

Postscript to Murder

M. R. D. Meek



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Lawyer Lennox Kemp's newly-wed happiness is slowly being eroded by a series of anonymous threats. Is it an aggrieved past client? A criminal he has helped put away? His friend Detective Inspector John Upshire points out that there is a multiplicity of enemies from which to choose. But then a colleague of Kemp's is murdered and Lennox is convinced that he was the intended victim. Weighed down by guilt, he feels disinclined to investigate the matter further, so it is left to his feisty wife Mary to follow the confusing clues. Is the murder connected to the anonymous threats and sabotage attempts against Kemp? or does it relate to the victim's own affairs? A mysterious commission in London, an arrogant property dealer, an unbalanced young woman, are only some of the elements of the mystery which Mary must disentangle. But is she on the right path? And will Lennox regain his interest in the affair before another murder is committed? The return of Lennox Kemp, M. R. D. Meek's popular lawyer sleuth, is an intricate and suspenseful puzzler that will delight his many fans.

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[CHAPTER 1](#)

‘Someone is trying to kill me’, Lennox Kemp remarked conversationally to Detective Inspector John Upshire.

‘Oh, aye? D’you want the other half?’ Without waiting for an answer, the inspector scooped up both their glasses and ambled over to the bar, using his big shoulders to get through the crowd but without unnecessary impact, easy as an animal in thick undergrowth. Kemp watched him with mingled affection and exasperation, and sighed. The laconic reaction had been much as he’d expected.

‘So, what’s new in that?’ Upshire’s baby-blue eyes were bland as milk. He put the two half-pints down smoothly and settled his bulk into a chair designed for someone of lesser size. ‘You’ve been an unpopular bastard in the past, and there’s probably still folk around would be happy to see you interred.’

‘Thanks, John. How well you put it ...’ Kemp took a long drink of the beer which somehow tonight didn’t taste so good. ‘But I meant what I said.’

‘Not threatening letters again?’

‘Those, too ... But they’re common enough.’

‘Disgruntled clients? What else do you expect? You know, Lennox, it always surprises me that you lawyers don’t get more of them. Look at it this way ... Every time you’ve a court case there’s bound to be a loser. You’ve said so yourself. Even in what you call civil suits – and pretty uncivil some of them are the way I hear it – one party comes out feeling he’s been kicked in the teeth.’

‘That’s just our adversarial legal system,’ said Kemp, doggedly, ‘and they should know all about that before they even get into court. We do warn people if they’ve got a weak case. If they insist on going ahead against our advice it’s no use them foaming at the mouth and vowing vengeance on all lawyers when they lose the battle ...’

But Upshire had warmed to his theme, and ignored the comment.

‘Same thing in criminal cases ... You get one of my known villains off the hook on a technicality and the men on my patch who’ve sweated their guts out just to bring him up before the bench, they’re mad as hell ... They’d like to see you roasted ...’

Kemp looked startled. ‘Not to the extent of trying to set my house on fire?’

John Upshire drew the back of his hand across his lips, and gave Kemp a sharp glance. ‘H’m ... I think you’d better tell me about it.’

‘Somebody pushed petrol-soaked rags through my letterbox this morning, followed by a lighted match. Luckily I was in the kitchen at the time and saw the flare-up. I stamped out the fire and we only lost the doormat. I did report it, John. Your desk sergeant has the details, and the debris. You weren’t around.’

‘I’ve been up at the Bailey all day helping to put away the Clayton brothers. My God, Lennox, why didn’t you tell me straight off?’

‘I’m telling you now. And it wasn’t the first attempt. My car was rammed out on the London Road on Saturday night. An unidentified van drove into me, reversed smartly and accelerated away leaving me on the edge of a ditch. It was a wet night, and I thought he’d just skidded, didn’t want to face the consequences and got the hell out ... Now I’m not so sure. My car’s still in dock, that’s why I walked here tonight.’

‘We’re both walking,’ said Upshire, tersely, ‘and this calls for something stronger. Whisky, eh?’

‘Sounds like a good idea. I’ll get them.’

As he threaded his way through the brass-topped tables Kemp was reminded of the many other nights he had spent with John Upshire in the Cabbage White, turning the small coin of their shared experience. For it was only here, away from the strictures of their respective offices, that they could, as it were, unbutton and let their tongues go free. Lawyer and policeman, they might be said to have the same end in view, but Kemp’s way was not Upshire’s and they both knew it, warily skirting the difference when occasion arose.

It had been a long friendship of benefit to each of them in their lone years when neither had other companionship, the inspector a widower, Kemp unmarried and with no clear plan to alter that state. Despite careful adherence to, on the one hand professional ethics and on the other the rules of police procedure, such meetings were mutually enlightening and sometimes their outcome had played havoc with the lives of those socially malfunctioning members of the community who had criminal tendencies. It was of these that Upshire now spoke.

‘You’ve helped put away a few in your time, Lennox. Their families, now, they’ve not liked it. When some of our old East Enders came out here for a new start they thought they’d find us less on the ball than our colleagues in the Met. Well, they learned different ... But when someone we’ve nabbed is doing his stretch he gets to brooding ... Mebbe he comes out with a grudge ...’

‘You know we solicitors don’t prosecute nowadays, John. That’s all up to the Crown Prosecution Service ...’

‘Five or six years ago you were doing it. Put a few behind bars in those days. Some got ten to twelve ... With remission, they’re out now, prowling the streets, God knows what in their twisted little minds. You thought of that?’

‘I’ve not had time to think of much ... Anyway, it would be your lot who finally put them away, my part was small ... Why don’t they have a go at the police?’

John Upshire grinned – a rare occurrence. It split his chubby features like a half-opened bun. ‘Because, my lad, we embody the law. We’re a force to be reckoned with. They can’t point the finger at one individual in a team. But you, you’re out on your own ...’

‘Which I feel most acutely,’ said Kemp, not heartened by the turn in the conversation. ‘Believe me, I’ve been searching my conscience since this morning’

‘Then you’re in the wrong area. Conscience has nothing to do with it. If you’ve nailed some rogues in your time, and even a few murderers, you did it in the course of duty ...’

‘And in answer to the call for justice ... I know all the high-sounding words, I just wonder sometimes as to their meaning ...’ Kemp felt it was probably the spirit of the grain which was beginning to fuel their terms of expression. John Upshire was normally a man of some reticence in speech, more at home with official prose than abstract concept. Only with Kemp did he sometimes relax sufficiently to reveal an inner depth of understanding, a cognisance of other issues beyond those contained in police dossiers. Kemp was surprised that he had not been made superintendent by now. The local force respected him for his fairness, the knack he had of seeing their point of view, his sympathy with raw recruits doing a difficult job in hostile circumstances, he backed them to the hilt against all criticism while at the same time upholding strict discipline, that first tenet of his belief in the system he had to operate. Perhaps the powers that be had never interpreted correctly Upshire’s inherent loyalty to the men serving under him, and his refusal to bend even when it went against the wishes of his superiors. There would have been conflict there; perhaps it had not helped him in the promotion stakes.

‘I’ll run a routine check,’ the inspector was saying, ‘to see if there’s anybody just released or out on parole who might fit the bill.’ He paused, and shook his head. ‘But it’s a long shot. Most of them steer clear of trouble – at least for a month or two. And we keep a close eye on them if they’ve been part of one of the organized-crime rackets. This kind of petty revenge isn’t nearly as common as you might think ...’

‘I don’t see anything petty in an attempt on my life. It’s the only one I’ve got and I’d like to hold on to it for a while yet.’

‘I bet you do – particularly now it’s changed. You got married ...’

Upshire could not keep a slight resentment from edging into his tone. He too had savoured these nights spent mulling over cases, the relationship which had brought comfort to them both when neither could find it at home. Now things would be different. Kemp had acquired a wife – and not one John Upshire would have chosen for him. Mary Blane, her name when she was single, though she had had others, had a past which the inspector considered to be dingy if not downright disreputable. He could not help commenting on it, even at the risk of putting strain on a friendship he cherished.

‘Have you thought that it could be your wife they were getting at? She had some pretty weird connections back there in the States.’

‘Come off it, John. Matrimony hasn’t quite blighted my wits. Of course I’ve wondered about that, but it just isn’t on ... These letters I’ve had, what they say, they’re aimed at me alone. They hint at things that have happened only to me, either here in Newtown or even further back ... I haven’t any ideas yet as to what they’re getting at but I’m working on it. But it has nothing to do with Mary.’

Upshire grunted. ‘Whatever you say ... I’d better have a look at them. I suppose you’ve kept the stuff?’

‘Have you ever known a lawyer throw away anything that’s written down? And, talking of Mary, she’d like you to come to supper on Saturday night. She feels it’s time she got to know you better and, frankly, I think a closer acquaintance with her will modify your view.’

If John Upshire’s acceptance of the invitation was grudging that was only to be expected. Kemp was well aware that the inspector’s opinion of Mary Madeleine Blane, now Mrs Kemp, was bound to be coloured by her involvement in a recent case which had put her by Upshire’s reckoning in that grey area between legal right and moral wrong, or perhaps the other way round. As an upholder of the law, the inspector didn’t like grey areas; he preferred to see people in black and white, and possibly with little captions under them saying guilty or innocent. Kemp’s work, by its very nature, forced him to dig deeper into the character and motive of his clients so that his attitude to their frailties tended to be tolerant and sometimes even ambivalent.

The two men parted at the corner, Upshire to go back to the empty suburban house he and Betty had bought when he was first posted to Newtown. His daily housekeeper would have left him his supper, and be gone till the morning. He would eat it in the kitchen, lock up and go round putting

out the lights, but the bedroom would be cold and unwelcoming ... Kemp watched him stride off, and felt a pang. He knew that life only too well. For years he also had returned late at night to a sterile lodging, the flat above the builder's yard he had inhabited for so long with its folk-weave curtains drawn against the dark and the drab furniture staring up at him ...

All that had changed, and Kemp had sensed the undercurrent beneath the inspector's guarded: 'Well, if nothing comes up I'll be round on Saturday ... Seven-thirty? Right

It was inevitable that the relationship between them would never again have the old easy familiarity. Professionally they would meet as before and have the same respect for each other's work but that other bond that had drawn them together, two men of single status in a society seemingly composed of couples, that bond was broken.

Well, it wouldn't be the first time a friendship had foundered on the rock of a marriage ... Kemp's mind was caught up by a half-remembered jingle, something from the Chinese:

'The single man can never know
The ins and outs of marriage ...
The envy that the coachmen know
For those within the carriage.'

Despite the serious nature of the matter which had made him seek out Inspector Upshire tonight, Lennox Kemp was smiling as he went home to his wife.

CHAPTER 2

As Kemp put the key in his own front door he was reminded of another complaint by John Upshire.

'I don't know why you had to stick yourself in this end of town anyway ... It's too near the centre – what with that bowling alley and that so-called youth club – a lot of mindless do-gooders doing no good at all to them that's going to the bad anyway, like rotten apples in a barrel

Upshire's rare excursion into metaphor owed more to the quality of the malt being drunk than an attempt at humour, but again behind the words there had been resentment. 'Why didn't you and your new wife take a nice house in a quiet suburb instead of down there in that troublesome spot ... It's no wonder you get things put in your letterbox.'

The inspector probably guessed that it had been Mary's choice, the large Victorian leftover in a terrace beside the station.

When the railway had first come to Newtown it had not impinged on the original village but discreetly held to the banks of the Lea where the river-barge traffic had once flourished. But the Victorians too were entrepreneurs in terms of their future and soon houses were needed to accommodate those whose business interests might lie in the City of London but whose horizons encompassed a wider land of England beyond the green woods and sleepy hamlets of the home counties. Railways brought trade and prosperity till even the squat little widow of Windsor was moved to approve, and with that blessing of crown and country, villas rose fast along the new steel lines which conveyed not only freight to the Midlands but also ladies eager to sample the delights of shopping in Oxford Street.

George Meredith's heroine, Diana of the Crossways, complained to one enthusiast: 'How I hate your railways ... Cutting up the land and scarring its countenance for ever, its beauty will never be the same again

If these, not unmodern, sentiments had echoed over the century they had never struck any chord in Newtown, which had gone on grasping at commercial straws, both long and short, right down to the present recession. However, No. 2, Albert Crescent had not been one of the victims of this particular turn of fortune. There had never been money enough to convert it, unlike its neighbours, during the upsurge of the eighties, into a gold brick of plush offices for financial consultants and insurance brokers. Under the heel of circumstance these now had a tarnished look, gilt peeling from gingerbread, while No. 2 still stood in all its decayed splendour, an honourable relic.

‘I like it,’ Mary had said as soon as she saw it. ‘Far better-looking and half the price of those awful boxes on the estate where your friends the Lorimers live, and just look at the length of the back garden ... Why, it goes right down to a river ...’

‘Once you’ve fought your way through the undergrowth, yes, that’s the Lea, all right. A puddle of slime enriched with beer cans ...’

‘You’ve never seen the Liffey,’ said Mary, complacently, ‘nor the East River for that matter. I guess we can clean up a little brook like the Lea. If we buy this house, Lennox, I’ll go half on the purchase price ...’

‘You bloody won’t ...’ But of course he’d been overruled, despite the fact that when she had stood up at the altar Mary Madeleine Blane had promised to obey.

He should not have been surprised, for this woman he had married – perhaps against his better judgement – was still an unknown quantity. When he asked her to marry him he knew it went against all his reason to do so; had he stopped to think he never would have made such a proposal ...

But he had not stopped to think because he was caught up in the age-old folly which had nothing to commend or excuse it, except the fact that he was in love.

She came out from the drawing room when she heard him in the hall. Her kiss of greeting was by no means perfunctory.

‘You told John Upshire?’ she asked. ‘What did he have to say?’

‘Not a lot. You know what policemen are like.’

‘Oh, I do, I do ...’ When she smiled, as she did now at the thought behind his words, her plain features lit up like a glint of sun on a cloudy day. ‘They’ve the face on them puts us all in the wrong. Let’s have some coffee, it’s just made.’

‘Does he think it’s me that’s to blame?’ she said later, as they sat by the fireside.

Kemp held nothing back from this new wife of his. ‘He did wonder about the possibility but I soon scotched that one. You and I have seen those letters, it’s me they’re aimed at.’

‘But why now, Lennox? Whoever’s writing them, they’re obsessed with some grievance against you.’

‘Well, I only wish they’d come out in the open with it.’

‘But that’s not the way it is with an obsession. It blocks the light of day for people, like a great wall. And it’s a wall that’s maybe been building up over a long time.’

Kemp looked across at her. She sat holding her coffee cup in both hands, frowning slightly at the effort of putting thoughts into exact words because when she was serious only the right words would do. It was one of the first things he had noticed about her during the short time she acted as his secretary, her way with words. Later, of course, he had realized that such adroit handling of the tools of speech could be put to many uses.

‘That’s why I’m wondering why they’re being sent now,’ Mary went on, ‘because something must have triggered them off, and the only thing I can think of is that you got married. Is there some woman in your life who might resent it?’

‘Whom I have cast aside like a worn-out glove?’ said Kemp, airily. ‘Oh, they must be thick as autumnal leaves that strow the brooks in Vallombrosa, the women I’ve abandoned ... Come off it, Mary, the only woman who has been affected by my marriage is yourself, and if I may say so, you’ve taken it rather well.’

‘You mean I have bettered myself, being rescued from a life of crime and marrying the boss into the bargain? Sounds quite a romantic fiction ...’ But he could see she was only laughing at him as he went over and sat on the hearthrug at her feet. She curled her fingers in the tufts of hair on his forehead. ‘You’re getting a bit thin on top,’ she said. ‘I don’t see you as a breaker of hearts, Lennox, but I was serious about the letter-writer maybe being a woman, it’s a way women have ...’

‘Willing to wound and yet afraid to strike ... I don’t think that was said of a woman.’

‘Oh, you and your quotations ... I’m serious, Lennox. You’ve been involved with women in a lot of your cases, not only the matrimonial ones. There must be someone out there who is bitter.’

‘It wasn’t a woman in the van that skedaddled the other night, and I don’t see a woman pushing firelighters through a door at seven in the morning. Much too obvious.’

‘She would have help, of course. Women don’t often act alone.’

‘You did, Mary Madeleine ...’ Kemp could not see the point of never alluding to her past life; it was there before them both and, as he had accepted her, so it had become part of his life also.

‘I had grown used to being alone. It was the only way to survive ... then ...’

‘And now?’

Her face glowed in the firelight as she looked down at him.

‘Ah, now I’ve found a better way ...’

‘No more talk then ...’

But when he kissed her eyelids he saw first the fear in her eyes and knew what she was thinking. As he had once been afraid for her life so she was now for his.

Perhaps he should take more seriously what she had been saying, perhaps he should look back over his past cases, ransack his memory to find cause enough for someone to send him such poison through the post. He knew many of the phrases by heart, so often had they been repeated.

‘You’ll get your comeuppance, never fear ...’

‘You wrecked lives, Kemp, let’s see yours get wrecked ...’

‘I’ll get even if it’s the last thing I do ...’

‘Vengeance is mine. I’ve waited long enough ...’

Such sentences recurred over and over again in the six letters he had received during the last months, interspersed with more specific threats, a knife in the back, a breaking of bones, death by a variety of methods, all violent, couched in language not easily identifiable. There were misspellings, of course, but they could have been deliberate. ‘Comeuppance’ – not a word in everyday use – had been spelt correctly, as if a dictionary had been used but if so, why make other mistakes? There was a certain literary quality about the style, even semicolons were scattered about, and the grammatical errors looked false. Despite such contrivances the words flowed as if the writer knew very well what he or she was about, and feeling came through almost too well – a spillage of hate bursting its banks.

The letters were typewritten on plain paper torn off the kind of pad available at any stationers. The typing had the pepper-and-salt look made by a two-fingered typist, but that too could be misleading – any expert can imitate an amateur. The machine was manual not electronic, black carbon ribbon, the alignment fairly even with no smudging of the e’s and o’s ... Someone who kept the keys clean or did not use that particular typewriter very often?

Except for this kind of muck ... Kemp sighed. He would hand the lot over to John Upshire tomorrow and let the police get on with whatever analysis they could make of such unpromising material. He had already made photocopies for himself. He shovelled the letters back into their envelopes, plain brown manilla, all addressed to himself, Mr Lennox Kemp, at his new home. He studied the postmarks, all different, all districts of London from the City to outlying suburbs, the malevolent missives had obviously been simply popped into pillar boxes wherever the writer fancied. None had been posted here in Newtown, but there was local knowledge; references to ‘your posh office’ ... ‘I seen your glossy girls go in and out’ ... (That had an almost poetic ring to it.) ‘Choke you to death in a gravel pit’ was an obvious pointer to the main industrial activity along this stretch of the River Lea ...

Kemp tossed the bundle into his briefcase and put it in the hall ready for the morning.

Mary was down first. She felt the draught halfway up the stairs and saw that the front door was standing wide open. It was a strong old-fashioned door of solid oak but the lock too had been old-fashioned and all too easily shattered, expertly done – and quietly. Where the wood had burned in the previous day’s fire the bolts had not drawn across properly.

Kemp surveyed the damage, and shook his head.

‘We kept open house last night,’ he observed, gloomily.

His briefcase had gone. It was all that had been taken.

CHAPTER 3

‘So you’ve lost the evidence?’ John Upshire sounded more scornful than sympathetic.

‘Evidence of what? That someone hates my guts? I know what was in those letters – that’s enough for me. But there’s plenty of evidence for your men to get started on – a broken lock, an arson attempt and a stolen briefcase.’

‘All my sergeant’s got is a sackful of ashes ... As for the breaking and entering, why’d they only pinch your case? Anything in it apart from the letters?’

‘Luckily, no.’ The inspector was just the man to assuage anger, it was part of his job. But even that habitual stolidity could do little to take away Kemp’s sense of outrage at what he saw as the violation of his home. He had been burgled before, both at his flat and in his office, and had accepted such happenings as part of modern living, but then he had been a single man ... What rankled now was that he and Mary had been upstairs in bed, wrapped in sleep or other blessedness. It was as if a stranger had stood and watched them ... He shook off such unproductive thoughts. ‘I don’t take so much work home with me since I married, and all our thief got was a pocket calculator and a folder of brochures on – of all things – security systems.’ He laughed. ‘Talk about locking the stable door – Mary and I were just about to have the whole house done.’

‘Well, it looks as if you’d better get on with it. I’ve had a word with the officer on patrol. Constable Barnes was in Station Road about midnight. There was a bit of a fracas at the Victoria pub but he soon cleared that up, and his beat would take him round your crescent in the early hours and he saw no one acting suspiciously – in fact, he saw no one at all though there’s the usual number of cars and vans parked ... He wouldn’t have been able to see your front door anyway for all those damned bushes in your garden. Yes, I take your point about the fire, I don’t believe in coincidence either. Someone wants to scare you, they begin by letting you know how easy it is to get at you and your house is the obvious target. That and the letters ... Just our luck they managed to pinch them back.’

‘Pure chance,’ said Kemp. ‘There’s no way they could know where they were. I think you’re right, breaking in that door and leaving it open was just a bit of showing off. They never went further than the outer hall, they spotted the case and simply lifted it, probably thought it would cause me embarrassment if I had clients’ files in it. Anyway, apart from the writer, no one knows such letters exist except Mary and myself, and now you.’

‘And I’ve not mentioned them to anyone on the force. I was waiting to get them to put them under the usual analysis. Well, we’ll just have to bide our time and see if you get any more of the same.’

‘I hope not,’ said Kemp, fervently. ‘Such vicious stuff has an unnerving effect on one. You and I can handle break-ins and burglaries, even that knock to my car if it was part of the whole scheme, because it’s men’s hands that wield the chisels or turn the steering wheel ... Even pushing fire-lighters through the letterbox makes a loutish kind of sense. Plenty of our minor criminals get a kick out of bashing property – makes them feel bigger than they are. Vandalism grown up. But the letters, that’s something else again, the sheer malice behind them, the anonymity ...’

‘Let me see your copies on Saturday evening,’ said John Upshire, briskly. ‘I’m still to come, am I?’

‘Of course you are. Mary’s not the kind to let this business get her down. Nor am I, if it comes to that – which is just as well for I’ve enough obsessed clients without becoming one myself.’

As he returned from the police station to his own office Kemp attempted to switch his attention from personal matters to the more pressing affairs of the practice. Despite recent shake-ups in the profession, Gillorns remained the eminent legal firm in Newtown, with a high reputation for probity and fairness, and Kemp was determined to keep it that way. Having over the past few years gathered round him not so much a team as a coterie of lawyers who worked in their separate fields but could

stand together when required, he knew that he was the pivot of the firm, he held it together. Like John Upshire, not all of them had approved of his marriage, perhaps sensing a change in him. Despite their being friends as well as colleagues, he had spoken to none about the letters, for the animosity displayed in them seemed too personal – at least so far. But he knew how easily the reputation of a legal firm can be damaged when the character of any member is impugned, and there had been more than a hint of that behind the writing.

Had Kemp confided in anyone it would have been Tony Lambert of his Trusts department, who had a wise head on young shoulders, but Tony had recently become engaged to a pretty law student from Australia and it did not seem fair to intrude upon his present starry-eyed contentment. Michael Cantley's insight into the thought processes (where such could be discerned) of Newtown's up-and-coming young criminals might be of help should the scaring tactics be repeated, but in Kemp's view the mind of the anonymous writer was of a different generation. Cantley had been with the firm for many years; he might yet have to be consulted if old files were to be exhumed. So might Perry Belchamber who had come over from the Bar and specialized in matrimonial matters; if, in the past, a troubled family had eaten bitter fruit, their children's teeth could be set on edge ...

Kemp couldn't find the right quotation for that so he dismissed the whole matter of the letters from his mind and concentrated on Friday's business.

There was no lack of it, despite the recession having trailed its dusty underskirts over all aspects. Instead of houses happily changing hands weekly on the new estates built in the boom years, now the property files were full of repossessions, and anguished cries from the building societies. 'Ignore them as long as you can,' Kemp told Charles Copeland, his conveyancing clerk. 'Where there's a roof there's hope ... I'd rather be blamed for the law's delay than have families out on the street.'

It saddened Kemp to handle the failures, the flow of bankruptcies, the winding up of small firms set up in the good times with such high hopes, those who had ventured too far, been too sanguine in their expectations and now found themselves facing a harsher reality.

Surprisingly, the figures for divorce had gone down. There were still the inevitable matrimonial disputes – paired-off humans being what they were – but couples were tending to stand together in adversity, or, as a cynic might have it, they were looking more closely at the financial consequences of splitting up one home and providing for two. A statistician might have an interest in this effect of hard times but there could be little comfort in it for moralists.

One of Kemp's cases in court that morning brought him up against an old adversary, Nicholas Stoddart, who had been a colleague in the firm some years ago. Stoddart had left Gillorns in a move which was of benefit to both parties. Kemp had discovered in the past of this envious man a shady episode which might never have come to light had Stoddart not attempted to smear someone else, thus showing himself as not only untrustworthy but vindictive also. It was upon this latter ground rather than the misconduct itself – which could be seen as merely an ambitious young lawyer's attempt to outsmart an opponent – that Kemp had accepted Stoddart's resignation.

Nick had taken his undoubted talents as a bold litigation man to the City for a while, but now even there the sturdiest of companies were shedding twigs like trees under storm, and Stoddart was back in Newtown. Not that he would have it that way. According to Nick Stoddart, the local firm of Roberts could hardly wait to engage his services.

Watching him now, on his feet before the Bench, Kemp felt a grudging admiration for Nick's powerful presence and skill in argument. He should have been a barrister, he thought – not for the first time – and indeed, Stoddart's appearance would have been the better for a wig. As it was, his heavily handsome features seemed to be tacked on to a head too small to hold them and the brow which should have been impressive failed at the low hairline. To make up for this disunity – of which he must have been aware since he had once confessed to Kemp that he practised his important speeches in front of a mirror – Stoddart employed a trenchant style which had put the fear of God into many a hapless witness.

In today's case there was no need for such histrionics. A mere neighbourhood dispute about barking dogs, bad feelings, bad language and some bad law; in Kemp's opinion it should never have been brought before the Bench. Getting to his feet and saying so succinctly he caught the nods of approval from the magistrates and heard them dismiss the claim of Nick's client, with costs against him. Those who had retained Kemp grinned all over their homespun faces, despite their Worships' admonition for them too to go away and try to get on better with their neighbours.

That was entirely Nick's fault, thought Kemp, he went at it as if it was a murder trial at the Bailey.

Kemp stuffed the folder into the tattered old satchel he was using in place of the stolen briefcase, and bowed his way from the court. On the stairs he met Stoddart who, not surprisingly, was in a black mood.

'Damn that office at Roberts,' he fumed. 'They never get things right ...'

'Hullo, Nick,' said Kemp. That's what you've always done when you lose a case, blame someone else. You should have advised your client properly, taken a closer look at the papers instead of indulging your penchant for bully-boy tactics ... But Kemp knew better than to voice his thoughts; he didn't want a brawl on the steps of the court.

'What sods we've got on that bench ... Soapy shopkeepers who don't know their arse from their elbow when it comes to law ...' Stoddart was still splattering blame around like hailstones.

Kemp shrugged. 'Some you lose, some you win. Don't take it to heart, Nick, you've had victories in your time.'

But Stoddart only glared at him. 'I can do without your advice, thank you, Kemp ...' He muttered, 'You ... you just watch your own step ...'

He swung away across the crowded floor of the entrance hall cannoning into a hapless usher on his way to the door. She was not the only one to stare after him in surprise. Kemp had long since buried his hostility towards Stoddart. There had been a future for the man with Gillorns, he had been well thought of at the London office. Did he still blame Kemp for what had amounted to dismissal? It had all happened years ago and he and Stoddart had met several times since Nick's return to Newtown, yet until today he had never wondered about any lingering bitterness ... Those blasted letters ... They were making him look askance at everyone.

On Friday evenings Kemp closed the office early, a custom which pleased the staff mightily, though it was not intended solely for their benefit. But it enabled the partners, the qualified assistants and the articled clerk to reserve a table in a local hostelry for refreshment and an informal chat about the week's work. There was little enough time for them to meet during office hours, each being in a sense compartmentalized within their own sphere, so it was an opportunity to raise issues, air particular problems and give voice to complaints on a more personal level than was possible within earshot of the clerical staff.

It was from such meetings that Kemp took his soundings as to the health, or otherwise, of his small establishment.

For the most part they were congenial get-togethers; policy decisions might be taken or abandoned, tricky points of law argued where diverse opinions were better than just one; occasionally, as on this evening, they were merely social. Now it was congratulations to Tony Lambert upon his getting engaged.

Glasses were raised to him. 'Never thought you'd get round to it, Tony ... What brought you to the brink?'

Tony pushed at his large spectacles, a habit he had when embarrassed. The gesture tended to draw attention to a certain owl-like solemnity he had, an asset with his elderly clients. 'I suppose it was meeting someone like Anita,' he said, simply answering the question.

'Miss Allardyce ...' Michael Cantley turned to Kemp. 'You've met her?'

'I've seen her about,' said Kemp. 'I gather she's at Guildford studying law.'

‘She comes down here weekends to stay with her brother. He works for the Development Corporation ... That’s how we met.’ Tony was flushed and happy. ‘Which reminds me, I hope you’re all coming to our party on Tuesday night out at The Leas – that’s Zachary Allardyce’s place ... He and Anita got together on the invitations ...’

‘Glad to see you settled at last.’ Kemp meant what he said. He valued his young colleague highly, and knew his circumstances. Tony was a native of Newtown, his parents on the lower end of the local gentry, owning land in the original village. Tony, their only child, had lived with them, succoured them in their old age like a dutiful son, and mourned them when they died within months of each other.

In the past Tony had been seen around with various perfectly proper young women but the relationships had somehow never quite ‘taken’ ... He was a serious type, though not a prig, and modest about his considerable intellect. It was said the Allardyce girl was bright ... Kemp wondered if it was loneliness after his parents’ death that had brought Tony to take this step towards marriage. At least people can’t say that about me, he thought – I’d been on my own for so long I’d got used to it. He looked across at Tony who smiled back as if they followed the same line of thought.

‘I’m only following your example, Lennox. Taking the plunge doesn’t seem to have done you any harm ...’

‘I’m not so sure about that,’ said Sally Stacey, ‘I don’t get the tax figures from Mr Kemp as quickly as I used to. I think his mind’s on other things ...’

‘And I had to remind him about a maintenance hearing last week which he forgot,’ said Perry Belchamber. ‘Time was when it was him did all the reminding round here.’

‘You have been distraught ...’ Michael Cantley had been happily married for years, and was prepared to make allowances. ‘You did rather take the whole place on your shoulders before this, and now you have your own worries setting up home and all that ...’

This was surely the time to tell them ... Explain that the reason his mind had not been entirely on business lately had nothing to do with Mary or his marriage. They had the right to know about the letters, these colleagues and friends of his ... They would exhibit astonishment, outrage, but he would have their sympathy.

But Franklyn Davey, their young articled clerk, was rather nervously putting a question about a recent case in the Court of Appeal, and as everyone clamoured to give their point of view, the moment passed.

Kemp was to regret its passing ...

‘You’ll be sure to bring Mary to Anita’s party next week,’ Tony said to him as the meeting was breaking up. ‘We’ve seen so little of her, and I always liked her when she worked in the office. She might find it a little awkward, of course, seeing us all again in such different circumstances ...’

Kemp laughed.

‘I’ve come to the conclusion that my wife can handle any situation, but thanks for the thought. We’ll both be delighted to come ...’

Once again he would like to have drawn Tony aside and told him about the threats and the break-in, if it was only to share the burden with someone ... Yet he hesitated, unwilling to strike a sour note on the evening of the younger man’s celebration. In the past it had been Tony Lambert who had shared his confidences when Kemp felt it necessary, now the timing for such things was all wrong ...

Yet as he walked home through the darkening streets he had a premonition that somehow he had missed a chance which would not be given again. He should have grasped it firmly when it was to his hand, not let it be whisked away in a moment of indecision.

One of the maxims by which he lived was never to lose control of events; he had the uneasy feeling that that was exactly what he had done.

CHAPTER 4

No day in the week separated the married from the single as much as Saturday. Hitherto, Kemp had taken the cessation of work lightly but by Sunday evenings, he had tended to return to the office, if only in spirit, out of a certain deprivation, though he would not have called it boredom. He was not a man of hobbies; what went on under the bonnet of his car was a mystery to him and he had never owned a garden until now.

Since his marriage, however, he looked forward to the weekends, and the time they allowed for him and Mary to be by themselves, enjoying each other's company and planning expeditions into the country. It was a felicity he had long forgotten.

This particular Saturday started off as no exception. Rising late, they were lounging about in their vast sunny kitchen, he drinking coffee at the table, she idly questioning whether soup or smoked salmon should begin their evening meal – idly, because she had already decided.

Newtown's local paper plopped on the new doormat, through the new letterbox in the new door – one hastily put in place the previous afternoon by a carpenter who said the old one was a fine bit of oak he could use on his garden shed.

'I like your *Newtown Gazette*,' said Mary, bringing it in. 'It's all so nicely irrelevant to the national news. All these pictures of happy brides with flowers in their hair beside bright-eyed boys, bashful in their collars and ties. And right next to them there's more bashful boys up in court for brawling in the pub. Sometimes the names are even the same ...'

'That's Newtown for you. All human nature in a nutshell of newsprint. I have to read it to keep up with my clients, they only give me expurgated versions of themselves and I learn far more from the press ...'

Mary was turning the pages. Suddenly, she stopped.

'Lennox ...'

'What is it?'

She put down the paper on the table in front of him.

It was a headline, not on the front page, but a headline just the same.

Local Solicitor Threatened

It was divulged yesterday that Mr Lennox Kemp, of Gillorns, Solicitors, The Square, Newtown has been the recipient of 'poison pen' letters from an unknown sender. We understand that several of these have been received by Mr Kemp and that not only do they contain threats of personal injury but also imputations affecting Mr Kemp's professional reputation. On contacting the police we were informed by Detective Inspector John Upshire that the matter was already under investigation.

Kemp was still staring at the item in disbelief when the telephone rang.

'You can take it as fact it didn't come from the station.' Upshire was in a barking mood.

'Well, it certainly didn't come from me,' said Kemp.

'I couldn't be sure of that ... Thought maybe you'd jumped the gun. I had to think fast when the *Gazette* got on to me asking if it was true you'd had letters. All I said was that if you had then we'd investigate.'

Kemp took a deep breath.

'It's damnable,' he said at last. 'Whoever pinched that brief-case leaked those letters to the press ... Might not even be the sender. The *Gazette* phoned you? Why the hell didn't they get in touch with me first?'

'Would you have denied it?'

'I'd have said, no comment. That probably wouldn't have stopped them. It's damaging, though ... That bit about reputation ...'

'Was there something like that in the letters?'

'Enough.' Kemp was terse. 'Look, John, it's urgent you get moving on that break-in. I'll have a word with the editor. Alf Grimshaw's always played fair with me in the past. I'll see what I can get out of him as to source.'

‘A journalist’s source? No chance ...’ Upshire didn’t sound hopeful as he rang off.

It was obvious at the *Newtown Gazette* that Alfred Grimshaw was expecting Kemp’s call.

‘Tried your office around five last evening but couldn’t get you. It was too good an item to miss and the paper was ready to roll. You know how it is, Mr Kemp.’

‘All I want from you is where the hell you got your information?’

‘OK. OK. Keep your hair on. There was a phone call earlier. First thing Friday morning. Came in to the desk. The reporter who took it thought I’d better see it ... Half a mo ... I’ve got the note here. It was a man’s voice, no name, of course. Said Mr Kemp was getting threatening letters, that it was in the local public interest for people to know, etc., etc. Well, I wouldn’t have touched it with a bargepole, you know that, Mr Kemp. A delicate matter, and from an anonymous tip-off ...’

‘Then why the hell did you print it?’

‘Because we got proof it was true. Came in later ... A packet of letters in their envelopes, postmarked and addressed to you – and opened.’

‘How many?’

‘Three ... That’s why I tried to phone you ... But the story couldn’t wait. My reporter called Upshire. He’s a friend of yours, isn’t he? We reckoned if there was anything in it he’d be the one to know. My man was sure he did.’

‘I suppose that packet came by hand and nobody saw who brought it?’

‘Right. Dropped in the outside box Friday lunchtime. Look, Mr Kemp, it was an item of local interest, besides having the makings of a good story. We might even be able to help in following it up ... And we certainly wouldn’t print what’s in those letters. It’s vicious stuff. I think perhaps you ought to have them back.’

‘I think so too. After all, they are my private correspondence,’ Kemp said, with some sarcasm. ‘Who’s seen them at your office?’

‘Only myself and the reporter who took the call, Dan Frobisher. I can vouch for him keeping his mouth shut, but, as I’ve said, the *Gazette* may be able to help ... Sometimes these things are better out in the open ...’

‘The voice of the press in the interests of the great British public ...’ Kemp could not help the sardonic note, but he had to admit that Grimshaw had a point. ‘Could you send Frobisher round here with those letters before they go any further? And I’d like them in the same packet in which they were delivered. Your item was correct, the police are investigating and John Upshire will soon spike your guns if anything else gets printed in the meantime.’

‘Right-oh ... Just so long as we get the full story in the end, Mr Kemp.’

Mary looked at him closely when he came back from the phone.

‘More coffee?’ She was calm, she was rarely otherwise.

She put two fresh cups on the table, poured and sat down opposite him.

‘What harm can it do?’ she asked.

‘The bit about reputation is nasty ... and I’d rather I’d told my colleagues about the letters than have them read about them in the *Gazette*. I’ve had letters before threatening to have me struck off, usually from people who think we’ve overcharged them or disgruntled husbands who’re sure I’m having it off with their wives ... But these are only crackpots getting something out of their systems, and they soon stop. This joker’s different, he or she is relentless – and they hark back to the fact that I’d been struck off before ...’

‘But that was nearly twenty years ago, and you’ve said yourself anyone in the legal profession can look it up.’

‘Mud sticks, Mary ...’

‘Only if you let it ... I grew up in so much of it I never noticed. But I can see how it might be different for you. All the same, I am more concerned with the death threats. Your reputation is important to you but I don’t want to read about it on a tombstone.’

‘I think that’s one of the nicest things that’s ever been said to me.’

Kemp spoke lightly but the underlying meaning was clear to both of them; when people come together in their middle years the relationship is deepened by knowledge of the fragility of such a merger. They were still holding hands when the doorbell rang.

Daniel Frobisher was not what Kemp expected; he thought of reporters as eager young men in leather jackets. Frobisher was in his fifties and soberly dressed in a grey suit. He was a stocky man of good features. Glasses did not quite conceal a cast in his left eye which gave him a slightly sinister look until one became reconciled to it.

‘Mr Kemp? Of course, I’ve seen you in court. Mrs Kemp, we haven’t met?’ His glance swept briefly over her. ‘Sorry to intrude on your Saturday leisure.’

He was already in the hall. ‘Nice house, this. Glad to see you’ve not altered it. A good period for architecture.’

‘Do come in, Mr Frobisher,’ Kemp told him, rather belatedly. ‘We can talk in the study.’

He led the way into the small room designated as such, though so far unused since the habits of a single man had been already cast off by Kemp, without regret.

Mary hovered for a moment in the doorway.

‘I have to shop, Lennox, or there’ll be no meals in this house today. Nice meeting you, Mr Frobisher.’

‘She’s an American, your wife?’ asked Frobisher as soon as he heard the front door close.

‘Is she?’ said Kemp, pleasantly. ‘I hadn’t noticed ... Now, Mr Grimshaw said you had a packet of letters for me.’

‘Sure. Sure. Here it is.’ Frobisher struggled with an inner pocket and produced a brown paper package. Kemp took it from him. It was unmarked, unaddressed and had been originally sealed with Sellotape. He shook out the contents which he recognized instantly: three envelopes postmarked and bearing his address. He was aware of the reporter’s eyes upon him as he carefully scrutinized the letters.

‘All present and correct, squire?’ It was a sobriquet which Kemp particularly deprecated, but here the style bespoke the man: Frobisher was the sort who would see himself as equal in any company.

‘I think so. Will you thank your editor for me? I understand from him you will keep your discretion.’

As if on cue, Dan Frobisher laid a surprisingly well-manicured finger along the side of his nose. ‘Mum’s the word. You can count on me. Is that all, Mr Kemp?’

‘All for now, Mr Frobisher. What else did you have in mind?’

‘I’m a reporter, squire ... Just doing my job, like you do yours ...’

‘Look, there’s nothing further in this for you – at least for the present.’

Frobisher walked round the big desk, looked down at its bare surface, then transferred his gaze to the bookshelves where Kemp had begun to arrange his literary treasures. ‘H’m ... the classics ... I’m a great reader myself, Mr Kemp ... “A Good Book is the Precious Life-blood of a Master Spirit” ... I remember that from my schooldays ... You’ve a nice set of Disraeli there ... Who do you think wrote them?’

Kemp stopped himself saying, ‘Disraeli, of course.’ He knew exactly what Frobisher was up to – the man must have been studying the techniques of television interviewers.

‘I’ve no idea,’ he said, smoothly.

‘Oh, come on, surely you haven’t got that many disgruntled clients.’

Frobisher turned from his contemplation of the Victorian brown-and-gold bindings, and grinned at Kemp.

There was no doubt here was a man on the make. He had scented a good story, perhaps one of the few to come within the orbit of a small provincial paper, and he had decided to milk it for all it was worth. Kemp was wary of journalists, but they were a breed he had no wish to antagonize.

‘Shall we just say the question is an open one? Your editor has suggested the services of the *Gazette* might be used ... These services at the moment require you to keep your mouth shut, Mr Frobisher. When the writer of these letters is discovered Inspector Upshire will issue a statement. In the meantime I have no comment to make.’

‘Now there’s a phrase sticks like wax in the ears ... Mine, I keep ’em open, Mr Kemp. That little item this morning, you may not like it but it’ll get people talking ... Stir things up a bit. Might make it easier for the police to get their man ...’ He had turned to the bookshelves again, peering at the titles. ‘Lord Lytton, eh? That’s turgid stuff ... D’you suppose anybody reads him now?’

‘Not as many as read the *Newtown Gazette*. Did it never occur to you that the reason those letters were delivered to your paper was simply that, to stir things up? The publication of that little item, as you call it, has helped neither myself nor the police to find the culprit.’

Kemp disliked talking to any man’s back so he opened the study door and walked into the hall, leaving Frobisher no alternative but to follow. Eventually he did so, but with reluctance.

‘I like your taste in houses, Mr Kemp, like your choice of books, old-fashioned but very correct. A good image for a solicitor ... Can’t afford a blot on the escutcheon. Leatown, wasn’t it?’

If it was meant as a disabling shot it misfired – Kemp was ready for it.

‘A good reporter does his homework, Mr Frobisher, and I can see you’ve done yours. But that story’s been dead for twenty years, and if you’re thinking of bringing it back to life I would remind you of the little matter of difference between libel as a tort and libel as a criminal offence. You’re a well-read man, Mr Frobisher, so I shall detain you no further on the subject – nor on any other.’

‘No offence meant, squire – and none taken, I hope. Homework always was a bind but it had to be done. From what I gathered, you had a rough time of it back then ... And you’ve helped put away a few villains since you came to Newtown. Don’t think I don’t appreciate that.’ There was even a hint of admiration in Frobisher’s voice as he flipped out a card. ‘Call me any time.’

‘Thanks.’

Slightly mollified, Kemp took the card as he opened the front door.

‘That’s a fine new bit of timber you’ve got there, but it’s not a patch on the old one,’ Frobisher remarked as he went down the step. ‘Some say we need neighbourhood-watch schemes ... Newtown’s always had ’em, neighbours watching robberies like it was television only not so exciting ...’

Though cynical, the observation was apt. Kemp had also found the people of Newtown anxious to keep themselves to themselves, like the three monkeys, when it came to cooperation with the forces of law and order, an attitude which did little to diminish the crime figures.

He thought of this, and of other things, as he closed the door and went back to his study to ponder on the interview. Was Daniel Frobisher as smart as he made out, or had he merely picked up a few tricks of investigative journalism with which to dazzle the natives? At his age he should have wider scope than his present job on a local weekly mostly given over to weddings and obituaries, and only occasionally enlivened by reported rows in the council chamber.

‘He was thorough,’ Kemp told Mary over lunch. ‘I’ll say that in his favour.’

‘Thoroughly bad.’ Mary held to a definite opinion. ‘I didn’t like him one bit.’

‘You hardly saw him.’

‘I saw enough. He gave me a passing glance and decided I wasn’t pretty enough to bother with ...’

‘He didn’t get as far as your ankles. Anyway, you can’t blame him for simply overlooking you. I wouldn’t want someone like him taking an interest.’

‘Neither would I. It’s lucky for you, Lennox, that you married a plain woman. Those who are fair of face have significance for men, they start wondering where the husband got hold of her and what’s she like in bed.’

Kemp watched his wife as she peeled an apple. Everything Mary Madeleine did she did with the same quiet intentness, as if all that mattered was the here and now. She was the most concentrated person he had ever met. Yet she could let her mind fly, and her words, too, when the fancy caught her as it had just done.

‘Do you know who he’s married to?’ she said.

‘I never thought to ask.’

‘Amy Robsart.’

‘Not Leicester’s love? Shut up in Cumnor Hall so lone and drear?’

‘I don’t think so.’ Mary went on cutting up her apple. ‘I’ve no idea what you’re talking about. Amy’s the daughter of the Robsarts at the corner shop where we get our papers.’

Kemp had to shift gear to keep up with her.

‘Someone else has been doing their homework ... How did you come by this gem?’

‘I was paying our account when Mrs Robsart did a tut-tut about that item in the *Gazette*. Terrible thing, Mr Kemp getting them poison-pen letters ... So I said we’d a Mr Frobisher in the house right now helping us with our enquiries. Don’t they call that a euphemism?’

‘They do, and it’s got nothing to do with euphony, which means harmony.’ He knew Mary’s concern for the niceties of the English language, a topic barely skimmed in her American school – admittedly a fairly low-grade one where her attendance had been erratic. Coming late to academic learning, she was saved from error by natural wit and from pretensions by wide experience of life at ground level. She thought of herself as a slow thinker; in Kemp’s view she could outstrip the field if the stakes were the survival of the fittest.

‘Well, there was little harmony in the Robsart household when Mr Frobisher seduced their youngest a few years back. Apparently he fought shy of fatherhood but Mr Robsart’s an ex-boxer himself so the nuptials duly took place. Naturally, it’s no good word they’re saying of their son-in-law.’

‘How did you get all that out of Mrs Robsart? She’s always been pretty taciturn with me.’

Mary considered it for a moment, then she said: ‘People in Newtown don’t know how to place me – in the English sense – so, because I’m ordinary, and nothing much to look at, they take me as one of themselves ... They like to talk and I’m a good listener.’

And you have the common touch, thought Kemp. Loving her as he did, he meant nothing derogatory, rather that it was an attribute too rarely given the place it deserved. He had had it once himself when he had been struck off by the Law Society and the only job he could get was as an enquiry agent in the East End of London. He wouldn’t have survived for long in Walthamstow had he lacked the common touch.

‘And I got more ...’ said Mary, as she piled the plates neatly, one on top of the other. ‘I was asking Mrs Robsart about the times her boys deliver the papers in the morning, and she told me one of the lads saw a person at our door last Thursday about half past seven but they scuttled off so fast he couldn’t say whether it was man or boy, or even a girl ... What it is, there’s a bit of rivalry in the paper rounds, the newsagents from up in the town trying to butt in. The Robsarts get up in arms if they think there’s poaching on their ground so the paperboys are told to report back if they see anything ...’

‘Why the hell didn’t they tell the police?’

‘Oh, Lennox, when will you ever learn? They don’t talk to the police. Some of the lads, they’ll be underage ... But they’re desperate for the job.’

‘All the same, I’ll pass the word ... Might get a description. Boys have bright eyes.’

‘They’ll keep them skinned in future; Mrs Robsart, she’ll see to that. All this one got was a glimpse of a flapping raincoat and a cap pulled down over the ears.’

‘Still, it’s better than nothing. Tell your tale to John when he comes this evening, and I’ll give him those letters handed over by our friend, Frobisher.’

‘Let me have a look at them when I’ve finished the washing-up.’

‘They’re not the most dangerous,’ she decided, when Kemp had spread them out on the study table. Nevertheless, she shuddered. ‘I hate to think of that Paul Pry reading them, especially that bit ...’

She pointed to it:

You was found wanting once before. Sticky fingers in the till, wasn’t it? You got six years for that. Nothing to what you’ll get from me one dark night ...

‘Might be worse,’ said Kemp, grimly. ‘Whoever the mischief-maker is who dropped them in on the press he probably hoped they’d print the lot ... Make people think I’d gone to prison for a six-year term ... Thank God Grimshaw has a healthy respect for the laws on libel.’

‘And Frobisher?’

‘He checked up on my record, of course. Well, it’s his job. I’m only angry that my colleagues at the office had to find out about the letters this way. I should have told them earlier ...’

They had all been on the telephone that day, and Michael Cantley had called round. He was appalled when he saw the contents of the three letters.

‘Are they all like this?’ he asked.

Kemp nodded. ‘Some of the others were more specific about the way I should be dealt with. What do you think, Mike, of the letters themselves?’

Cantley read them again, carefully.

‘Someone who goes back a fair way. A case that went wrong, the injustice thing comes through. Real bitterness ... But, I don’t know, Lennox, there’s something funny about the actual phrasing, the vagueness ... I’d like to have studied them all. Why on earth didn’t you tell us?’

‘They were too personal. It’s only the more recent that hinted at a slur on reputation ... It was then I began to think of damage to the firm ... And now there’s this item in the *Gazette*.’

‘Oh, we can ride that one out, though I don’t think the paper should have printed anything without checking with you first. If you like I’ll have a word with the local Law Society ... See whether we should issue a disclaimer.’

‘I’d be glad if you would, Mike; it would be better done through the firm. I’ve got photocopies of the others, by the way – these are originals.’

‘You got these from Dan Frobisher? I know him. He’s a bit cocky but he’s a good reporter, does most of the court stuff for the *Gazette*. I think he’ll be discreet if there’s something in it for him in the end. He’s been around Newtown longer than you have, Lennox, though I can’t imagine why he stays ... He and Nick Stoddart used to be thick, possibly still are now that Nick’s back.’

‘That’s a combination I can well do without.’ Kemp sighed. ‘But it’s time I stopped getting paranoid about everyone I meet.’

CHAPTER 5

John Upshire set off for dinner at No. 2, Albert Crescent in the mood of a man with nothing better to do on a Saturday night. It was preferable, marginally, to eating a takeaway meal in front of the television. He was uneasy, however, at the prospect of again meeting Kemp’s wife who he still thought of as Mary Madeleine Blane because of the file on her he had once received from the New York Police Department. That nothing in that file had ever been proceeded with had come as a relief to Inspector Upshire who had no wish to get embroiled in matters best left to the American authorities.

In the event the case had been satisfactorily dealt with by some tricky footwork on the part of Lennox Kemp, the legal complexities of which the inspector did not wish to know, and would not have understood if he had. All the same, Kemp did not have to go and marry the woman ...

As Upshire strode through the streets of Newtown he made up his mind that he would distance himself from the new Mrs Kemp. Although this might be construed as resentment at the marriage, it was more a question of how he felt about her as a person. Upshire was not given to analysing his feelings; all he knew was that tonight he had the hump.

Halfway through dinner he realized that he was enjoying himself as he had not done for years. The atmosphere was relaxed, there were no signs of tension between them (he was the only guest), the conversation was agreeable and the food delicious.

John Upshire was amazed to find himself talking to Mary about Betty's last illness, a thing he had never spoken of before. Mary had nursed many such patients and understood. She listened with quiet sympathy but a calm detachment, showing that her interest was in him rather than the circumstances since his wife's death had happened some seven years ago.

It was not that becoming Mrs Kemp had changed Mary Madeleine's appearance. Upshire had considered her a plain, unprepossessing woman the first time he met her, and she still had the same too-wide brow, a narrow, rather stubborn chin, and a general colourlessness which did not make for beauty. But she gave a straight look from her pale grey eyes, and she smiled a lot ... It's the Irish in her, thought Upshire, who was well aware of her parentage, and he admired the way her soft brown hair was cut in a bob so that it swung out like a bell when she turned her head.

She had forbidden any mention of the letters during the meal.

'My cooking would not be getting the full attention of your mouths if I allowed it,' she said. 'Taste first, you can talk afterwards.'

'Take your port into the study like gentlemen,' she told them as she began clearing the dishes. 'I'll be bringing coffee in a while.'

Kemp spread the letters out on the table, smoothed the brown paper they had been wrapped in, and added his photocopies of the others.

Upshire studied them all closely.

'I've sent a man to fingerprint the *Gazette* staff – though Mr Grimshaw says only the office boy who took it from the box, himself and Dan Frobisher actually handled the package. It was Frobisher who opened it. And I've got a transcript here of the note he took of that phone call. Apparently whoever it was asked for him.'

'Asked for Frobisher himself?'

Upshire shrugged. 'It's well known he's their crime reporter. He sees to it he gets his by-line ...'

'You know him, John?'

'Over the years, yes. He's in and out of the station – that's his job. Never given us any trouble, though ... My men get on with him ... Doesn't badger us, like some ... He'll push for a story if he thinks there's anything in it ...'

'He's already tried pushing me,' said Kemp, grimly.

He told Upshire about the reporter's visit, at which the inspector raised his eyebrows, sceptically.

'But that's a dead duck. Why'd he bring it up now?'

'Presumably because our secret scribbler has already done so.' Kemp pointed out certain parts in the letters.

'H'm ... they only hint at something ... But surely anyone could find out?'

'If they thought it worth their while ... So far as my profession is concerned, it's over and done with long ago. But the slur is there ... If they had been specific it could do less harm.'

'I see what you mean.' The inspector looked again through the letters for a moment. 'You think this chap's clever? I think he's a nutcase.'

'I'll not be agreeing with you there, John,' said Mary Kemp as she brought in the tray. 'I wish I could ... If a person is mentally deranged, they'd give themselves away by doing other crazy things than just writing letters. It's the sane I'm afraid of.'

'Mary thinks they could be written by a woman,' said Kemp.

Upshire shook his head. 'Looks more like a man to me.'

‘When Michael Cantley read them,’ said Kemp, slowly, ‘he thought there was something odd about the phrasing. The same thing had struck me. It’s as if ideas had been tossed about before being committed to paper, like people do when there’s two of them working on a script ...’

‘You think there’s two of them?’ exclaimed Upshire.

‘That’s it,’ said Mary, eagerly. ‘A man and a woman. That would account for the use of phrases that don’t seem to me to quite match up.’

‘You’ve got me out of my depth.’ John Upshire accepted a cup of coffee, piled sugar into it, and drank. ‘When the analysts have done with them, mebbe a shrink should have a look ... There’s some nasty threats in there, Lennox, and I don’t mean the ones about revealing your murky past. It’s your immediate future I’ve got in mind ...’

He got a grateful glance from Mary for that.

‘It’s what I’m always telling Lennox. If this person, or these persons, really want to harm him, then he’s in danger. That stuff put through our letterbox ...’

She told the inspector about what the delivery boy had seen, and he promised to look into it without upsetting the Robsarts. Then he turned to Kemp.

‘That accident to your car, Lennox, we haven’t a hope in hell ... The London Road on a wet night, people are skidding all over the place ... and you never got a proper look at the van. No, what I have to concentrate on is the theft of your briefcase, and how that ties in with the letters being leaked to the *Gazette*.’

‘Goes with my theory that there’s more than one person involved ... If their object is just to cause me embarrassment, maybe lose me a few jittery clients, they’ve picked the wrong man. I’ll not be done to death by slanderous tongues ...’

Mary smiled at Upshire. ‘That’s the wine speaking out of him,’ she said. ‘He’s started on his quotes ...’

But Upshire, more perceptive now, saw the disquiet in her eyes as she went on: ‘Yet I don’t like to hear the word death on anyone’s lips ...’

‘Don’t you worry, Mary ...’ It was the first time the inspector had used her name. ‘In my experience real killers don’t send letters about what they’re going to do. You can take my word for that. And we’ll catch this joker before he does any more damage. You can count on me ...’

As he left the Kems’ house John Upshire wished he could be as confident as he hoped he had sounded. He hated cases like this where there was nothing really to get hold of; burglary, theft, attempted arson, these were run-of-the-mill petty crimes in Newtown ... And, digging deeper, he had no doubt that there were families in the town with enough hatred in them to conspire at mailing poison-pen letters like those his friend was getting – John Upshire would put nothing past some of the crooks he’d known.

Dismissing such thoughts from his mind – for surely an examination of them and some slogging by his own men would bring up something – he walked with a lighter step than he had earlier in the evening. Whatever her past, Mary Kemp was a pleasant woman of more than ordinary gifts, and he could understand now why Kemp had married her.

Watching her moving about in the big old-fashioned drawing room which, despite its spaciousness, she had contrived to make cosy, he had seen how, when their eyes met, she and her husband had the glowing look of people in love. Upshire felt a pang, a memory of something long forgotten. As the evening had gone on, and he knew he had been accepted not only as Lennox’s friend but as hers also, his unease had vanished. When she assured him on leaving that he would always be a welcome guest in their house he knew she was not simply mouthing civilities.

John Upshire was a policeman, not given to much introspection. In his job he felt he was like the soldier, his not to reason why, his priority to investigate the crime, search out the criminal and hand him or her over to the law, for he was neither judge nor jury – though often he questioned

the decisions of both, but only in the privacy of his own mind. He was well aware of the limitations imposed by his work, the lack of social life, the occasional distrust of acquaintances ...

So, he was all the more grateful tonight to find himself quite uplifted. Wine, good food, congenial company – and friendship – he valued them for they were rare in his experience.

Having accepted their marriage, he wished well for the Kemps.

CHAPTER 6

It was Tuesday evening. Mary Kemp turned from the dressing table and looked at her husband.

‘Glum-face,’ she said, ‘you’re not really wanting to go to this party, are you?’

‘I suppose not. I’m not easy with the people in the office at the moment. There’s an awkwardness between us because of the letters – the way they found out. It’s only natural, they have the firm to think of and their own careers. Mike Cantley’s all right, and probably Belchamber ... he takes the broad view, and, having been a barrister, he’s never taken by surprise. For the rest, well, I simply don’t know ... Tony Lambert of course is up on cloud nine because of his love life, but I’m sure that nasty item in the paper shook him, he’s very conventional, our Tony. Because he always does the decent thing he expects everyone else to do likewise.’

‘A vain hope in a naughty world,’ said Mary, smoothing her dress. It was a misty blue which deepened the dark brown of her hair, and for once she had used eyeshadow. ‘How do I look?’

‘Like a mouse in blue spectacles ... No, don’t brush it off, it suits you ... I think that’s the cab at the door.’

Kemp was still without his car, which irked him. Lorimers’ Garage had had it over a week but had just taken delivery of a spare part damaged in the incident on the London Road and had told him it would not be ready until tomorrow evening. Kemp had been perverse about not accepting their offer of a hired car; he thought the walking would do him good, though he was not overfond of the exercise, and after a week he’d had enough of it.

‘As soon as I pass my driving test I’m going to buy a Mini of my own,’ said Mary, as they were being driven off. Although she had never possessed a motor vehicle in her life – an odd distinction in an American – Mary was a very competent driver; Kemp had not asked her where she got the experience. ‘And then we shall be a two-car family like those people everyone tries to keep up with, the Joneses, isn’t it?’

‘Never heard of them,’ said Kemp, ‘so we’ll just have to make do with the Allardyces. Tony says they have quite a place ...’

It was indeed. Even Kemp was startled at the size of it. Simply called The Leas after the original meadows upon which it was built, the sprawling modern bungalow occupied a large area with plenty to spare for wide lawns and winding walks through newly planted shrubberies. The drive was brightly lit by spotlights fixed on iron standards.

‘Well, I do believe these are old streetlamps,’ said Kemp, peering out. ‘I wonder where young Allardyce picked them up? Probably perks from the Development Corporation he works for. How very ingenious ...’

The word ingenious is not one readily applied to an Australian sheep-shearer, and that is what Zachary Allardyce looked like. Tall, bronzed and blond, any typecaster would have swooped on him for the part.

He was not immediately introduced to Kemp, who only came upon his host after doing the dutiful circulating expected of guests at these affairs. When Anita’s brother was eventually pointed out to Kemp by Tony Lambert he was deep in conversation with Mary Kemp. As Kemp approached them he heard the true twang of Australian vowels.

‘Zachary’s a crazy name. I mean, who wants to be called something out of the Bible these days ...’

‘I rather like it,’ Mary said. ‘The biblical thing ... Back in the States now, they go in for it too, call their sons Seth or Joshua, Daniel or even Jeremiah ... as if it sets the seal of the Almighty on them ...’

Allardyce laughed – as indeed she intended him to.

‘I shorten mine to Zack ... One-syllable names are easier to yell out over a great distance.’

‘And I’m sure there’s plenty of that where you come from.’

‘Yes, ma’am ... The old man – that’s my dad – he still runs the sheep station, but Anita and I, well, we quit ... Wider horizons, you know ... Like in your country, the young must branch out ...’

‘They surely do.’ Kemp could see that Mary Madeleine was enjoying herself; she was using one of her many voices. ‘Either they end up wealthy on Wall Street or broke in The Bowery ... Oh, have you met my husband, Lennox Kemp?’

Zack Allardyce gave Kemp a handshake that would have pulled his fingers out of shape had it lasted longer.

‘Mr Kemp. We’ve not spoken but of course I’ve seen you around Newtown.’

It was the second time recently someone had said that to Kemp; more folk know Tom Fool than Tom Fool knows, he thought. He must have gone around with his eyes shut to miss so large a specimen.

‘At various planning enquiries,’ Allardyce explained. ‘I remember you represented that little parish council – Amwell, wasn’t it? – when our Development Corporation took over the gravel pits.’

‘And won a famous victory ...’ It had not been that for Kemp, nor for the villagers of Amwell. They had had this pretty spot with a flowing brook and a deep, translucent pool. Kemp remembered there had been words carved on the little bridge, and he murmured them now: ‘Sweet Amwell, Blessed Be Thy Stream ...’

All gone now of course under the desert of the diggings.

‘Progress, Lennox ... Can’t be stopped, you know.’

‘Someone said progress would be wonderful if only it would stop,’ Kemp remarked, with a smile. ‘I notice the Corporation’s gravel workings have fallen on lean times of late.’

‘Recession. Hits everybody ...’ Zack Allardyce waved at a tray of wine which was passing, and had their glasses replenished. ‘I liked your style, Lennox, you put up a good fight for the place, but my Corporation looks to the future, you know ...’

Kemp didn’t like being patronized, nor the inference that he had somehow been relegated to the past. Although Zack was at least ten years older than his sister, he was still a young man and it might be that he yet had much to learn about his adopted country.

As if picking up her husband’s thought, Mary turned the conversation by asking how long Zachary had been in England.

Some considerable time, it seemed. He had come as a student, taken his degree here – he did not specify at which university – and, after a stint in local government, he had been, in his own words, snapped up by the Newtown Development Corporation some three years ago.

‘Planning’s my forte,’ he told them, ‘so I stick to working in the new towns. Gives me scope for my ideas ...’

‘You’ll not be wanting to go back to Australia, then,’ said Mary, innocently. ‘There can’t be much need for planning there with all that empty space to fill and no historic ruins to knock down ...’

‘I don’t intend going back. That’s why I advised my sister to come over and do her law here. We’re both staying in your tight little island, you can bet on that ... Ah, here’s Anita ... I expect you’ve already met Lennox Kemp. This is his wife.’

Anita Allardyce was also fair-complexioned but in no other way did she resemble her formidable brother. She was a small girl, chunky rather than slim, with intelligent blue eyes set wide apart. She had the bouncy look of one in perfect health, and attractive because of it.

‘I didn’t recognize you at first,’ said Mary, ‘but I’ve seen you jogging in the local park. You wear a bandana thing round your hair ...’

‘But not tonight.’ Anita laughed, and shook out her red-gold mane which was waved and frizzed in the present dishevelled fashion of the young.

‘Why, you’re a right little lion cub!’ exclaimed Mary, who sometimes said exactly what she thought.

The two ladies went off together, Zack abandoned Kemp and moved away through the crowd like a tall ship in a fishing fleet.

‘I see our friend Stoddart’s here.’ Mike Cantley had come up and was whispering in Kemp’s ear. ‘How’s he connected to the Allardyces?’

‘Well, Roberts get most of the Corporation’s legal work when we are on the opposite side – which happens quite often these days.’

‘Letting Nick loose on planning must be like sending a bull into a china shop,’ Cantley muttered. ‘Look out, he’s heading this way. I’m off ... I don’t want my evening’s enjoyment spoiled.’

‘Hullo, Lennox, Gillorns in full force tonight, eh? Nothing like presenting a solid front ...’ It was obvious that Stoddart had already imbibed more than his share of the wine.

‘It’s Tony’s engagement party, Nick,’ said Kemp, smoothly, ‘so naturally the firm is here to help him celebrate.’

‘The Allardyce kid? She’ll eat him alive, that one ... Great chap, her brother Zack ... Did you know he’s now a highflier with the old Corp? And nearly was a corpse that esh-establishment till he took over ...’

‘Its work was done,’ said Kemp, shortly, ‘the town’s built. All they’re doing now is scrub round the edges.’

‘Which don’t suit you conservash ... conservationists ...’ Nick had trouble with the word, so he changed the subject, at the same time modifying his voice and mien – a good barrister’s trick if done swiftly enough to disarm an opponent. Unhappily for Stoddart, alcohol had slowed him down and the effect was merely clownish. ‘You need friends, Lennox, at a time like this ...’ He went on nodding solemnly like a drinking duck. ‘Of course, we in the profession know all about your bad time, but no shouting it from the rooftops, eh?’

Usually Kemp could be amused by Stoddart’s antics but tonight he was not in a forgiving mood. He was saved from throwing something bitter in Nick’s face – vermouth by choice but probably only words – by the appearance of Mary at his side. She must have heard at least some of the conversation.

‘They are serving supper, Lennox,’ she said, taking his arm, ‘in the conservatory ... As near as the Australians can get to the great outdoors, I suppose, but it will be chilly ...’

‘So, this is the little lady ...’ Stoddart bent his huge head down towards her, and his loosely held wine glass spilled out a few drops on the shoulder of her dress.

‘Not so little, and certainly no lady.’ Mary fixed him with a direct look. ‘Nor are you so great as a man that you can’t carry your liquor either inside or out ...’

As she gently towed Kemp away she continued in a clear, carrying voice: ‘And it’s better manners than that I’ve had from the drunks on Skid Row ...’

It was the kind of party where by supertime those who had indulged themselves too freely were loose of tongue whilst those who had remained sober were grown embarrassed and lacked conviviality. That there had to be the two camps arose naturally from the presence of so many lawyers who knew the extent of police surveillance on the roads home. The various couples split fairly amicably along the line between drinking and driving but the resulting disunity hardly helped the party spirit. Fortunately no expense had been spared, so the food was some consolation.

The members of Gillorns drifted together in an unconscious gesture of solidarity with Tony Lambert. Zack Allardyce dominated the other end of the long table set out under a glass roof among

a jungle of potted plants in various stages of greenness and demonstrating verdant health in some, despondent wilt in others.

Sally couldn't take her eyes off Zack. 'He looks like a TV ad for Fosters ... You can almost see the wide open spaces between his ears ...'

Young Franklyn had been at the wine. He gave a loud guffaw – brought on as much by surprise than anything else; he was rather in awe of Miss Stacey as he was finding revenue law beyond his powers. Besides, she didn't often make jokes.

Nick Stoddart looked up from where he was sitting mid-table next to Anita. 'I recognize Gillorns's virgin tax expert,' he muttered, 'and I think she of all people should keep her lip buttoned ... Who's the whipper-snapper who thinks she's funny?'

'Franklyn Davey ... He's their articled clerk,' Anita told him. 'Since your time, I expect. Didn't you used to work at Gillorns?'

'Long time ago ...' Nick's voice was blurred ... 'Before I went on to better things ... Just like you're doing, honey ...'

Anita went rather pink. 'Oh, it's not fixed yet ...' she began, but found her companion wasn't listening. He had found something more interesting going on further up the table. Zachary had tackled Lennox Kemp on the subject of the item in the local paper.

'Hi, there, Lennox ... Are these real poison-pen letters?'

'Not up for discussion, Mr Allardyce,' Kemp said firmly. He was damned if he'd get on first-name terms with the man.

Nick leaned forward so that his chin was level with his fruit salad.

'That's right ... No dirty linen, if you please ...' He wagged his finger in the air. 'Anonymous ... synonymous ... And your sins will find you out ... Y'know what they say ...'

'What does synonymous mean?' asked Mary of the table in general. 'I don't think it's got anything to do with sinning.'

'And you'd be right, Mrs Kemp,' said Franklyn, eager to be of help. 'It only means equal to ... on a par with ...'

'Young Mr Bloody Know-all ...' muttered Stoddart. 'In my day articled clerks knew their place ...' He pawed Anita's arm to bring her attention back to him. 'You thinking of getting your articles with Gillorns?'

She coloured slightly, but whether it was at his touch or because of the question an observer could not have known. 'I hope so,' she said, rather primly, 'once I've taken my Part One exams this summer.'

Kemp was surprised; the subject had not been bruited before – at least not in his presence. He looked round for Tony but he was already at the door saying goodbye to the Cantleys.

The party was breaking up. It did not seem the right time to ask Tony whether it was his suggestion that Anita Allardyce should join the firm. Kemp doubted it; Tony was a stickler for doing things the right way, he would have spoken to Kemp first. It looked as if the lion cub – as Mary had called her – had a way with her ...

Later, Kemp found himself next to Tony in the hall. Around them the departing guests were jostling for coats, calling up taxis, looking for their spouses, arranging lifts for those unfit to drive, and taking farewell of their host and hostess. For a few moments there was a revival of the original happy atmosphere.

'You still without your car, Lennox?' Tony asked him.

'Get it back tomorrow night, thank goodness ...'

'You know I'm up in town all day tomorrow? It's to do with my parents' estate, and I've got several other little errands' – he looked across at Anita, meaningfully – 'including a present she doesn't know about yet ...'

‘That’s all right, Tony. Your department runs itself anyway. You’ll miss that Law Society Branch meeting on the budget but Sally can fill you in later.’

‘Pity about the meeting ... I’m afraid I’d clean forgotten ... But this business in town can’t wait. As you know, I’m sole executor and it’s the final winding-up ...’

‘You won’t be missing much. It’s a nuisance for me, too ... I’d meant to pick up my car earlier but Lorimer says it won’t be ready till after five and that’s when the Branch meets. Sally’s going to take me in her car and then she’ll drop me off at the garage later. The way some of these old boys drone on it’ll be after eight before we get away. But David Lorimer will leave my car out back as he usually does so I’ll just pick it up there after the meeting.’

‘You still go to Lorimers’? Bit out of the way, isn’t it?’

‘David Lorimer’s an old client of ours. Besides, he’s always given me good service. As you know, I’m hopeless with what goes on under the bonnet ... Hey, I think that’s my coat you’ve got there.’

‘Gosh, I thought it was mine,’ said Tony, handing it over. ‘I’ve never known you wear an overcoat ...’

‘Comes of getting married, and coddled. As a single man I never felt I needed a coat, but now Mary insists ...’

‘Well,’ said Tony, ‘it looks as if you and I go to the same outfitters.’

‘Difficult not to. Newtown’s hardly the metropolis ...’

‘That reminds me,’ said Tony. ‘Do you want any errands run while I’m up in town tomorrow? I could call in at Clement’s Inn -’

‘Definitely not,’ Kemp interrupted with some fervour. The last thing he wanted was for Gillorns Head Office to get wind of any trouble at the Newtown end. ‘I’m keeping a very low profile as far as they’re concerned until this nasty business blows over – as I’m sure it will ...’

The good wine had got to him, and the effect was to make grave matters seem of less moment.

Young Lambert, on the other hand, had been anxious under the eye of his beloved, and therefore somewhat abstemious. ‘I hope so, Lennox, indeed I do. Doesn’t do the firm any favours this thing getting out.’

Had Kemp been his usual discerning self he would have recognized a fair comment from one who was both colleague and close friend. In his present euphoric state, however, he only grinned and said: ‘Nothing for any of us to worry about – certainly not you. Have a nice day in town. Did you say something about a present for your fiancée? I hope she likes it, women can be difficult to please ... Ah, here’s my wife with that expression on her face which says I’m talking too much ...’

‘Our taxi is here, Lennox,’ said Mary, squeezing his arm. ‘Let’s go and say the proper things to the Allardyces.’

But Zachary had loomed up behind them, and he laughed.

‘Don’t spoil yourself by being proper, Mary,’ he said. It was obvious that he was rather taken with her. ‘All these English, now ... they’re too damned polite. Except when they drink, of course. You were a bit hard on old Nick Stoddart, but then you’re a pretty direct lady. Comes of you being an American, I suppose ...’

‘Comes of me being me,’ said Mary, firmly. ‘Thank you for a very enjoyable evening. Now I must have a word with your sister.’

Zachary seemed anxious not to let Kemp go. He began a rambling account of a recent planning appeal which had been settled in favour of what he called ‘his’ corporation, dropping some influential local names along the way and making much of his own contribution. Kemp listened politely but with no great interest in the matter, although he was intrigued by the Australian’s self-esteem and could see that it could have impact in some quarters.

He was about to turn away when Allardyce stopped him again. ‘I say, Lennox, I’m sorry if I was out of line asking about those letters ... But that piece in the paper did make the thing public. Have you really had your life threatened?’

‘We all step on someone’s toes from time to time. When we deal in controversial issues there are always people who get upset.’ Kemp tried to turn the conversation. ‘You must have met a few angry protestors in your line of work, Mr Allardyce.’

‘Sure, I’ve been threatened by farmers’ dogs and looked down the barrel of a shotgun. Folk don’t always like what we do, but at least they meet us face to face ... Anonymous letters, now that’s something else again. That’s sneaky. You’ve not been attacked physically, have you?’

Kemp shook his head. He had no wish to share his experiences with Zachary Allardyce, though the man would make a formidable bodyguard should he ever need one. Fortunately he was rescued from this disturbing thought by the reappearance of his wife and they went out together to find their cab.

‘These people, Lennox ...’ Mary Kemp sat contentedly in her own sitting room with a coffee cup in her hand and a glass of cognac on the table beside her. ‘... They don’t act real ...’

‘Parties are all the same in Newtown – and in the whole of England, too, for all I know.’ Kemp, back in his home, was apt to be philosophical.

‘Are we holding a postmortem on social events?’ she asked.

‘We do appear to be doing so on this one.’

‘Well ... Should I be giving you my impressions of it? From an outsider’s point of view, an American for instance ...’

‘For so they took you ...’

‘Being not one of them ...’

‘Nor an Australian from the outback ... Come on, Mary, you’re dying to tell me.’

She took a drink of the brandy although she didn’t need it for the words to come.

‘Zachary Allardyce is on the make. I don’t believe his old man ever owned as much as half an acre, and only counted sheep as an aid to sleep ... Little sister, Anita ... she’s out on the prowl and your Tony’s a toothsome morsel ... Nick Stoddart’s on the slide, pushed down by that chip on his shoulder the size of an oak tree, and his tendency to tipple ... Your office colleagues, they’d sure like to be loyal but ... self-interest takes the heart out of that ...’

Kemp sat up.

‘You were listening to them?’

‘I have good ears. Nondescripts like me get overlooked when people are talking ... Same as the servants in eighteenth-century novels ...’

Kemp looked across at her fondly, but with some apprehension.

‘You’ve been doing some fast reading, Mary.’

‘And why not? The Irish have always had a way with words. It’s not difficult to catch up. Tonight I was hearing the hesitations, the spaces between the words ... When you listen to the silences you know what’s at the root of the talk.’

‘And that is?’

‘There is mistrust of you, Lennox, because of the letters ... Of your position as head of the firm. Of course, they are all of them lawyers so they’re careful in their speech, for ever looking over their shoulders for fear they’ll get sued for slander ... That’s where what they don’t say matters more than their words ...’

She drained the brandy in her glass.

‘Mary Madeleine Blane, I think you’re tipsy ...’

‘And what of it? Isn’t it the truth I’m telling you?’

Going upstairs with his arms around her, and comfortable in all else, Kemp hoped it was not so.

CHAPTER 7

Wednesday was an ordinary day. The morning post brought few surprises: fiscal reminders, conflicting claims, routine conveyancing, fervid complaints from dissatisfied clients, the odd

appreciation for services rendered, building society cheques towards impending completions, notice of meetings, appeals for charity, and letters from rival firms competing in the matrimonial stakes.

Kemp dealt with them all, distributing among his colleagues their particular headaches for the day, and taking to himself those in which he was concerned. He dictated, saw clients, drafted documents, perused and completed the various forms required by bureaucracy to ensure every citizen's right to be heard, to be tried, to be scolded, solaced or compensated according to the law. It was Kemp's framework, the narrow space in which he operated and within which he fervently hoped his intelligence and expertise might make for, at the very least, a happy compromise – justice was too often a will-o'-the-wisp and hard to catch, an abstract concept only possible in an ideal world ...

It was already five o'clock when Sally Stacey came into his office.

'We're late, Lennox, we'll miss the sherry ...'

'If it's what the local Branch usually provides it's no great loss ...'

As he had predicted, the meeting went on and on, petering out finally just after eight when the old-stagers had run out of steam – and their reminiscences of times past when the budget meant little more than a change in tax without the modern complexities brought about by political expediency.

Sally Stacey did not say much at the start of their drive back to Newtown, which was unlike her for she was normally quite a talker. Kemp was reminded of what Mary had said about the silences ...

'Lennox, there's something I have to tell you ...' When Sally spoke at last she had her eyes on the road, her hands firm on the steering wheel. 'It's about those letters ... Of course we were all shocked to see that bit in the *Gazette* ... I got to thinking ... You know the reporter, Dan Frobisher?'

'I've met him.'

'What you probably don't know is his background. You remember when I came to Gillorns four years ago? You had me doing matrimonials ...'

'I'm sorry for that, Sally. We just thought ...'

'Because I was a woman solicitor, the first you'd had, you thought I'd naturally go into that department ...'

'It was a mistake. I know that now, and I took you off it as soon as I realized you'd a business brain ...'

'You were the only one who guessed ... And I'm grateful. What I wanted to tell you was that while I was doing what everyone expected me to be good at – the social welfare thing – one of my clients was Amy Frobisher – well, she was Amy Robsart then ...'

'I didn't know she'd been your client.'

'To put it bluntly, what she wanted was a bastardy order. She was pregnant. She said the father was Daniel Frobisher and he wasn't keen to marry her.'

'And?'

'She was quite a tough little piece. It was either get him into court or she'd have an abortion.'

'I see.'

'No, you don't ...' Sally's hands were gripping the wheel very tightly. 'She came for legal advice ...'

'Which you gave her?'

'Well ... up to a point ... But when she talked about abortion, I was in a quandary ...'

Kemp waited for her to go on. When she didn't, he said, gently: 'I know that you are a Roman Catholic, Sally, and I appreciate that you might have strong views on abortion ... but you are first and foremost a lawyer.'

It was some time before she spoke. They were by now on Newtown's ring road and the high lamps shone brightly into the car so that he could see the strain in her face.

'I told her she should on no account abort the child.'

Kemp leant back in his seat, and watched the highway so brilliantly lit, the way forward so clear. Eventually he said: 'And she took your advice?'

Sally nodded. 'She said she would have the baby ... In the end the court papers weren't needed. Her parents made him marry her ...'

'So the child was born in wedlock?'

'The child was born mentally defective ...'

Kemp heard the indrawn breath that was almost a sob. He took his time before he spoke.

'It wasn't your fault, Sally. These things happen ...'

But Sally Stacey would not listen to any words of consolation.

'She burst into my office,' she went on, bleakly, '... it must have been about six months later ... She just stood there like a wild animal ... and she hurled abuse at me ... Because of me, she said, she was stuck with a husband she loathed and a thing she couldn't look after ... She called it a thing ... She was only nineteen, Lennox ...'

'Have you seen or heard from her since?'

'No.' Sally shook herself. 'I had to tell you now because of the letters ... just in case there is a connection.'

'I don't see how there can be. This happened, what, two years ago? And anyway, the letters are coming to me, not you.'

'Amy Frobisher said that day she wished all lawyers would burn in hell ... we were all liars and cheats, we wrecked people's lives and didn't care ... I could only sit there and hear her out. Afterwards I wrestled with my conscience ... Had I really done wrong?'

She was talking now to herself and although Kemp could have answered her, he chose not to. He could have told her she had been wrong, not in her personal conviction, but in allowing it to intrude upon her legal judgement. She would have been very persuasive with Amy Robsart, the strength of her religion lending sincerity and force to her argument, and the young girl in no state to withstand that persuasion. Sally had forgotten that the girl had rights too. The lawyer in Sally should have warned her she was stepping outside her brief; she ought to have stayed within the legal frame, offered advice only on that.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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