replied. 'You can read all the details tomorrow, Ellen. I'm afraid that Joe and I are going to be very busy.'

'Are you hungry?'

'I'm always famished during a murder investigation.'

'Then it's just as well I kept a meal for you in the oven.'

After hanging his hat on a peg, he followed her into the kitchen where a place had already been laid for him. Marmion sat down wearily. As Ellen took the meal out of the oven and set the plate down before him, he felt an upsurge of affection. His wife was so supportive and uncritical. He didn't need to discuss the new case with her. Indeed, he deliberately kept her ignorant of most of the

work in which he was involved. She preferred it that way. Her philosophy was simple. Home was a place for rest and refreshment. When under pressure at Scotland Yard – and she could detect the signs already – her husband needed a temporary refuge.

‘What have you been doing all day, love?’ he asked, slicing a potato.

‘Nothing really, I suppose, and yet time has flown past. I did some shopping, went to church – it was my turn on the cleaning rota – then I spent the afternoon knitting socks and gloves, even though Paul said that the soldiers have already got enough of both.’

‘It’s the thought that counts, Ellen, the feeling that you and the others are doing your share in the war effort.’

‘It also keeps us busy,’ she said, ‘and that’s important. We mustn’t brood.’

She sat back contentedly and watched him eat. Meals would be taken at irregular times from now on and he would often be preoccupied. Ellen accepted that without complaint. She’d been married to a policeman long enough to learn how to adapt to the extraordinary demands that his job sometimes placed on him.

‘Oh, and I made a point of calling on Lena Belton,’ she said.

‘How is she?’

‘She’s still in a complete daze.’

‘Any woman in her position would be,’ he said, sadly. ‘It’s bad enough to lose one son but she’s lost two in the same battle. That must have been a crushing blow for poor Mrs Belton. And she no longer has a husband with whom to share her grief, of course. He died last year. She must think there’s no justice in the world.’

‘It’s certainly shaken her belief in God,’ said Ellen. ‘When I asked her why we hadn’t seen her in church for such a long time, she was very bitter. It turns out that she refused to see the vicar.’

‘Then it’s just as well that she’s got friend like you, love. At a time like this, she needs all the help and sympathy she can get.’

‘She may need it, Harvey, but she doesn’t accept it very easily. Lena didn’t even invite me into the house. She kept me talking on the doorstep.’

‘Ask her to come here for tea or something.’

‘I did. She said she’d think about it – which means she won’t come. What upset me was a remark she made as I was leaving.’

He forked another potato. ‘Go on.’

‘She said that *our* time would come. We’d never understand what she was going through, she told me, until we had a letter to tell us that Paul had been killed in action. I didn’t like the way she said it,’ admitted Ellen. ‘Lena made it sound as if it was ... well, bound to happen. I’ve been worrying about Paul ever since.’

‘You’ve been worrying about him since he joined up. We both have.’

‘It’s got worse since I spoke to Lena Belton. She frightened me.’

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