

THE INSPECTOR GEORGE GENTLY CASE FILES



GENTLY WITH THE INNOCENTS

Alan Hunter

NOW A HIT BBC TV SERIES STARRING MARTIN SHAW

Alan Hunter was born in Hoveton, Norfolk, in 1922. He left school at the age of fourteen to work on his father's farm, spending his spare time sailing on the Norfolk Broads and writing nature notes for the *Eastern Evening News*. He also wrote poetry, some of which was published while he was in the RAF during the Second World War. By 1950, he was running his own bookshop in Norwich. In 1953 the first of what would become a series of forty-six George Gently novels was published. He died in 2005, aged eighty-two.

The Inspector George Gently series

Gently Does It
Gently by the Shore
Gently Down the Stream
Landed Gently
Gently Through the Mill
Gently in the Sun
Gently with the Painters
Gently to the Summit
Gently Go Man
Gently Where the Roads Go
Gently Floating
Gently Sahib
Gently with the Ladies
Gently North-West
Gently Continental
Gently at a Gallop

Gently with the Innocents

Alan Hunter



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The characters and events in this book are fictitious; the locale is sketched from life.

Let me add to the above legend that 'Harrisons' is a real house. For the purpose of the narrative removed it from its village and placed it in the town I have called Cross, but a little detective work with this book and a map may suggest its location to the curious. The quotation given in the text only slightly doctored, and the description of the house is accurate – except for one minor feature.

The house was for sale when I explored it. I believe the price asked was very reasonable.

A. 1

CHAPTER ONE

THE TELEPHONE RANG out in the hall and Gently looked up frowning. Praise the Lord, not tonight after the sort of day he'd been having!

In Elphinstone Road the rain was still pelting as it had been pelting all day: that chill, penetrating stuff which they kept for the back-end of November. He'd come in sodden, feeling old, and had downed a couple of rum-and-lemons. Mrs Jarvis was out. He'd had to knock himself up a poached egg and a pot of tea.

Now, settled by the fire in his den, he was beginning to feel dry at last, and he didn't want to know about Assistant Commissioners with bad cases of murder on their minds.

'For you, sir.'

Mrs Jarvis poked her unexpressive face round the door.

'Who is it?'

'Didn't catch his name, sir. Ain't none of your lot by the sound of him.'

She'd just come in. Her head was swathed in a glinting pixie-hood of grey plastic.

'All right, I'll take it.'

Mrs Jarvis sniffed and drew her head back from the door.

Gently hauled the extension phone over.

'Chief Superintendent Gently . . .'

For a moment he could hear nothing but the sound of irregular breathing.

'Yes?'

'I . . . I . . .'

'Speak up!'

'I—please, I want to talk to you.'

'Who are you?'

The name sounded like 'piecemeal': no wonder Mrs Jarvis didn't get it.

'So what's the trouble?'

'It's . . . the police . . .'

'Yes?'

'They think I've murdered my uncle.'

Gently sighed. 'And did you?' he asked.

'No!'

'So why bother me?'

There were confused sounds at the other end, as though the caller were shifting his grip on the receiver. Gently could hear traffic. The man was probably in a call-box.

'Look, I must talk to you . . . please! It isn't as simple as it sounds. Fazakerly told me—'

'Fazakerly?'

'Yes. He said you were related . . .'

Gently grimaced. John Fazakerly was a remote connection of his sister's husband – a ne'er-do-well who had dragged Gently into a case that was none of his business. Not much of a recommendation quote.

‘I don’t know him, of course . . . my firm sold the lease of his flat. But he’d mentioned you . . . about his wife . . . and I had to talk to someone . . .’

‘And he suggested me.’

‘Yes.’

‘Surely a lawyer would be more appropriate?’

‘But you don’t understand!’

Gently yawned.

‘He said . . . if I were innocent . . . come to you.’

A chunk of coal fell against the bars and lay hissing a geyser of white smoke. In the phone Gently distinctly heard gears being changed. Traffic lights? A junction?

‘Where are you speaking from?’

‘I’m in a call-box. At Tally-Ho Corner.’

‘I see.’

‘Please! If you could give me just ten minutes . . .’

Gently shrugged at nobody. ‘Well, since you’re out here.’

‘I can see you?’

‘For what it’s worth.’

‘Thanks . . . oh, thanks!’

Gently dropped the phone with a grunt.

His name was Peachment, Adrian Peachment, and he gave his age as twenty-six, a rather fey-looking young man with dark hair and shining dark eyes. Not a Londoner. Even over the phone you could spot a broadness in his speech. Yet he dressed in the current semi-military vogue and wore his hair in a nest that brushed his collar. He had parked a Mini with a recent date-letter under the tear-drop lamp across the street.

‘I’m terribly grateful, sir . . .’

He had left with Mrs Jarvis a short alpaca coat and a deer-stalker.

‘Oh, sit down.’

‘I wouldn’t have imposed—’

‘Do you smoke?’

He lit a cigarette jerkily, using a butane lighter.

Gently himself lit his pipe.

‘First, your troubles are none of my business. If the police are dealing with your case I couldn’t interfere anyway.’

‘It isn’t that—’

‘Listen to me! You’ll probably only make matters worse. If you drop something I shall have to report it. You’d be far better off if you talked to your lawyer. You have one, haven’t you?’

‘Well . . . no.’

‘Why not?’

‘At this stage . . . I didn’t think . . .’

‘What do you mean – “at this stage”?’

‘The coroner . . . at the inquest they seemed satisfied.’

Gently breathed smoke, staring at him.

‘Didn’t you say you were under suspicion?’

‘Yes.’ Peachment flicked his cigarette nervously. ‘Only the coroner . . . they’re not sure it was murder.’

Not sure it was murder! Gently chewed on his pipe-stem, eyeing the young man with little friendliness. For this he’d interrupted his snug evening, and the book lying open on the side-table . . .

‘Just give me the facts.’

‘Yes, of course.’

Peachment sat like a woman, his knitted legs turned sideways. He had a young-old face, long hollow-cheeked, and long-fingered hands with bony joints.

‘You see, they found him dead . . . actually, the milkman . . .’

‘Who?’

‘My uncle, James Peachment. He was seventy, you know, and living alone. They found him dead at the foot of some stairs.’

‘In London?’

‘No. No, in Cross . . . that’s a little town on the Northshire border. Uncle always lived there . . . my family . . . I’m up here now, I’ve a job in Kensington.’

‘What did the report say?’

‘A fractured skull.’

‘So?’

Peachment jiggled his cigarette. ‘There was other bruising. On the arms, legs, everywhere. Although someone had beaten the old boy up.’

Gently puffed slowly. ‘This happened in his house?’

‘Yes. It’s a queer old place called Harrisons. Elizabethan, something like that. All beams and passages and funny rooms. Well, the milkman found him at the foot of this staircase. It only goes to an empty room. And nothing taken as far as I knew . . . they made me go through the place, to check.

‘Had it been broken into?’

Peachment shook his head. ‘They wouldn’t need to break in if they knew the place. One of the back doors opens into a lean-to and doesn’t even have a bolt. Of course it’s mad . . . but that’s in the country. People don’t bother so much there.’

‘Carry on.’

‘Well . . . the police were awkward. You see, I was down there the day it happened. My girl-friend lives there. I called on Uncle. They got my finger-prints off one of the door-knobs. Then there’s the bit about me inheriting – my people are dead, so it comes to me. And, well . . . I don’t have a very good alibi, either. You can see their point. I could have done it.’

Gently eased himself back in his favourite chair. Perhaps there was something in it, after all! With a case like that lined-up against him, you might excuse any man for getting jumpy.

‘What is your alibi, just for the record?’

Peachment’s neck was flushing a little.

‘Actually . . . Jeanie and I had a row. I cleared off back here not long after tea.’

‘And that doesn’t cover you?’

‘No, not really. They say he died about eight p.m. Well, I wasn’t back here till close on ten, and nobody saw me get in anyway. You see, I have a flat.’

Yes, indeed, Gently saw. He blew a couple of casual smoke-rings and gazed at Peachment almost benignly.

‘But they haven’t arrested you?’

‘Well . . . no. I mean, the coroner returned an open verdict. Uncle could have got the bruises falling down the stairs – he *could* have done. It’s just possible.’

‘Then what’s your worry?’

Peachment’s eyes widened. ‘The police don’t think he died by accident.’

‘What about you?’

‘I *know* he didn’t. And that’s why I wanted to talk to you.’

He felt carefully in his breast pocket and took out a small, folded manila envelope.

‘This is why Uncle was murdered,’ he said. ‘And the reason why they beat him up.’

Gently took the envelope. The long fingers were trembling as they handed it over. Though small, and folded smaller, the envelope was unexpectedly heavy. Gently weighed it in his hand a moment.

‘A coin?’

‘A medal actually . . . that one.’

‘You mean there are others?’

‘Yes. I’m sure of it. But that’s the only one left.’

Peachment leant forward, watching closely while Gently slid the contents from the envelope. It contained a rather crude gold medallion, not quite geometrically round. On the face was the bust of a large-nosed man surrounded by a semi-legible inscription in Latin, on the verso a dove and a wreath of laurel leaves. It was about as large as a crown.

‘Careful . . . please!’ Peachment whispered.

Gently shrugged. ‘What’s it worth?’

‘Something over a thousand . . . I’ve just had it valued. It’s a Papal medal of Innocent III.’

‘Nice,’ Gently said. ‘And there were more?’

‘Yes, more. A lot more. I found that one hidden in the book-room at Harrisons – whoever killed him didn’t find it.’

Gently laid the medal on the side-table. Really, this case had got some life in it! People had been killed, and would be again, for much less than the price of that single gold piece. He looked at Peachment. Peachment was anxiously gazing at the medal lying on the table.

‘It’s Extremely Fine, you see. If you scratched it—’

‘What makes you think there are more?’

‘The legend, of course.’

‘The legend!’

‘Yes.’ Peachment’s eyes jerked to his almost indignantly. ‘There’s a legend about Harrisons – I told you, it’s a queer sort of old place. There’s supposed to be treasure hidden in it. A hoard of gold. Anyone’ll tell you.’

‘And that – that’s part of it?’

Peachment nodded. ‘How else could Uncle have got that medal? He could never have bought it if they’re rare anyway – and Uncle didn’t have that sort of money.’

‘Let’s get this straight,’ Gently said. He took a few short puffs. ‘Are there any grounds for this beautiful fable, or is it just the usual village tale?’

‘I believe it—’

‘Very likely! But is it backed by any facts?’

Peachment shrugged his lean shoulders feebly. ‘Actually . . . if you put it like that . . .’

‘Just so.’

‘But wait a minute. There’s something else I have to tell you. It’s the way Uncle behaved that last afternoon. He was . . . you know . . . excited about something.’

‘Go on.’

‘Yes,’ Peachment said. ‘Excited. At the time I didn’t really notice. It was just a duty visit. I was impatient – wanted to get back to Jeanie. He was’ – Peachment’s large hand sawed – ‘all . . . bubbling. Do you understand? Like – like a cat who’s swallowed a canary. He kept smiling and grinning to himself.’

‘Then there’s what he said as I was leaving . . . oh, I know it’s nothing to go on! But it was the way he held on to my hand, the sort of triumphant look he gave me.’

‘And what did he say?’

‘He said, “Boy, don’t sell this place when I’m gone. There’s more here than dust and old rotten beams.” And he kept shaking my hand all the time.’

‘Hm.’

Gently took more puffs. Did Peachment honestly think he would swallow this? Perhaps the young man was realizing how thin it sounded, because he added earnestly, ‘I’m sure . . . positive . . .’

Gently grunted.

‘So this is the theory. Your uncle had found a hoard of gold. He keeps it to himself, but someone finds out, and they beat him up to make him tell where he’s hidden it.’

‘Yes – that’s it.’

‘And this is all your evidence?’

‘The medal – yes. But where else . . .?’

‘It’s too thin.’

‘But the medal . . . I tell you—’

‘You should have shown the medal to the local police.’

Peachment’s dark eyes rounded despairingly.

‘Look, sir, I know – I *know* I’m right! That medal’s a rarity. I took it to Seaby’s. They say there are only two more like it. I didn’t take it to the local police because . . . well, they’re against me enough now. But Uncle was murdered, and there has to be a reason – and that’s the reason. I *know*.’

Gently picked up the medal again. Its rough heaviness was convincing. Purely as gold . . . Perhaps the medal, anyway, deserved a little looking into.

‘Who was your uncle?’

‘He – he was nobody.’

Again the anxious look as Gently fondled the medal.

‘What was his job?’

‘He kept the harness-shop. But he retired from that ten years ago.’

‘He owned – what was it – Harrisons?’

‘Yes. He and Aunt Agatha had always lived there. She died soon after he retired. He lived all alone. A bit . . . eccentric.’

‘He didn’t collect these things?’

‘Good Lord, no! He’s got a few old books and things.’

‘What sort of books?’

‘Nothing on coins. Old books on horses, local history.’

‘Are you in possession?’

‘Well . . . more or less. He didn’t leave any will. There’s still some lawyer’s business to get through. All this happened a month ago.’

‘Did he have many friends?’

‘No . . . I told you. He lived alone, scarcely saw anyone.’

‘Housekeeper? Char?’

Peachment shook his head. ‘A recluse . . . that’s the word I wanted.’

‘So you’ve no idea who might have killed him?’

Peachment said bitterly, ‘I’m the suspect.’

‘Right.’ Gently put down the medal. He drew out his pocket-book and began scribbling. ‘Here’s your receipt. I’ll keep the medal. I’ll see that proper inquiries are made.’

‘You’re going to . . . keep it?’ Peachment looked dismayed.

‘Of course. Like you, I’m curious about its provenance.’

‘But—’

‘Well?’

‘It’s all right, I suppose . . . only, please . . .’

‘I’ll take care it’s properly handled.’

He took a note of Peachment’s address. The young man lived at St John’s Gate. He worked for Lutyen and Marshall, estate agents, a large firm of good standing.

At the door he hesitated, then stuck out his hand. ‘I’m grateful, really . . . I mean, suspected like that.’

‘Don’t be so sure you’re out of the wood.’

‘Fazakerly was right . . .’

Gently said nothing.

He came back into the den and stood some moments by the fire. Outside he could hear the Mini being started and, after some buzzing, being driven away. A curious business, an odd young man! An old man’s face on young shoulders. One could see through it to the recluse uncle, the lonely old harness maker in his mouldering house. A medieval face . . . and a medieval coin – or did Innocent III go back yet further?

Gently relit his pipe. But was there in fact a case here? Old men did fall down stairs and die. A fractured skull, a clutch of bruises, they were sufficiently commonplace in such an event. The local coroner, anyway, hadn’t pushed the matter, as they would if there had been evidence of theft. And the coroner was obviously he’d been satisfied . . . only uncertain about how the old man came to fall.

Just one of those tragedies that happen too often to the elderly who live alone.

And yet . . . he stared again at the thick, bulge-edged medal, with its grotesque portrait, its uneven lettering.

Coming to a decision, he hooked up the phone.

‘Trunks. I want Merely 25. It’s a Northshire number.’

As he stood waiting he could hear the rain beating faster and a drop or two hissed on the coals

the grate.

‘Merely 25.’

‘Superintendent Gently.’

‘Good Heavens . . . Gently!’

He took the phone to his chair. Sir Daynes Broke, the Northshire Chief Constable, rarely came to business in the first five minutes.

‘. . . my first twenty-pounder on Sunday . . . live-bait, y’know, no twiddling with spoons . . . Gwen’s here, she’ll want a word with you . . . when are you coming for a day with the pike? . . .’

Then at last, as an afterthought: ‘You’re ringing about something . . .?’

Gently gave him a summary of what Peachment had told him. Sir Daynes listened with little cluckings, but didn’t interrupt till Gently had finished.

‘Yes, well . . . know about it, of course. Fact, Lindsay, the coroner, is a chum of mine. Says there’s no doubt the old fellow took a tumble – thin skull, y’know. He was getting on.’

‘And the local Superintendent?’

‘Chief Inspector. Fellow called Boyland. He’s all right. He’s not too happy, but there’s nothing to go on. Doesn’t like the nephew – that’s a fact.’

‘What about this treasure?’

‘Oh, poppycock. Stories like that about Merely Manor.’

‘But there is this medal.’

‘Won’t be worth much. I collect them, y’know. What d’you say it is?’

Gently told him. There was a slight pause at the Merely end of the phone.

‘Innocent III?’

‘So Peachment says. And the inscription reads INNOCENTI III.’

‘Describe it to me.’

Gently described it. He had a feeling that Sir Daynes was holding his breath.

‘That’s dashed queer.’

‘Is it worth much?’

‘My dear Gently, it’s almost priceless. There are only two or three known examples. How did our Peachment get his hands on one?’

Gently smiled at the spitting fire. This was young Peachment over again! But clearly the old harness-maker’s house at Cross held one mystery. Unless . . .

‘Of course, we’ve only the nephew’s word about where he got it.’

The phone made irritable noises.

‘Doesn’t matter where he got it, man. We still want to know where it came from.’

‘It’s in Extremely Fine condition.’

‘You’re making my blasted mouth water!’

‘But doesn’t that suggest . . . say, a collection?’

‘Now you’re making a little sense.’

Gently prodded the medal where it lay on its envelope.

‘I’ll check, of course, if one is missing. Seaby’s will know where they are . . . if there are only three, it shouldn’t take long. But suppose none of the known ones are missing?’

‘Then you’ll grill that nephew silly.’

‘But if he’s telling the truth?’

Sir Daynes made throat-noises. ‘Yes . . . begin to see what you mean.’

‘A collection . . . a fabulous collection . . . perhaps other semi-unique pieces. Maybe nothing to do with the legend, but certainly something to do with Peachment.’

‘But a theft like that—’

‘It may not yet have been discovered.’

‘But there’d be records of such a collection.’

‘Not if it were put together illicitly by someone buying stolen coins.’

Sir Daynes honked and hawed a little. The smile was still on Gently’s face.

‘So what do we do, man?’

‘It’s up to you. I think, on balance, perhaps Peachment was murdered.’

‘Hrmph! And I’d certainly like to see that medal.’

‘I could bring it along. If I got the case.’

When he hung up the smile was a grin. He poured himself a Cognac and sat down to drink it. Then he picked up the phone again, raked off a number, propped the receiver under his chin.

‘Gently . . . send me a car, will you? I have some property that should be under lock and key.’

Half an hour later, when the car arrived, the rain was changing into snow.

CHAPTER TWO

CROSS WAS a slushy, two-and-a-half-hour drive up the A's 12 and 140, with dimmed headlights and wipers grinding at a dirty mist all the way. You turned off at Broome, a village with a handsome coaching-inn, and a murderous mile later ran into the outskirts of the little town.

On another day it would have been charming. It was built on a slope beside a small lake. Across the lake you saw Georgian houses forming a crescent around the lake shore.

Water Street, the principal thoroughfare, spread out and divided at the top of the slope, showing off handsome gables and facades and the Ionic portico of the Corn Exchange.

A piece of Old England! But you needed to come back in June. Just now it was huddled in a dirty gloom which the glowing shop windows seemed to make more dreary. Pedestrians' breath smoked as they pulled away from cars that hissed past the narrow pavements. A few grimy pigeons huddled in the nooks of the Corn Exchange.

Gently held second all the way up Water Street, where vans parked regardless of yellow lines. At the top he pulled in beside a fishmonger's. The man at the slab was grinning with cold.

'Where's the police station?'

'Keep a-goin'. Take the second on the left.'

He stared curiously for a moment, then turned and began jiggling and chafing his fingers.

The police station was a worn-out building with a date on a plaque, 1905. It was built of dark red brick and an inferior freestone which was flaking off round doors and windows. Gently parked in a slot near the steps. He entered a dank hall with a tiled floor. A huge, bulging, green-painted radiator stood clear of the wall and wheezed unhappily.

'I'd like to speak to Chief Inspector Boyland.'

The young constable at the desk was slow to attend to him. Then, learning his name, he blushed childishly and collided with a chair as he came round the desk.

'This way, sir. I'll just . . .'

They went down a corridor laid with balding blue lino. The constable tapped hastily at the door at the end, opened it a little to hiss, 'Sir . . . he's arrived, sir!'

Gently went in.

'Inspector Gissing. He's in charge of the case.'

Gently shook hands with a heavy-faced, benevolent-looking man. Boyland himself was plump and jowled and had a thin moustache which looked out of place.

'This business about a medal . . .'

They'd both been drinking beer, though the glasses had been hurriedly pushed to one side. A plate with crumbs on it lay on the desk. Presumably Gently had disturbed their elevenses.

'It's a bit out of character, don't you think? I mean, old Peachment wasn't worth a bean. There's only the house, and that's falling down.'

He was plainly embarrassed and trying to talk his way out of it.

'Any more of that beer?'

'What . . . what . . . ?'

'I'm feeling a bit dry after my drive.'

Boyland stared at him round-eyed a moment, then chuckled and pulled open a drawer of his desk.

‘Sorry . . . didn’t know . . . you being such a nob.’

‘And a couple of sandwiches would go down.’

In the end he was sitting in Boyland’s chair with a glass of nut-brown and a full plate beside him while Boyland sprawled fatly on the edge of the desk and Gissing leant comfortably against a radiator.

‘Let me put you in the picture. I’ve had another long chat with young Peachment. I can’t shake his story about finding the medal. I think we’ll just have to accept it.’

‘Well, I don’t know,’ Boyland said dubiously.

‘Naturally, I’ve done some checking on Peachment. He seems to be a fairly clean-living young man. No trouble with us. No doubtful acquaintances.’

‘Have you checked on his alibi, sir?’ Gissing asked.

‘Yes. He was back in his flat by ten p.m.’

Gissing’s eyes were blank. ‘He could have done it,’ he said. ‘It’s running it close . . . but he could have.’

Gently drank a mouthful of nut-brown.

‘Just for the moment, let’s leave him in the clear. He’s telling a straight story about his movements, about finding the medal in his uncle’s book-room. Now, if the theory’s right, someone knew about that medal, and that’s why Peachment was beaten up. What I want is a list of people who were friends or associates of the dead man.’

Boyland shook his head. ‘Won’t be easy. Peachment didn’t have any chums.’

‘People he talked to.’

‘That’s just it. He never gave time of day to anyone.’

‘He was a rum ’un, sir,’ Gissing put in. ‘After his wife died he sort of closed up. You’d see him ambling around and muttering to himself; but he’d never speak a word to you.’

‘What about tradesmen?’

‘There’s the milkman,’ Gissing said. ‘It was him who went in and found the body. But he was in bed asleep when Peachment was killed – I checked him out. His family vouch for him.’

‘Other tradesmen?’

‘Nobody delivered. He’d buy his bits and pieces out.’

‘Doctor?’

‘He was on Doctor Paley’s list, but I don’t think the Doctor ever visited him.’

‘And he didn’t have any neighbours,’ Boyland said. ‘He was the only resident in Frenze Street. It was the livestock market down there, and Hampton’s warehouse, and some other old properties.’

Gently drank some more nut-brown. Almost, you felt, they were trying to be unhelpful! If there was a murderer going loose, they didn’t want him pinned to the comfortable, crime-free town of Cross. Whereas young Peachment . . .

‘Where’s the PM report?’

Boyland slid off the desk and fetched it for him. It listed twenty-seven separate bruises on different parts of Peachment’s body. They were indifferently distributed about arms, legs, body, face, and only two were described as severe. The fractured skull presumably came from the stairs.

‘Anything strike you about this?’

Boyland’s stare was non-committal.

‘I saw the corpse, sir,’ Gissing said. ‘There were too many bruises there for a tumble.’

‘But the bruises themselves?’

‘Well . . . all over him, sir. Only light bruises, most of them.’

‘If a man were being beaten to extract information would you expect bruising like that?’

Gissing’s eyes went blank. Then he slowly shook his head.

‘You’d expect them more . . . localized, sir,’ he said. ‘And more severe?’

‘Yes, sir. More severe. I don’t think he was duffed up to make him talk.’

‘Then why was he beaten?’

Gissing’s head kept shaking. ‘It struck me as queer at the time, sir. Maybe revenge . . . something like that. All I know is they weren’t an accident.’

‘Maybe a nutter,’ Boyland said.

‘You have any nutters?’ Gently asked.

Boyland shrugged his plump shoulders. Clearly he wasn’t going to admit that!

About the legend of the gold hoard they were derisive. It was going around when Boyland was a kid. Wasn’t there always a tale of that sort about old houses like Harrisons? A queer old house, a queer old man – to the kids, he’d never be less than a miser. Gissing, who’d poked about the place pretty thoroughly, discounted the notion of a secret hiding-place.

‘You went through the book-room when you were there?’

‘Yes, sir. At least, there’s a room with books in it.’

‘Young Peachment says the medal was in a drawer in the book-room.’

‘Well, sir . . . actually, I was looking for a blunt instrument.’

‘What about the drawer?’

There were a couple of drawers. Gissing had glanced in and seen old papers. He had rustled them with his hand, found nothing sinister, closed the drawers and passed on.

‘So the medal might have been there?’

Yes, it might have been, folded away in its manila envelope. Which envelope Gently had sent down to the lab and had received a report on that left him no wiser.

He told them about the medal. He’d taken it back to Seaby’s, who of course remembered young Peachment bringing it in. As soon as Peachment had gone they’d done their own checking – none of the known Innocent III medals was missing. Two were in museums, in London and New York; the third belonged to a Greek millionaire. Gently had nailed them down to a valuation of fourteen hundred, though in an auction it might go higher.

‘And this is it.’

He laid the medal on the desk. They gazed at its heavy disc in silence.

That was what had been under the old bills, and what Gissing had nearly put his hand on . . .

‘Any coin-collectors in the town?’

He knew that would be a forlorn hope.

‘There’s Bressingham . . . he keeps an antique shop. But he wouldn’t stock anything like this.’

‘I’ll talk to him. He might know something.’

‘This knocks me all of a heap,’ Boyland said. ‘If old Peachment had one of these, why not a dozen or a score?’

‘The hoard of gold, sir,’ Gissing said.

‘Meanwhile,’ Gently said, ‘this one. If there’s nothing else you can think of to tell me, I’d like to

go along and look at the house.'

~~They watched with the same, childlike silence as he wrapped up the medal again in its tissue.~~

'If there's room in your safe . . .'

'Of course.'

Boyland hastened to unlock the old, double-doored Chubb, which stood in a corner.

'You'd like a receipt?'

'I'll trust you this time.'

Boyland took the medal into his two hands, handling it as though he thought it might burn him.

A clock struck somewhere in the gloom as Gently and Gissing came out of the police station. It was noon, but it might have been any hour of what passed for daylight at the end of November.

They snuggled gratefully into Gently's Sceptre, still a little warm from the drive down. Gissing had donned a hefty tweed greatcoat of a style that Gently hadn't seen for years.

'Have you had any snow here?'

'Two nights ago. We'll be getting some more soon.'

'What sort of weather was it when Peachment was killed?'

Gissing thought a moment, then said, 'A mild spell.'

He directed Gently back down Water Street and then left past a car park. A further left turn brought them into a narrow street with a sale-ground and cattle-pens along one side. Opposite was a terrace of old straw-thatched cottages, their thatch moulting, windows boarded; beyond, and set back, steeply pantiled gables, and finally a dreary red-brick depository warehouse.

'Frenze Street . . . it's pretty old.'

Gently grunted, let the Sceptre coast.

'Before they built the market there were a lot of old houses . . . looked like something out of Dickens.'

'A cul-de-sac?'

'Yes. There's a footway through to Thingoe Road.'

'Cars park here at night?'

'Never seen many. The park we went past is free.'

Even now Frenze Street had atmosphere, with the best part of its glories gone. It was slightly domed, legged, a little sloped. Its buildings seemed watchful in the misty twilight. Pretty old . . . A spirit of age had taken root in the place.

'Here's Harrisons.'

It was the house of the pantiled gables, at the very end of the street and butting on to the warehouse yard. A [-shaped Elizabethan house, with the two gable-fronts of unequal size. The wings were apparently of three storeys and the central portion of two. There were a number of irregular small windows. The front had been rendered with a drab plaster. It stood withdrawn from the street behind rusting palings and a tangle of dead willow-herb, nettles and rank grass.

'Goes back a bit, wouldn't you say?'

Above the steep roofs were tall, twisted brick chimneys. One of them had been rebuilt at some stage. The other was an original Tudor chimney.

'Why is it called Harrisons?'

Gissing shrugged. 'Name of the bloke who built it, I reckon.'

‘It’s not on record?’

‘Not to my knowledge. Perhaps the Town Clerk knows something about it.’

‘Yet a place like this . . .’

It stood out sharply: once, this had been an important house. The house of a mayor, or a lord of the manor – perhaps the most important house in Cross. Surely all record of it hadn’t vanished except for the name of one forgotten owner?

‘Perhaps you’ll get on to the Town Clerk for me.’

‘Yes, sir. Though I’m pretty sure there’s nothing known about it.’

‘Who’ll have the deeds?’

Gissing thought. ‘I believe Howard and Patch are the lawyers.’

He ignored the beleaguered front of the house and led Gently into the warehouse yard. The house apparently shared the yard because it was separated by no fence. A side-door opened directly into it, then came an outwork with grass-choked gutters, then an open-sided shed almost full of junk, and finally a high garden wall.

‘That’s the footway to Thingoe Road.’

A dim passage led away past the wall of the warehouse. Half a dozen kids who’d been chasing the passage now clustered at the entry, watching the two policemen.

‘A right of way?’

‘Yes. That fellow’s Colkett.’

A hard-framed man wearing a baize apron stood at the warehouse door, also watching.

‘Did he see anything?’

‘No. He packs up there at half-past five.’

‘Did you talk to the kids?’

‘One or two of them. But by then they’d all gone home.’

And that was that. By eight p.m. there would be nobody left in Frenze Street – perhaps not even a parked car farther down, at the town end. Just the old man living alone in his old, decaying house. With a door which, according to his nephew, didn’t even possess a bolt.

And in one of his drawers, a fabulous medal. Why hadn’t the murderer made a search?

‘That door – the one that didn’t lock – has it been secured since?’

‘Yes, sir. We put a padlock on it.’

‘Which is it?’

‘This way, sir.’

Gissing led him into the open-sided shed, skirting several piles of rubbish. It was dank inside, and ferns grew on the house wall where rain dripped on it from the shed roof. Gissing struck a match. It revealed a cottage-type door with a simple latch-handle, but now fitted with a sturdy padlock which looked some centuries out of place.

Gissing unlocked it and pushed open the door. They went into a sort of hall or passage. At one end was a rusty gas-cooker and another door, which simply pushed open.

‘The kitchen . . . I’d say he mostly lived in here.’

‘What did he do about lights?’

‘This . . . I reckon.’

Gissing pointed to a hurricane-lamp that stood on a concrete draining-slab near the door.

‘Well – light it.’

The lamp made a squealing as Gissing hooked up the globe. A moment later its yellow light dimly showed them the low-ceilinged room.

A table, two deal chairs, a grandfather chair by the old hobbled hearth. On the worn brick floor a strip of coconut matting. A brown-painted dresser with some bits of crockery. In one corner a door stood ajar to reveal twisty, naked backstairs. A third door led to an adjacent room. A fourth into a passage.

‘Not much comfort in here.’

Only where the grandfather chair stood. The rest would be a wilderness of draughts, torturing the rheumatism in old bones.

‘I reckon you’d need to be cracked, sir.’

Alone, with the winter nights passing. By a small fire with a dim light. The other one gone. Alone.

‘Had he any money?’

‘A few hundred quid, sir. All invested with a housing society.’

‘And the medal.’

‘Perhaps he didn’t know its value.’

Or perhaps he didn’t care. There was nothing left to buy.

‘Let’s see where you found him.’

Gissing took him down the passage, past a back hall with a fourth outer door, then to a front hall which ran the depth of the house and had two sets of stairs leading from it.

‘Right there, sir. Where you’re standing.’

They were at the foot of the inner stairs. A short set, they rose to a landing closed by a dark panelled door.

‘He was lying with his legs still up the stairs and his head twisted under a bit. Brinded, that’s the milkman, came in for his money, looked up the passage and saw him there.’

‘Did he move him?’

‘Says he didn’t. Not much doubt the old boy was dead.’

‘Did you notice the expression on Peachment’s face?’

‘Yes, sir. Eyes open. Scared.’

And on the grimy floorboards, the bare stairs, no intelligible marks or footprints: not even much blood. A little had leaked from a broken bruise on the old man’s cheek.

‘Presumably he was attacked up the stairs?’

‘Well, he did fall down them, sir.’

Though this was inference again. The appearance of a fall might have been faked.

‘What’s up there?’

‘Just an empty room.’

‘What was his purpose in an empty room?’

Gissing shook his head. ‘That’s a mystery, sir. Unless he went up there to hide.’

They went up the stairs. All they led to was an L-shaped room with a small window. It was not much larger than a big cupboard and was fitted with wide shelves in the toe of the L. They were made of thin, scrubbed, knotless boards, and suggested an old country-house pantry. A small deal table and a kitchen chair occupied a position by the window.

Gently pointed to the latter. 'These were here?'

'Yes, sir. Just where they are now.'

'You examined the shelves?'

'Yes, sir. No signs that anything had been removed.'

A strange room! How had it come to be worth a separate flight of stairs? And why the chair and the table. What had old Peachment done up here?

If he'd been a writer, now . . .

Gently sat on the chair and rested his elbows on the table. Yes, that way round you could write the table without your being in your own light. And then, on the table . . . He rubbed at a stain, held his finger to his nose, sniffed. Paraffin! The old man had stood his hurricane lamp on the table.

Gissing was staring around in his stolid way.

'I reckon he was hiding up here, sir,' he said. 'He could hear chummie moving around in the house so he slid up here to be out of the way.'

'He could have locked himself in.'

Gently nodded to the door. It had an ancient lock framed into the panelling. Also it was fitted inside with a bolt, apparently of equal date with the rest. Lower down, a small panel was missing leaving an aperture about the size of a postcard.

'Maybe he was too scared.'

Gently shrugged. 'Maybe. Was the door open when you found him?'

'Yes – and the key in the lock, the way it is now.'

Was it a sort of prison, that room? The door, for instance, was extremely solid. The window, which was the shape of a letter-box, had sockets in the frame that would take a bar. The floorboards were massive planks twelve or fourteen inches wide. Through the window you looked into an overgrown garden shut in by walls on three sides.

A prison . . . had there been a prisoner?

'Come on. Let's see the rest of the house.'

Suddenly he was feeling the chill damp of the place, the skin of his back was beginning to prickle.

'I tell you something, sir,' Gissing said, as they went down the stairs again. 'I wouldn't live here if someone paid me. I reckon this place has got too old.'

CHAPTER THREE

A PANTECHNICON RUMBLED by in the street and bumped into the yard with rattles and a clanking. Through cobwebbed lace curtains Gently could see some of the kids, huddled like starlings on the rail of a cattle pen.

Frenze Street.

He and Gissing had arrived in the book-room, a narrow chamber with a rotting floor and a meagre little glazed-tile fireplace.

Not exactly a library! On the inner wall stood a black-painted bookcase about six feet high, shelves above and lockers below, and two drawers with brass ring-handles. A writing-table, a couple of chairs, and a ragged carpet were the rest of the furniture. The floor had rotted through in a corner near the hearth. Everywhere dust, cobwebs, rot-smell.

No wonder Gissing hadn't lingered there in his hopeful quest for a blunt instrument.

'One of those drawers . . . ?'

There were no others. They each took one and tipped its contents on the carpet. Old receipts, some twopenny almanacks, chalk, a thimble, a set of false teeth. In Gissing's drawer, a couple of farthings, one bearing Queen Victoria's head.

Was it credible that the medal had turned up amongst this rubbish?

The books, furry with dust, were sticking to the shelves and each other. They comprised a few cheap classics, books on horses and farriery, novels, a ten-volume county history. In the lockers below they found Peachment's old account-books along with more receipts and a family Bible. A quaint wall-cupboard under a window contained nothing but dry rot.

'I don't know, sir . . . it's hard to believe . . .'

Gissing lit a fag with grimy fingers.

From a long way off they could hear shouting and bumping as the pantechnicon discharged its load in the yard.

'You think young Peachment is trying to work something?'

'Well, sir, if he'd swiped that medal . . .'

'But someone did kill the old man.'

Gissing fanned smoke. Then slowly he shrugged his shoulders.

They packed the trash back in the drawers and left the book-room to its rot. But wherever you went in that icy house you met neglect and decay. Rooms that were furnished had been left to frowst behind closed doors and jammed windows. Empty rooms, showing wormy floorboards, exhaled a doggy smell that was unmistakable.

In a cheap wardrobe in one of the bedrooms they found a woman's clothes hanging, below them a hand-bag and mouldy shoes. On the dressing-table, a prayer-book.

'The lofts . . . they're worth seeing.'

Each loft was reached by a separate staircase. Three great halls under the high-pitched rafters, the suggested the carcasses of long-dead whales. They were floored, and one possessed a huge hearth. The rafters caging them were rot-stained and peppered. A number had been replaced with poles of fir to which the bark was still clinging.

Then there was the priest-hole, or something like one, which Gissing had discovered in downstairs room. The drawers below an alcove in a wall pulled out, and lo! behind them was a small dank cell.

Where they'd hidden the gold?

Gently knelt and pushed his head in. Light filtered down from a small, high window. But the alcove could have been of later construction, and was probably only intended to fill an awkward corner.

And yet . . . one more odd thing about Harrisons.

'Let's go out into the garden.'

Gissing led him to a cobwebbed door that clearly had not been used lately.

From the rear, the house looked a planless jumble. The space between the wings had been filled carelessly. Grotesquely sloping auxiliary roofs made cradles for moss and even young saplings. The west wing . . .

'Look . . . that wing is different.'

Standing out here, you could spot it at once. Besides being taller, the west wing was brick, while the rest of the house was timber-framed.

'Older, would you say, sir?'

No doubt of that: the stone-framed windows gave it away. And above, badly in need of pointing, reared the original chimneys Gently had noticed.

'Listen . . . those curious features . . . they're all in this corner of the house. The priest-hole, the rooms at different levels – including the one where Peachment was attacked.'

'And now you see why. We've two different houses . . . the main part built on to something older. Sixteenth century – even fifteenth . . . perhaps going back to the Dissolution.'

'You mean . . . ?'

Gissing put on his blank look.

Gently shrugged and shook his head. At least it was something of a coincidence that an Innocent I medal had turned up here.

'Surely the house is on record somewhere.'

Gissing's blank look didn't falter.

'Isn't it scheduled?'

'Don't think so, sir. We've got so many old drums round Cross.'

Gently moved deeper into the grassy jungle. Every line of the house was telling the same story. Compare, for example, the firm outline of the west wing with the slight sag and tilt of its neighbour. And the stone-framed windows: three complete storeys, against only two elsewhere – with those at the lowest level bricked-up, turning a sunken room into a half-cellar.

A house that silently seethed with history.

And an old, muttering man shuffling about it.

Under some rotting floorboard, behind a loose brick . . . wasn't it possible . . . just possible?

'Reckon that's the window of the priest-hole, sir.'

Gissing's interest flickered for a moment.

'And up there . . . that'll be the little room. You can just see the back of the chair.'

A tiny window with fixed, mullioned panes, and once a stout bar behind them. A punishment cell . . . a monkish prison? With an observation shutter in the door?

The garden itself was entirely enclosed and accessible only from the house. A sizeable plot,

showed no sign that old Peachment had ever set foot there.

‘What’s the old brick place over by the wall?’

‘Don’t know, sir. But I can guess.’

Gissing was right. It was a Northshire two-holer. In that county, they built their privies with two seats.

When they came out of the house the pantehnicon had gone, leaving a raffle of tea-chests stacked in the yard. The warehouseman, Colkett, was busy with a trolley, but he rested the shafts as they came by.

‘Found any treasures?’

‘Should we have done?’

Colkett was aged around forty. He had a leathery face with deep lines and smirking, inquisitive grey eyes.

He wasn’t put out by Gently’s rebuff. He leant grinning against the trolley. Then he fetched a tab-end from behind his ear and lit it, grinning all the time.

‘If what they say is right. Where there’s muck there’s money, you know. And I reckon there’s plenty of muck in there. You two haven’t come out with clean hands.’

True enough. The grime of Harrisons had a peculiarly clinging quality.

‘Have you a wash-place?’

‘There’s a sink.’

‘Perhaps you’ll be kind enough to let us use it.’

‘Do what you like,’ Colkett said. ‘I reckon the police are always the guv’nors.’

He led them through the open doors of the warehouse into a small but comfortable office. At one end was a sink equipped with a water-heater. Near it a kettle simmered on a gas-ring.

‘Home comforts.’

Colkett squeezed aside to let the policemen go through.

‘I was just going to brew up with my sandwiches. Perhaps you gents would like a cuppa?’

After the old house, a cheerful place. An oil convector stove was popping in a corner. A girl’s calendar hung on the wall above a table on which lay a thumbed, black stockbook.

‘You work here alone?’

Gently lathered with carbolic under a stream of water that was stinging hot.

‘All alone. That’s the way I like it. Just one boss and his shadow.’

‘You knew Peachment?’

‘I knew him.’ Colkett puffed on his tab-end. ‘Not to talk to – nobody did. But I’d see him ambling across the yard. “Hallo, Dad,” I’d say. “How’s the screw-matics?” And he’d sort of laugh and mumble something. You know what I think? He was deaf. Got his ears all bunged up with wax.’

‘Laughed, did he?’

Gently felt for a towel. Colkett shoved one into his hand.

‘Well . . . when I say laugh. Perhaps you’d call it a giggle. Miss him I do . . . old Peachey.’

Gently handed the towel on to Gissing and took his pipe out of his pocket. Colkett sprawled easily on a corner of the table, watching, the smirk lingering in his eyes.

Opposite the table a double window overlooked the yard and the wall behind it. Above the wall, the back of Harrisons, its dead windows staring blindly.

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