

ANTHONY BERKELEY

MURDER IN THE BASEMENT

'SOMEONE'S BEEN HIDING
SOMETHING IN THE CELLAR,
UNDER THE FLOOR, AND
BRICKED IT UP AGAIN.'

MURDER IN THE BASEMENT

Born in 1893, Anthony Berkeley (Anthony Berkeley Cox) was a British crime writer and a leading member of the genre's Golden Age. Educated at Sherborne School and University College London, Berkeley served in the British army during WWI before becoming a journalist. His first novel, *The Layton Court Murders*, was published anonymously in 1925. It introduced Roger Sheringham, the amateur detective who features in many of the author's novels including the classic *Poisoned Chocolates Case*. In 1930, Berkeley founded the legendary Detection Club in London along with Agatha Christie, Freeman Wills Crofts and other established mystery writers. It was in 1938, under the pseudonym Francis Iles (which Berkeley also used for novels) that he took up work as a book reviewer for *John O'London's Weekly* and *The Daily Telegraph*. He later wrote for *The Sunday Times* in the mid 1940s, and then for *The Guardian* from the mid 1950s until 1970. A key figure in the development of crime fiction, he died in 1971.

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ANTHONY BERKELEY

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MURDER IN THE BASEMENT

TO

GLYNN *and* NANCY

PROLOGUE

Young Mr. Reginald Dane drew his wife into a corner of the higgledy-piggledy drawing-room.

“I say,” he whispered, with a cautious eye on the hall. “I say, darling, how much do you think ought to give these men?”

“Haven’t the least idea, darling,” Molly Dane whispered back. “Ten shillings, would you think?”

“Between the three of them?” Reginald whispered doubtfully. “Better spring a quid, hadn’t I? They get pretty big tips, these chaps.”

“That ought to be plenty.”

Young Mr. Dane nodded in a conspirator-like way and, emerging from the corner, walked with an air of extreme carelessness towards a large man with a walrus moustache, who was hovering in an intent manner just inside the open front door. The large man affected to start in astonishment perceiving Reginald approaching him.

“Think you’ll find everything quite satisfactory now, sir,” said the large man, very deferentially.

Reginald nodded. He did not say that, to his certain knowledge, every single article of furniture, carefully labelled in advance with the name of the room for which it was destined, had been put in the wrong one, so that he and Molly would have to spend several laborious hours in sorting them out. Young Mr. Dane was not one to make unnecessary fuss. He simply said:

“Oh, yes. Quite. Most satisfactory. Perfectly. Excellent. Er—here you are.”

A look of bland amazement passed over the walrus moustache as its owner caught sight of Reginald’s outstretched hand.

“Well, thank you, sir,” he said, in tones of great wonder. “Thank you kindly.”

“That’s for—er—that’s among the three of you, you know.”

“Oh, yes, sir. Very good of you, I’m sure.”

“Not at all,” said Reginald, and fled.

“Was it enough?” asked his wife anxiously, as he rejoined her in the little drawing-room.

“Oh, yes, I think so,” Reginald replied nonchalantly. “He seemed quite pleased.”

Side by side they peeped through the uncurtained window.

With much banging and clattering the three men were closing up the end of the big furniture-van. One took his place at the wheel, one got up beside him, the third climbed into the back, and with a rapt, thirsty look on their faces the three emissaries of Ate drove away. If ever Ate returned to earth he would surely be in the guise of a furniture-remover. There is something so fateful about a furniture-van. Relentlessness urges it forward, and Destiny sits at the wheel.

Mr. Reginald Dane slipped an arm about his wife’s waist. “Well, darling, here we are,” he observed.

“We are, darling,” his wife agreed.

“Sorry the honeymoon’s over, and all that?”

His wife smiled, and shook her head.

Looking down into her smiling, upturned face, young Mr. Dane saw that it was good. He kissed it.

“So now let’s go and look round all this semi-detached messuage or tenement known to men as Burnt Oak Road, Lewisham, in the county of Middlesex,” said Reginald, quoting, somewhat inaccurately, from memory.

With solemn steps as befitted such a ceremonial, their arms about each other’s waists, Mr. and Mrs. Dane made their state progress from room to room. And wherever they looked, in spite of the disorder

in spite of the furniture so wrongly disposed, in spite of a wicked scratch on the brand-new dining-room table—lo! it was good.

Then Molly went off to make some tea in their new kitchen, and Reginald wandered in the direction of the front door. He opened it and planted himself in the little porch outside, and his eyes travelled proudly over the tiny strip of front garden at his feet. After that he went and planted himself in the French windows that opened out of the dining-room at the back and surveyed the minute garden there with its pocket-handkerchief lawn and its ragged little beds, now flowerless whatever had once been there, for the month was the depressing one of January. But to Reginald it was more beautiful than Kew in June.

“There’s even a cellar, you remember,” chanted Reginald, now at the kitchen door. “I’m going to have a look at it.”

Molly, busy with buttered toast, nodded brightly. “Don’t get too dirty, darling. Hadn’t you better wait till after tea? Why not see if you can get some of the curtains up now?”

“Curtains!” said Reginald with scorn. “When there might be a chest of gold forgotten in the cellar! You never know what people may leave behind. Darling, you must see that I couldn’t possibly have tea till I know for certain whether there’s a chest of gold in the cellar or not.”

He opened the door under the stairs, and ran down the flight of narrow steps.

It was not a large cellar certainly, but then it is something to have a cellar at all in a semi-detached villa in the suburbs. Moreover this particular cellar was lit by electric light. Reginald turned the switch and regarded the eight-by-ten cell of whitewashed brick with high approval; even the cobwebs hanging in thick festoons from every available projection, seemed to him the most satisfactory cobwebs he had ever seen. Draped round a bottle of old port, for instance. . .

In a moment Reginald had furnished the whole cellar with row upon row of delectable bottles.

Well, it really would make a perfect wine-cellar. The temperature was just about right, and the air seemed dry. The lime-wash on the walls was firm and hard, and the brick floor showed no signs of dampness. Except perhaps in one corner; the corner remote from the entrance. Reginald went across to look at it.

Certainly that corner was a little curious. There was a slight depression in the floor there—a long narrow depression, about five feet by fifteen inches, where the bricks seemed to have been laid not quite so evenly as over the rest of the floor. Reginald kicked the projecting edge of one idly, but it was quite firm.

Then something else caught his eye. Elsewhere the floor was frankly dirty, with a fine, dark-grey dust; but near one end of the depression, more towards the centre of the cellar, was a round patch of quite different colour, a light grey, through which the redness of the bricks did not show as it did on the rest of the floor. With sudden interest Reginald bent down and examined it.

Then he whistled, and began to look at the remainder of the floor with intentness. As if suddenly and quite unexpectedly, finding something that he was looking for, he bent down again and ran his hand once or twice over some bricks in the very middle of the floor, examining the result on his finger-tips. Finally, with a loud whoop, he bounded up the cellar steps and into the kitchen.

“I’ve found it, darling! I’ve found our chest of gold! ”

Molly, pouring boiling water into the tea-pot, looked up, “*What?*”

“Well, perhaps it mayn’t be a chest of gold, but it’s something. Someone’s been hiding something in the cellar, under the floor, and bricked it up again. Come and look.”

“But the toast will get cold.”

“Blow the toast! Put it under the grid. Darling, you *must* come.”

Molly came.

In the cellar Reginald proudly explained. “See that depression? That’s where it is. And see the light-coloured patch? That’s where they mixed the mortar to cement the bricks in again. Must be. And see this patch just here? Look—it’s earth! Someone had those bricks up not so long ago, dug a hole underneath, piled the earth here, and cached something. When he put the earth back again he didn’t stamp it down tight enough, and it’s sunk; hence that depression. Darling, I’m convinced there’s a chest of gold under this floor.”

“Much more likely to have been a plumber, playing with the drains,” replied Mrs. Dane, who was a matter-of-fact young woman.

“Anyhow, I’m going to see. I noticed a rusty old pickaxe in the garden. I’m going to have those bricks up.” He bounded up the stairs again.

“But, darling, tea’s ready,” wailed his wife after him.

Reginald carried out his excavations alone. Not all the chests of gold in the world can dash a cup of tea from a woman’s lips.

Sipping contentedly in the higgledy-piggledy drawing-room, Molly listened to the blows of the pickaxe, and smiled secretly. After a while they ceased, but Reginald did not appear. At last she went to the top of the cellar stairs and called to him.

“Well, darling, is it a chest of gold?”

Her husband’s voice came up to her, oddly shaky.

“Don’t come down, Molly. There—there’s something pretty beastly here. I must get a policeman.”

PART I

CHAPTER I

By half-past six the remainder of the bricks and covering earth had been removed by the two constables, with their pickaxes and spades, and the body was fully exposed. Under the directions of the police surgeon it was lifted out of the shallow grave and laid on the floor of the cellar.

“There’s no need for your men to stay here,” Chief Inspector Moresby told the divisional inspectors. “The atmosphere for the atmosphere in the cellar was close. “They can wait upstairs, or in the garden.”

Thankfully the two lumbered up the cellar stairs with their tools.

“You’d all better go upstairs,” grunted the police surgeon as he bent to examine the body. “It’s none too pleasant here.”

“Well, we can’t do any good watching you, doctor, and that’s a fact,” assented Chief Inspector Moresby. “Come on, both of you.”

He led the way out of the cellar, and Sergeant Afford, whom Moresby had brought with him from headquarters, and Inspector Rice followed him.

Young Mr. and Mrs. Dane were hovering anxiously in the hall.

“Is it—is there someone really there?” quavered the latter.

The chief inspector laid a large and kindly hand on the shoulder of each. “It’s a bad business, I’m afraid; I won’t disguise it from you. About as bad as it can be.”

“A nice end to a honeymoon,” said young Mr. Dane, with a rather shaky laugh. “What is it, inspector?”

“It’s a woman.”

“Oh-h-h-h-h,” Molly Dane shuddered.

The chief inspector became practical. “Just moved in, haven’t you? Now I’m going to make a suggestion. You’re not straight here yet, I see; carpets not down and so on. Is there somewhere you could go to for a night or two— friends perhaps, who could put you up? We shall be in and out of here for a day or two, you see, and it won’t be very nice for you; then you can come back when we’re finished—and I’ll get one of my men to give you a hand with your carpets and so on. What do you say? Is it a bargain? ”

“I don’t feel I could ever come back,” said Molly:

“We could go to my wife’s people,” Reginald replied.

“They live in London. And our suit-cases aren’t even unpacked yet.”

“Then that’s arranged,” beamed the chief inspector. “I’ll send my sergeant round with you in the car, to explain. That’s fine. Now, what about those suit-cases? No point in delaying.”

Within ten minutes Mr. and Mrs. Dane had set off in a police car on the long ride from Lewisham to Hampstead, escorted, quite unnecessarily Mr. Dane felt, by Sergeant Afford. But then Mr. Dane did not know that the sergeant’s real mission was to explain not so much to Mrs. Dane’s people as to the local detective division, and add the request that a quiet eye be kept upon the pair while they were in Hampstead. Scotland Yard cannot afford to take anything or anybody at its appearance-value.

In the meantime Chief Inspector Moresby was talking, in the higgledy-piggledy drawing-room, to a stout man with a face like a very gloomy full moon. This was Superintendent Green, from Scotland Yard, who had arrived just as the Danes were leaving.

“About six inches deep, she was. The earth had been packed over her, and the bricks laid again over that. You’ll see for yourself, Mr. Green.”

“Nude, you say?”

~~“Except for her gloves. I’d say she was dressed in outdoor things, and the clothes were taken away to prevent identification. The murderer just didn’t bother about her gloves.”~~

Green nodded. “That’s probably it. Not going to make our job any easier. It’s not likely we’ll get anything from the gloves, especially as he left them.”

“There’ll probably be some distinguishing marks on the body, sir,” Moresby opined. “Ah, here’s Dr. Remington. This is Superintendent Green, doctor, from headquarters. Well? Have you found anything to help us?”

The doctor, a tall, spare man with a stoop, carefully shut the door behind him. “Not much, I’m afraid, chief inspector. The body’s in an advanced stage of decomposition, as no doubt you saw. The features certainly aren’t recognisable. I’d say she’s been buried there for six months at the least.”

The two police officers looked glum. Six months meant a very cold trail to be followed.

“Age?” asked Superintendent Green laconically.

“I can’t put it nearer than that she was a young, or comparatively young, woman. Say twenty-three to thirty. Well nourished. Healthy, so far as I can see superficially. Teeth in good condition.”

“No stoppings?”

“Not one.”

The superintendent frowned. Dentists’ work is one of the surest ways of identifying an unknown corpse. “What class would you put her in?”

“There again I can hardly tell you. The hands are too far gone to enable me to say whether she was accustomed to work with them, but her gloves look good. I took them off, by the way. I expected you’d want them at once. They’re very much stained, but they’re all there in the way of an external clue.”

“Thanks. Yes, we’ll want to get to work on them at once. She was shot, the chief inspector told me?”

“Through the back of the head,” nodded the doctor.

“The bullet passed through, and came out of the forehead.”

“Ah! We’ll have to find that bullet, Moresby.”

“I had a bit of a look round, as soon as we saw she’d been shot,” Moresby said dubiously. “I haven’t found it yet.”

“Any idea of the calibre, doctor?”

“Fairly large, I think. At a guess, and as near as I can put it at present, I should suggest a .45 service revolver.”

The detectives looked still more gloomy. So many officers retained their service revolvers after the war, and omitted to take out licences for them, that to trace a shot from one of them, even given the bullet with its distinctive markings, is almost impossible; and when the bullet is missing . . .

“Any birthmarks, or scars on the body?” asked the superintendent.

“So far as I’ve been able to see yet, neither. If there were I doubt if they would still be decipherable. There’s not much skin left, you know.”

“This looks as if it was going to be a job,” grumbled Moresby.

“Too early for the doctor to say yet,” Superintendent Green remarked. “We must wait till we’ve got your full report, doctor. Can you wait a few minutes? I’ll go down with the chief inspector and have a look at the body, and then we’ll get it along to the mortuary at once. Ready, Moresby?”

The two detectives went down to the cellar on their gruesome mission.

In the dining-room the divisional inspector and his sergeant had begun a painstaking search of the

house, not really with the expectation of finding anything to throw light on the tragedy, but simply because nothing must be left to chance. The two constables were still thankfully inhaling fresh air in the front garden, chatting with their colleague at the gate, whose orders were to admit no one.

A very few minutes sufficed the superintendent for his examination of the body, and he learned from it nothing at all. A rough shroud was then fashioned out of bits of felt and brown paper left by the furniture-removers, and arrangements put in hand for getting it to the mortuary.

"Phew!" said the chief inspector, as he descended again to the cellar with the superintendent. "That's a bit better. Now we can look round properly. You think she was shot here, Mr. Green?"

"Too early to think anything," grunted the other. "Let's see what we can find. The grave first."

The two stout men went down on their knees by the churned-up earth, in the middle of which the impression made by the body was still plain, and began to sift it through their fingers with the utmost care, in search of any article however trifling that might have been inadvertently buried at the same time. When this had proved useless, Moresby took a pick and loosened the surface on which the body had lain, which was also treated in the same way, and finally dug a foot down until he struck a layer of gravel which had plainly never been disturbed. Not so much as a match-stalk rewarded his work.

"Try the walls, then," said the superintendent philosophically.

Here better luck awaited them. On one of the two walls allotted to him Moresby almost at once found a mark on the whitewashed surface, at about the level of his own shoulders, which he examined closely.

"She was shot here, sir. Here's the mark where the bullet struck. Plain traces of lead."

The superintendent came over to look. "Yes, that was no nickel-coated bullet. Bears out what the doctor said. Well. . ." As if at a command both heads bent abruptly to the floor at the foot of the wall, and simultaneously a disappointed expression appeared on each face. "Not a hope," said Green, voicing their common thought. "He must have taken it off with him. Seems to me we're dealing with a very well-planned crime here, Moresby."

"True enough, Mr. Green," agreed Moresby ruefully, and did not add his fear that the chances of catching its author seemed a little slim.

The two spent another twenty minutes in the cellar, during which every square inch of the walls, ceiling and floor underwent the scrutiny of at least one pair of keen eyes, without however revealing anything else of the slightest help. All that was plain was that the murderer had shot his victim here, had dug her grave, and had methodically mixed the mortar which he must have expected would hold her down for ever.

Up in the drawing-room again the superintendent lowered his bulk into one of the still swathe armchairs. "Premeditated, of course," he began to deliver his opinion. "Otherwise why take her into the cellar at all? Dare say he had the cement and sand all ready. Might get a line there. Cement isn't usually bought in small quantities; enquire for a single bag sold six to nine months ago. Sand not so hopeful, but try it all the same. Know anything about this house? Was it empty six months ago?"

"I don't know yet. I thought of having a word with the neighbours on each side as soon as we're through here; and Afford can get on to the house-agent when he gets back. I've got his name and address here. His office will be shut, of course, but Afford can follow him up."

The superintendent nodded approval of these suggestions. "As for the girl, there seemed enough of her face left for the doctors to fake up quite a fair reconstruction," he said grimly. "We'll have that circulated to the Press, of course. And then you'll simply have to work through the 'missing' list; you ought to be able to get a line on her that way, with any luck."

"Yes, sir; of course," said Moresby, without quite so much of his usual geniality. It was an arduous

task that his superior officer had tossed him so casually.

~~“And put Afford on to making enquiries round here. There should be gossip of some kind. That’s a~~
I can suggest for the moment. We’ll go into it more closely tomorrow morning, when we’ve got the
doctor’s report. I’ll be getting along now.”

When the superintendent had gone, Moresby joined the divisional inspector, who was now ferreting
about in the kitchen. The latter reported that so far he had found nothing. “And don’t expect to, M
Moresby,” he added gloomily.

“You never know,” Moresby comforted. “And if there is anything, you’ll find it, I’m sure. Pay
particular attention to the fire-places; that’s where people throw things, you know.”

It was now getting on for eight o’clock, and as cold as a late January night at that hour might be
expected to be. Moresby was not sorry that his own immediate business took him out of the chill
untenanted house into warmer ones. He stepped into the dank darkness outside, and turned to his left.
Burnt Oak Road was made up of pairs of semi-detached villas, of the four-bed., two-sit., spacious-an-
commodious-kit., type. The one to which Moresby now turned was the Siamese twin of the Danes’.

A gaping little maid opened the door to him.

“Is Mr. Peters in?” said Moresby pleasantly.

The maid gaped a little wider. “Peters? He don’t live here. It’s Mr. Cottington as lives here.”

“Did I say Peters? I meant Cottington, of course. Is he in?”

“Well, he’s having his supper.”

One of the doors opening on to the tiny hall was pushed ajar, and a bald little head came round it,
to be followed the next moment into the hall by its owner. “Someone to see me, Mabel?”

“Yes, sir, but I told him you was having your supper.”

“I’ve finished, I’ve finished.”

“Then in that case if I might have a word with you, sir,” said Moresby, who by this time was inside
the hall too.

Mr. Cottington seemed doubtful as to whether his visitor might have a word with him or not. He
took off his gold-rimmed spectacles, looked at them dubiously, as if they were an oracle of some sort,
and replaced them. “Well . . .” he said feebly. “I’m rather busy, you know.”

“I’m not connected with any business firm, sir,” Moresby smiled.

Mr. Cottington brightened. “Oh, well, then. All right. Mabel, you can go. Come into the sitting-
room, Mr. . . ?”

“Moresby, sir.” The chief inspector became aware of another head round the same door, a rather
nice head with greying hair and a comfortably motherly face, at the moment undisguisedly curious.
“And if Mrs. Cottington could join us . . . ?”

The next minute they were all three in the sitting-room, sitting comfortably on chairs round
a cheerful little fire.

“I didn’t wish to say so in front of your maid, Mr. Cottington,” Moresby said genially, “but I am
a police officer.” He produced a card and gave it to his host, who read it with high interest and passed
it to his wife.

“Well, really,” said that lady, not without trepidation.

“I’m making enquiries about the house next door, No. 4,” Moresby explained quickly. “I understand
_____”

“Oh, what *has* been happening?” interrupted Mrs. Cottington, her trepidation quite forgotten. “I saw
the new tenants moving in this afternoon, and the furniture men go away, and I was just wondering
whether I’d go across and offer them some tea here, what with them being in such a muddle, when

saw Mr. Dane (I think their name's Dane) run out without his hat or anything, and come back with a policeman; and then more police arrived, and all sorts of other men, and cars, and then Mr. and Mrs. Dane came out to one of the cars and drove off, and the police stayed there. I've just been telling my husband all about it at supper. Mabel—that's our maid—said they've found a body in the cellar, but I couldn't believe that."

The chief inspector sighed behind his smile. At every supper-table in Burnt Oak Road at that very moment, he knew, excited wives were telling incredulous husbands that a body had been found in the cellar at No. 4; and in each case the information would have come from the Mabel of the household.

"Not in this road," added Mr. Cottington. "Always been very quiet and respectable, this road has been. That's why we came here ourselves. I told my wife such a thing couldn't happen here. Of course, it's all a silly tale? Behind their spectacles his eyes gleamed almost as eager a curiosity as his wife's.

Moresby had already made up his mind. A little confidence will produce far greater results in the way of information than a too correct reticence; and in any case the papers had it already. "Yes, it's quite true," he nodded.

"Well, I *never!*" ejaculated Mrs. Cottington ecstatically.

"But how on earth do the Mabels get their information?" added the chief inspector, with a humorous groan. "That's what beats me."

"Then I'll show you," whispered Mr. Cottington, as he tiptoed across the room, and flung open the door with a sudden jerk.

The result was admirable.

"Mabel!" boomed Mr. Cottington. "Go back to your kitchen!"

An atmosphere of friendly confidence being thus induced, the Cottingtons vied with each other in giving their thrilling visitor all the information he wanted.

Put more briefly, this amounted to the interesting fact that No. 4 had, before its lease to the Dane had been vacant only a few weeks; six months ago it had been occupied, by an elderly spinster whose name was Miss Staples. Miss Staples had died last October, in consequence of which the house fell vacant.

This was not at all what Moresby had expected. He had taken it for granted that six months ago the house was either vacant, or occupied by a man who would prove to be the murderer. The character of Miss Staples, as the Cottingtons described it, seemed to shut out the remotest possibility of her being concerned in the crime in any way; she had been a gentle, feckless creature, incompetent in the most ordinary things of life and devoted to a fat pug and a fatter white Persian cat. How, then, had her household managed during her occupancy of it to acquire a very obviously murdered corpse under its cellar floor?

Here the Cottingtons were able to supply a valuable suggestion. Miss Staples had been away from her home for three weeks in August, on her annual holiday. It must have been during that period, Moresby considered, that her cellar had been put to this improper use.

He questioned them closely as to whether they had noticed at any time during those three weeks any signs of improper occupancy of the house while its owner was absent, but they had noticed nothing. They had indeed been away themselves for the first fortnight in August.

Moresby obtained the exact dates of the Cottingtons' absence, and approximate ones for that of Miss Staples, and then, having asked the names of the occupiers of No. 6, took his leave with many expressions of genial gratitude.

The tenants of No. 6 were an elderly and retired insurance broker of the name of Williams, and his two elderly sisters. They also received the Scotland Yard man in a flutter of excitement, and the

information received from their Mabel had first to be confirmed before questions could be asked.

These preliminaries settled, it appeared that they had known Miss Staples very well indeed, and while agreeing completely with the Cottingtons' estimate of her, were able to add a number of details to complete her picture in Moresby's mind. It became still more certain that Miss Staples must have remained in ignorance of what had happened in her cellar. Moreover when she came back from her holiday at the end of August she had said not a word to the Misses Williams as to her house having been entered in her absence; and both ladies gave it as their firm opinion that had Miss Staples noticed the slightest thing amiss she would certainly have spoken of it to them.

Had any of the three heard or noticed anything suspicious? Nothing; but then they had been on holiday themselves (Moresby was interested to hear) during the second and third weeks in August. Most curious, wasn't it, how everyone took their holidays in August, even people who had no real need to, like Miss Staples and themselves, although it really wasn't the best month for weather, and everyone knew that prices were much dearer; just habit; most curious. Most curious; it wasn't possible, was it, to fix the exact dates of Miss Staples's absence? Yes, indeed it was; Letty's diary they all laughed at Letty for keeping a diary, but one never *knows*; diaries can sometimes be most useful; if it wasn't for Letty's diary, how could Mr. Moresby ever have found out such a thing as that?

Letty's diary was fetched, excitedly pored over, and finally divulged the information that Miss Staples had been away from the 6th of August to the 30th.

Neither of the two ladies had ever been in Miss Staples's cellar, of course? Why, indeed they had. Ever so many times. Was it kept empty? Oh, dear, no. It was full of the most *odd* sorts of lumber. Miss Staples kept *all* her old newspapers there for one thing: one never knew when old newspapers weren't going to come in handy, did one? No, never: what else did Miss Staples keep in her cellar? Oh, all sorts of bits of furniture, broken and *quite* useless; and packing-cases; and odd remnants of wall-paper; oh, and all the silly sorts of things one does keep in cellars. Was it chock-a-block, then? No, one certainly wouldn't call it that; there was plenty of room to move about. *Oh*, the chief inspector meant . . . Yes, indeed; it would have been quite easy to clear one corner, perhaps a whole half; and then if the things were put back again . . . How *horrible*! Yes, and just fancy: if Miss Staples hadn't died the—the murder might not have been discovered for *years*. Yes, Miss Staples had signed another seven years' lease only a few months earlier. Oh, she had, had she? Yes, she had. She always said she meant to die in that house, and oh, dear, oh, dear, died in it she had—and lucky not to be murdered in it too! Dear, dear, dear, what *was* the world coming to, Mr. Moresby? What was it indeed!

Now, what about Miss Staples's visitors? And her relations? Well, she didn't have many visitors; a few people in Lewisham, of course, and her neighbours in Burnt Oak Road; not more than a dozen at most. Could the Misses Williams make out a list, did they think, of the people Miss Staples knew? Of course certainly they could; with pleasure; but surely Mr. Moresby didn't think . . . ? Oh, no; just a matter of routine; one never knew; the most unlikely people were sometimes able to contribute helpful information. Relations? Well, there was a nephew; but such a *nice* young man; quite impossible that one should not know his name and address? Well, his name was Staples too, but as for his address . . . wasn't he in the navy, Jane? Or was it the merchant service? Anyhow, Miss Staples called him "Jim," if that was all. Help. It was? How wonderful to think of oneself actually *helping* Scotland Yard!

Where was Miss Staples born? Oh, in Bath. Yes, very nice family. Miss Staples always spoke very well of her family. The Staples of Bath, yes. There had been a brother, but he was dead. Yes, he had been in business in Bristol. Something to do with advertising, but Miss Staples had never said very much about him; she had not thought advertising was really a very nice thing to be in; well, one does meet such *queer* people in advertising, doesn't one? Yes, perhaps one does: the nephew, then, was the

son of the advertising brother? Yes, precisely. And he had a sister too; but she could not be a very nice girl, because she had never been to see her aunt—well, not for the last six years, since the Miss Williams had known her, at any rate. No, she had never spoken of any other relations, but no doubt there were cousins; there always are cousins, somehow, aren't there?

Moresby agreed that there always are cousins, somehow.

From No. 6, where he felt that he had been a good deal luckier than he had expected, he proceeded to the police station of the division. There he was informed that the records showed no complaint the end of August or beginning of September, from Miss Staples of 4, Burnt Oak Road, that her house showed signs of having been tampered with during her absence; it was therefore quite certain that no such complaint had been made.

Moresby went back to No. 4.

The divisional inspector and his sergeant, their hands blue and their noses red but their devotion to duty unshaken, were working their way through the second of the four bedrooms. They eyed the chief inspector's warm presence with chilly gloom.

"Keep on looking," Moresby encouraged them. "You won't find anything, but keep on looking. Afford back?"

The divisional inspector explained that Sergeant Afford had reported back, and been sent off on the track of the house-agent. "Have you found out anything, Mr. Moresby?" he added.

"I've fixed the date of the murder," Moresby grinned, "if you call that anything. At least, within a week."

"You have, sir? When was it, then?"

"Second week of last August," said Moresby, and explained why. "And what's more," he added, "the murderer must have come in with a key. Now, I wonder how he got hold of that?"

CHAPTER II

The enquiry into the death of the young woman found in the cellar at Burnt Oak Road proceeded on its routine course. The Press, of course, seized on it avidly. If, as Miss Rose Macaulay says, women are news, and by that presumably meaning live women, murdered young women are super-news. Young women, in the eyes of Fleet Street, are invariably romantic; and to be murdered in a suburban villa and buried under its cellar floor is obviously the quintessence of romance. Banner headlines flaunted the boldest type over double-column stories for just seven times as long as would have been the case if the victim had been an unnewsy young man. The Mabels of Burnt Oak Road had their lives' ambitions gratified.

Before he had gone home on the evening of the discovery Moresby had telephoned through to the Bristol police for particulars of the son and daughter of advertising Mr. Staples, late of that city. The possession on the part either of murderer or victim of a key to 4, Burnt Oak Road, as seemed clearly evidenced by the lack of any signs of forcible entry, appeared to Moresby to point to one of the parties being connected in some way with Miss Staples herself, and he was hopeful that the murdered woman would prove to be the niece. At any rate, the first line of enquiry was plainly in that direction.

The next morning Moresby devoted entirely to the case. First of all Sergeant Afford was interviewed. He had seen the house-agent from whom the Danes had taken the house, at his home on the previous evening, but had been able to obtain no information of real value from him. On Miss Staples's death her nephew, who was her sole heir (Afford thought there had been some trouble with the niece), had put the house in his hands for disposal of the remainder of his aunt's lease. The house had only been empty for three weeks. Then Mr. Dane had taken over the lease and, so the agent had gathered, got married on the strength of his acquisition. So far as the agent could say, Mr. Dane had had no motive in taking the house other than the possibility it gave him of immediate marriage. He had not called in connection with the board displayed outside No. 4; he had merely enquired, quite hopelessly, whether they had any house at all in a quiet road at not too high a rental.

Afford had been able to obtain information about this nephew. His name was James Carew Staples and he was third officer on the *Duchess of Denver*, one of the Western Navigation Company's passenger boats plying between Liverpool and South America. He was about twenty-nine, and unmarried. Before coming to Scotland Yard that morning, Afford had ascertained that the *Duchess of Denver* was at that moment one day out from Buenos Aires.

Moresby at once wrote out a radiogram addressed to James Staples, on board, asking him to wireless the present whereabouts of his sister and to call at Scotland Yard immediately on his return to England.

Afford was then despatched to Lewisham to make further enquiries in Burnt Oak Road and the houses whose gardens backed on to it, as to suspicious movements of strangers noticed during the summer, and particularly in the second week of August.

Moresby then sent for the inspector whose services were at his disposal, and set him to checking up the lists of missing women for the second half of the previous year. When it is realised that no fewer than six thousand women are reported as missing every year to Scotland Yard, it will be seen that the task was no light one; especially as anxious relatives, while hastening to report the missing one's absence, hardly ever bother to report her return, as in nineteen cases out of twenty return she does.

To help the inspector in his weeding-out, he was given a copy of the doctor's preliminary report

which had been put on Moresby's table late the previous evening. In view of the time the body had been in the ground, this was necessarily sketchy as regards her appearance. The doctor had however been able to give the following indications:

Height: Five feet five inches.

Figure: Medium slim, but well covered.

Hair: Medium brown, but might have been darker during life.

Feet: Small. ? Size four shoes.

Teeth: All sound.

A closer examination had still revealed no natural distinguishing marks on the body, but what looked like the remains of a thin scar, some three or four inches long, had been found on the outside of the right thigh, about halfway down. It was impossible to say what colour the eyes had been, or the shape of the nose; nor was it possible to estimate the age within closer limits than twenty to thirty, and even these were elastic. The body had been in the ground certainly not less than three months, and probably not more than nine; six months was a likely guess.

This meagre information Moresby sent down for incorporation in the next day's *Police Gazette* with a note on the circumstances in which the body was found, and a request for information regarding any woman to whom the description might apply and who had been missing for the period given.

Lastly, a detective-constable was given the pair of gloves which had been taken from the dead girl's hands, and sent off to a firm of glove manufacturers to learn what he could about them; and a second one despatched to make enquiries of every builder and builder's merchant in London as to a single barrel of cement having been sold to a private customer during the months of June, July, or August last year. As he gave this last man his instructions Moresby thought of Roger Sheringham. It is by such arduous and painstaking and quite unspectacular methods that Scotland Yard gets its results; Mr. Sheringham Moresby thought with a small grin, would be most scornful about them.

Having thus set the wheels of his machine in motion, the chief inspector rang through Superintendent Green to ask if he might come along to the latter's room and discuss the case.

It was the superintendent's custom, before he voiced his own ideas about a case, to hear those of the officer in charge of it. He therefore began the conference with a grunted request to Moresby to sketch out the lines on which he proposed to conduct the investigation, and why.

Moresby explained the steps he had already taken, which met with a short nod not so much approval as absence of disapproval, and then went on to give his views about the case in general.

"It seems to me, sir, that there are two ways of approach: was either the murderer or the girl connected with Miss Staples, or were they both complete strangers? In the first case, you see, we ought to be able to get a line through Miss Staples, in the second we can only get one through the girl's identity. I propose to work along both lines, of course."

The superintendent was understood to mutter to the effect that once the girl was identified the case would probably be as plain as a pikestaff.

"Yes," agreed the chief inspector, in a rather worried tone, "but to tell the truth, Mr. Green, I'm not too hopeful about identification. It's a long time, you see, and there's precious little for the relatives to swear to. We'll probably have her identified forty times over, if I know relatives."

"No wedding-ring."

"No rings at all. But that doesn't say there never were any. And it's impossible to say whether there were any marks of rings, or not; I looked particularly for that. No, I'm not relying too much on getting

her identified through herself, so to speak; it's my belief that it'll turn out easier to get a line on the man, and identify her through him. And that's why I propose to work the Miss Staples end for all it's worth."

"Unless it turns out to be the niece." The superintendent had already had Moresby's report, drawn up late on the previous evening, and was informed of everything that had been discovered up till then.

"Ah, yes, sir; and that's just what I'm hoping it will turn out to be," Moresby admitted. "That would make things nice and easy for us, that would."

"But apart from that, you think one of them was connected with Miss Staples?"

"I do; and there's two things that make me think so. How else did the murderer know that house was going to be empty, and the houses on each side of it too, in the second week in August? (I'm assuming that's when it was done.) How did he get in without leaving any traces—and you can bet the old lady didn't leave any windows open or the back door unlocked—if it wasn't with a key, and how did he get hold of a key, or the chance to get a key cut, if he didn't know her, and pretty well at that? Of course both of those apply equally well to the girl; she could have passed 'em on."

"Something in that. Obviously premeditated, as I said yesterday. What about the cement? You think he had that there all ready?" Both officers were taking it for granted that the murderer was a man.

"It seems likely, doesn't it, sir? And a bag, to take her clothes away in. It wouldn't need to be a large one, the way girls' clothes are nowadays. We're dealing with a cunning one, all right; he had everything cut and dried beforehand. And what I mean is, he *must* have known some time ahead that he'd have that bit of the road to himself then, and how could he possibly have known it if he hadn't got it (or she hadn't got it) from Miss Staples herself?" And Moresby, feeling that he had stated the argument as forcibly as was possible, permitted himself a mild beam.

"That's sound enough—if the murder was committed in that particular week. But you've not got the smallest evidence that it was."

"Well, no, Mr. Green, I haven't," the chief inspector confessed, a little dashed. "But it looks to me like a safe bet."

"We can't rely on safe bets," he was told severely. "We must have evidence. You know that. But there's no harm," added the superintendent more kindly, "in taking it as a working assumption, and seeing if you can get anything on it. Now, what about the girl? Putting the niece out of the question for the moment, have you got any ideas about her?"

"Well, no, sir; I can't say I have. Have you?"

The superintendent drew for a moment or two at his pipe before he answered.

"In this sort of case it usually turns out to be husband and unwanted wife. The Rainshill business. Remember? Deeming. Buried her, and two kids, under the hearth. But that's when they're the occupiers. I don't remember any other case where a house actually in the occupation of someone else was made use of this way. That ought to give us something in itself, oughtn't it?" He puffed at his pipe again. Moresby waited in interested silence. The super, when he chose, could put two and two together as well as anyone.

"It shows a high level of intelligence, for one thing. It was safer than an empty house, you see, with all that junk in the cellar. And though it looks as if more nerve was wanted, it isn't really, if you've got the sense to realise it. He had bad luck. It ought never to have been discovered at all. Yes, he was certainly of a higher type than the Rainshill man; and therefore probably, but not certainly, of a higher social class.

"You get that in the girl too, don't you? Size four shoes. And those gloves looked to me about six and-a-half. Small hands and feet, sound teeth, well nourished. The gloves weren't cheap ones either."

you noticed. Yes, I think we can call her a lady. Of the professional class at a guess, both of them. That should help you with those lists.

“Then what about their relations with each other? Intimate, obviously. Why does a man want to get rid of a woman—a young woman? Because she’s become a nuisance to him. And that means almost invariably that she’s standing in his way with another woman. She must have been under his influence. She accompanies him, you see, to someone else’s house, and down they go to the cellar. I wonder what excuse he gave for that. They must have gone almost straight there too, because she still has her outdoor things on; hasn’t even taken off her gloves.”

“Unless he put them on her after she was dead, to mislead us in some way,” Moresby ventured. “I’ve wondered about that, because of the absence of rings. It isn’t natural for a girl to wear no rings at all, is it? And if he took them off her, he must have had her glove off to do it. Well, why should he put the glove on again, instead of taking it away with the rest of her things?”

“May be something in that,” agreed the superintendent. “It certainly looks as if he had some idea other about those gloves. Well, you’ve got to find out what it was, that’s all.”

The telephone on the superintendent’s desk tinkled, and he lifted the receiver. “Yes? Yes, put it through here. Bristol,” he explained to Moresby. “You’d better take it.”

Much of Bristol’s information duplicated, and confirmed, that obtained by Sergeant Afford. With regard to the niece Bristol was not helpful. She had left the town on her father’s death five years ago and the authorities knew no more about her. They were however enquiring among those of Mr. Staples’s friends who might have kept in touch with her and hoped to have something further to report later in the day. In the meantime all they could say was that her age was thirty-one, and she had been unmarried when heard of last. Mrs. Staples died in 1907.

“Humph!” observed Superintendent Green, when this had been communicated to him. “Got to wait for the radio from her brother, then. Well, that’s enough theorising. You’d better get on with it.”

Moresby went back to his own room. There was little more he could do at the moment, and he occupied himself in drawing up an official paragraph for the evening papers, on much the same lines as that for the *Police Gazette*, giving the dead girl’s description and asking for information. The papers could be trusted to embellish it with cajolery to their readers to recognise even from such sparse details somebody known to them; and though the inevitable result would be a flood of false identifications, each of which would have to be carefully enquired into, there was a good possibility that among them would be the correct one. In any case, it was the most hopeful line that offered at the moment. A helpful Press at their backs is one of Scotland Yard’s greatest assets.

Just as Moresby was thinking of going out to lunch his telephone-bell rang. It was the police surgeon who, with a colleague, had been spending the morning in conducting the post-mortem on the body.

“Well, we’re through, thank heaven,” he told Moresby, “and I hope you don’t find any more corpses in cellars for a long, long time. You’ll get my report later. I’m just ringing you up now to give you one bit of information red-hot, in case it helps you. In fact so far as I can see it’s the only thing we’ve found that’s likely to be of the slightest help to you. She was going to have a child. About five months gone.”

“Ah!” said Moresby, with great satisfaction. “Well, that gives us the motive at any rate. Thank you, doctor.”

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