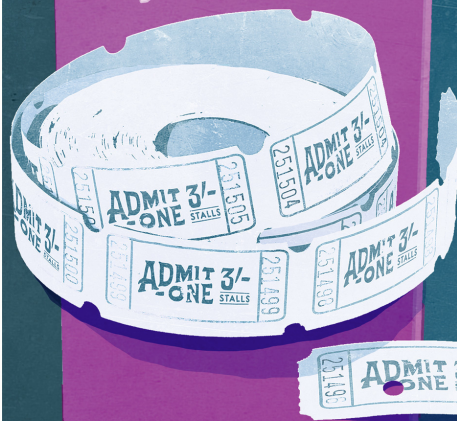


INSPECTOR FRENCH

and the
BOX
OFFICE
MURDERS



Freeman
Wills Crofts



Freeman Wills Crofts Inspector French and the Box Office Murders

Аннотация

From the Collins Crime Club archive, the fifth Inspector French novel by Freeman Wills Crofts, once dubbed ‘The King of Detective Story Writers’. THE PUZZLE OF THE PURPLE SICKLE The suicide of a sales clerk at the box office of a London cinema leaves another girl in fear for her life. Persuaded to seek help from Scotland Yard, Miss Darke confides in Inspector Joseph French about a gambling scam by a mysterious trio of crooks and that she believes her friend was murdered. When the girl fails to turn up the next day, and the police later find her body, French’s inquiries reveal that similar girls have also been murdered, all linked by their jobs and by a sinister stranger with a purple scar . . .

Содержание

FREEMAN WILLS CROFTS	5
Copyright	6
1	9
2	31
3	47
4	60
5	71
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	72

FREEMAN WILLS CROFTS

*Inspector French and
the Box Office Murders*



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[Contents](#)

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Chapter 1: The Purple Sickle](#)

[Chapter 2: French Makes an Assignation](#)

[Chapter 3: The Inquest](#)

[Chapter 4: French Makes a Start](#)

[Chapter 5: Lee-on-the-Solent](#)

[Chapter 6: The Supreme Appeal Court](#)

[Chapter 7: Fair Passengers](#)

[Chapter 8: The Grey Car's Round](#)

[Chapter 9: French Makes a Second Assignation](#)

[Chapter 10: Mr Cracksman French](#)

[Chapter 11: The Happy Paterfamilias](#)

[Chapter 12: The Car's Freight](#)

[Chapter 13: The Transport of Supplies](#)

[Chapter 14: The Property Adjoining](#)

[Chapter 15: Mr Cullimore Expounds](#)

[Chapter 16: In the Net](#)

[Chapter 17: The Shadows Loom Nearer](#)

[Chapter 18: When Greek Meets Greek](#)

[Chapter 19: Conclusion](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also in this Series](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

1

The Purple Sickle

Inspector Joseph French, of the Criminal Investigation Department of New Scotland Yard, sat writing in his room in the great building on Victoria Embankment. Before him on his desk lay sheet after sheet of memorandum paper covered with his small, neat writing, and his pen travelled so steadily over the paper that an observer might have imagined that he had given up the detection of crime and taken to journalism.

He was on a commonplace job, making a *précis* of the life history of an extremely commonplace burglar. But though he didn't know it, fate, weighty with the issues of life and death, was even then knocking at his door.

Its summons was prosaic enough, a ring on the telephone. As he picked up the receiver he little thought that that simple action was to be his introduction to a drama of terrible and dastardly crime, indeed one of the most terrible and dastardly crimes with which he had ever had to do.

'That Inspector French?' he heard. 'Arrowsmith speaking—Arrowsmith of Lincoln's Inn.'

A criminal lawyer with a large practice, Mr Arrowsmith was well known in the courts. He and French were on friendly terms, having had tussles over the fate of many an evil-doer.

‘Yes, Mr Arrowsmith. I’m French.’

‘I’ve a young lady here,’ Arrowsmith went on, ‘who has just pitched me a yarn which should interest you. She has got into the clutches of a scoundrel who’s clearly up to no good. I don’t know what he’s after, but it looks mighty like a scheme of systematic theft. I thought you might like to lay a trap and take him redhanded.’

‘Nothing would please me better,’ French returned promptly. ‘Shall I go across to your office?’

‘No, it’s not necessary. I’ll send the girl to the Yard. Thurza Darke is her name. She’ll be with you in half an hour.’

‘Splendid! I’ll see her directly she comes. And many thanks for your hint.’

Though he spoke cordially, French was not impressed by the message. Communications purporting to disclose clues to crimes were received by the Yard every day. As a matter of principle all were investigated, but not one in a hundred led to anything. When, therefore, about half an hour later Miss Darke was announced, French greeted her courteously, but without enthusiasm.

She was a pretty blonde of about five-and-twenty, with a good manner and something of a presence. Well but plainly dressed in some light summery material, she looked what she evidently was, an ordinary, pleasant, healthy young woman of the lower middle classes. French put her down as a typist or shopgirl or perhaps a bookkeeper in some small establishment. In one point only did

she seem abnormal. She was evidently acutely nervous. There was panic in her eyes, tiny drops of perspiration stood on her face, and the hand in which she grasped her vanity bag trembled visibly.

‘Good morning, Miss Darke,’ said French, rising as she entered and pulling forward a chair. ‘Won’t you sit down?’ He gave her a keen glance and went on: ‘Now, if you’ll excuse me for two or three minutes I’ll be quite at your service.’

He busied himself again with his papers. If her nervousness were due to her surroundings she must be allowed time to pull herself together.

‘Ready at last,’ he went on with his pleasant smile. ‘Just take your time and tell me your trouble in your own way and it’ll be a strange thing if between us all we’ll not be able to help you out.’

The girl looked at him gratefully and with some surprise. Evidently she had expected a different kind of reception. French noted the glance with satisfaction. To gain the confidence of those with whom he had to deal was his invariable aim, not only because he valued pleasant and friendly relations for their own sake, but because he felt that in such an atmosphere he was likely to get more valuable details than if his informant was frightened or distrustful.

‘So you know Mr Arrowsmith?’ he prompted, as she seemed to have a difficulty in starting. ‘A good sort, isn’t he?’

‘He seems so indeed, Mr French,’ she answered with a suggestion of Lancashire in her accent. ‘But I really can’t say that

I know him. I met him this morning for the first time.'

'How was that? Did you go to consult him?'

'Not exactly: that is, it was through Miss Cox, Miss Jennie Cox, his typist. She is my special friend at the boarding house we live at. She told him about me without asking my leave. He said he would hear my story and then she came back to the boarding house and persuaded me to go and tell it to him.'

'She thought you were in some difficulty and wanted to do you a good turn?'

'It was more than that, Mr French. She knew all about my difficulty, for I had told her. But she believed I was in danger and thought somebody should be told about it.'

'In danger? In danger of what?'

The girl shivered.

'Of my life, Mr French,' she said in a low tone.

French looked at her more keenly. In spite of this surprising reply there was nothing melodramatic in her manner. But he now saw that her emotion was more than mere nervousness. She was in point of fact in a state of acute terror. Whatever this danger might be, it was clear that she was fully convinced of its reality and imminence.

'But what are you afraid may happen to you?' he persisted.

Again she shivered. 'I may be murdered,' she declared and her voice dropped to a whisper.

'Oh, come now, my dear young lady, people are not murdered in an offhand way like that! Surely you are mistaken? Tell me all

about it.' His voice was kind, though slightly testy.

She made an obvious effort for composure.

'It was Eileen Tucker. She was my best friend. They said she committed suicide. But she didn't, Mr French! I'm certain she never did. She was murdered! As sure as we're here, she was murdered! And I may be too!' In spite of her evident efforts for self-control, the girl's voice got shrill and she began jerking about in her chair.

'There now,' French said soothingly. 'Pull yourself together. You're quite safe here at all events. Now don't be in a hurry or we'll get mixed up. Take your own time and tell me everything from the beginning. Start with yourself. Your name is Thurza Darke. Very good now; where do you live?' He took out his notebook and prepared to write.

His quiet, methodical manner steadied the girl and she answered more calmly.

'At 17 Orlando Street, Clapham. It's a boarding house kept by a Mrs Peters.'

'You're not a Londoner?'

'No; I come from Birkenhead. But my parents are dead and I have been on my own for years.'

'Quite. You are in some job?'

'I'm in charge of one of the box offices at the Milan Cinema in Oxford Street.'

'I see. And your friend, Miss Jennie Cox, who also lives at Mrs Peter's boarding house, is typist to Mr Arrowsmith. I think

I've got that straight. Now you mentioned another young lady—at least I presume she was a young lady—a Miss Eileen Tucker. Who was she?

'She was in one of the box offices at the Hammersmith Cinema.'

'Same kind of job as your own?'

'Yes. I met her at an evening class in arithmetic that we were both attending and we made friends. We were both bad at figures and we found it came against us at our work.'

French nodded. The name, Eileen Tucker, touched a chord of memory, though he could not remember where he had heard it. He picked up his desk telephone.

'Bring me any papers we have relative to the suicide of a girl called Eileen Tucker.'

In a few moments a file was before him. A glance through it brought the case back to him. It was summarised in a cutting from the Mid-Country Gazette of the 10th January of that year. It read:

'TRAGIC DEATH OF A YOUNG GIRL.

'Dr J. S. Jordan, deputy coroner for South Eastern Surrey, held an inquest at the Crown Inn, Caterham, yesterday morning, on the body of a young girl which was found in a quarry hole about a mile from the town and not far from the road to Redhill. The discovery was made by a labourer named Thomas Binks, who was taking a short cut across the country to his work. Binks reported the affair to the police and Sergeant Knowles

immediately visited the scene and had the body conveyed to the town. The remains were those of a girl of about twenty-five, and were clothed in a brown cloth coat with fur at the collar and cuffs, a brown skirt and jumper and beige shoes and stockings. A brown felt hat lay in the water a few feet away and in the right hand was clasped a vanity bag, containing a cigarette case and holder, some loose coins and a letter. This last was practically illegible from the water, but enough could be made out to show that it was from a man of undecipherable name, breaking off an illicit relation as he was going to be married. Dr Adam Moody, Caterham, in giving evidence stated that death had occurred from drowning, that there were no marks of violence, and that the body had probably been in the water for two or three days. At first the identity of the deceased was a mystery, but Sergeant Knowles handled the affair with his usual skill and eventually discovered that she was a Miss Eileen Tucker, an employee in the box office of the Hammersmith Cinema in London. She seemed to have been alone in the world, having lived in a boarding house and no relatives being discoverable. After considering the evidence, the jury, with Mr John Wells as foreman, brought in a verdict of suicide while of unsound mind.'

'A sad case,' said French sympathetically when he had finished the paragraph. 'I see that the jury brought in a verdict of suicide, but you think the poor young lady was murdered? Now, just tell me why you think so.'

'I know it! I'm sure of it! She wasn't the kind of girl to commit

suicide.'

'That may be, but you've surely something more definite to go on than that?'

'No proof, but I'm as certain of it as if I had been there. But what she told me about the man shows it wasn't what they said.'

'I don't quite follow you. What did she tell you?'

'She was in trouble through some man, but not the kind of trouble the letter said. There was no love affair or anything of that kind. It was money.'

'Money?'

'Yes. I thought at first she had got into debt to this man and couldn't pay and I offered to lend her what I could; it wasn't very much. But she said it wouldn't help her; that the man had her in his power and that she was frightened. I begged her to tell me particulars, but she wouldn't. But she was frightened all right.'

'I don't want to suggest anything bad about the poor young lady, but doesn't it look as if he had found her out in something that she shouldn't have done? Tampering with the cinema cash, for example?'

Miss Darke looked distressed.

'That was what I feared,' she admitted, 'but of course I didn't let her know I suspected it. And of course I don't know that it was that.'

French was frankly puzzled.

'Well, but if all that's true, it surely supplies a motive for suicide?'

‘It might have with another girl, but not with her. Besides there was the letter.’

‘Yes, you mentioned the letter before. Now how does the letter prove that it wasn’t suicide?’

Miss Darke paused before replying and when at last she spoke it was with less conviction.

‘I looked at it like this,’ she said. ‘From the letter it would be understood that some man had got her into trouble and then deserted her. From what she told me that wasn’t so, and from what I know of her it wasn’t so. But if that’s right there couldn’t have been any letter—not any real letter, I mean. I took it the letter had been written by the murderer and left in her bag to make it look like suicide.’

In spite of himself French was interested. This was a subtle point for a girl of the apparent mentality of this Miss Darke to evolve from her own unaided consciousness. Not, he felt, that there was anything in it. The probabilities were that the unfortunate Eileen Tucker had been deceived and deserted by the usual callous ruffian. Naturally she would not tell her friend. On the other hand he considered that Miss Darke was surprisingly correct in her appreciation of the psychological side of the affair. The older French grew, the more weight he gave to the argument that X hadn’t performed a certain action because he ‘wasn’t the sort of person to do it’; with due reservation of course and granted an adequate knowledge of X’s character.

‘That’s a very ingenious idea, Miss Darke,’ he said. ‘But it’s

only speculation. You don't really know that it is true.'

'Only from what she said,' returned the girl. 'But I believed her.'

'Now, Miss Darke,' French said gravely, 'I have a serious question to ask you. If you knew all these material facts, why did you not come forward and give evidence at the inquest?'

The girl hung her head.

'I know I should have,' she admitted sadly, 'but I just didn't. I did not hear of Eileen's death till I saw it in the paper the day after and it didn't say where the inquest would be. I ought to have gone to Caterham and asked but I just didn't. No one asked me any questions and—well, it seemed easier just to say nothing. It couldn't have helped Eileen any.'

'It might have helped the police to capture her murderer, if she was murdered,' French returned. 'And it might have saved you from your present difficulties. You were very wrong there, Miss Darke; very wrong indeed.'

'I see that now, Mr French,' she repeated.

'Well,' said French, 'that's not what you called to talk about. Go on with your story. What can you tell me about the man? Did Miss Tucker mention his name or describe him?'

Miss Darke looked up eagerly, while the expression of fear on her features became more pronounced.

'No, but she said there was something horrible about him that just terrified her. She hated the sight of him.'

'But she didn't describe him?'

‘No, except that he had a scar on his wrist like a purple sickle. “A purple sickle” were her exact words.’

‘H’m. That’s not much to go on. But never mind. Tell me now your own story. Try to put the events in the order in which they happened. And don’t be in a hurry. We’ve all the day before us.’

Thurza Darke paused, presumably to collect her thoughts, then went on:

‘The first thing, I think, was my meeting Gwen Lestrangle in the train.’

‘What? Still another girl? I shall be getting mixed among so many. First there is yourself, then Miss Jennie Cox, Mr Arrowsmith’s typist, then poor Miss Eileen Tucker, who died so sadly at Caterham. And now here’s another. Who is Gwen Lestrangle?’

‘I met her first in the train,’ Miss Darke repeated. ‘I go to my work most days by the Bakerloo tube from the Elephant to Oxford Circus. One day a strange girl sitting beside me dropped a book on to my knee and we began to talk. She said that she came by that train every day. A couple of days later I met her again and we had another talk. This happened two or three times and then we began to look out for each other and got rather friends. She was a very pleasant girl; always smiling.’

‘Did you find out her job?’

‘Yes, she said she was a barmaid in the Bijou Theatre in Coventry Street.’

‘Describe her as well as you can.’

‘She was a big girl, tall and broad and strong looking. Sort of athletic in her movements. She had a square face, if you know what I mean; a big jaw, determined looking.’

‘What about her colouring?’

‘She was like myself, fair with blue eyes and a fair complexion.’

‘Her age?’

‘About thirty, I should think.’

French noted the particulars.

‘Well, you made friends with this Miss Lestrangle. Yes?’

‘The thing that struck me most about her was that she seemed so well off. She was always well dressed, had a big fur coat and expensive gloves and shoes. And once when I lunched with her we went to Fuller’s and had a real slap-up lunch that must have cost her as much as I could spend in lunches in a week. And she didn’t seem the type that would be getting it from men.

‘I said that I couldn’t return such hospitality as that and she laughed and asked me what I was getting at the Milan. Then she said it was more than she got, but that there were ways of adding to one’s salary. When I asked her how, she smiled at first, but afterwards she told me.’

French’s quiet, sympathetic manner had evidently had its effect. Miss Darke had lost a good deal of her terror and her story was coming much more spontaneously. French encouraged her with the obvious question.

‘She said she had got let in on a good thing through a friend.

It was a scheme for gambling on the tables at Monte Carlo.'

'At Monte Carlo?'

'Yes. It was run by a syndicate. They had a man there who did the actual play. They sent him out the money and he sent back the winnings. You could either choose your number or colour or you could leave it to him to do the best he could for you. If you won you got your winnings less five per cent for expenses; if you lost of course you lost everything. But the man did very well as a rule. He worked on a system and in the long run you made money.'

In spite of himself French became more interested. The story, he felt, was old—as old as humanity. But the setting was new. This Monte Carlo idea was ingenious, though it could only take in the ignorant. Evidently it was for this class that the syndicate catered.

'And that was how Miss Lestrangle had made her money?'

'Yes.' Apparently Miss Darke had not questioned the fact. 'She said that as a rule she made a couple of pounds a week out of it. I said she was lucky and that I wished that I had an obliging friend who would let me into something of the kind. She didn't answer for a while and then she said that she didn't see why I shouldn't get in if I wanted to. If I liked she would speak to her friend about it.'

'I wasn't very keen at first, for at one time or another I had seen a deal of trouble coming through gambling. But I thought a little fling wouldn't do me any harm, so I thanked her and asked her to go ahead. If she won, why shouldn't I?'

‘Why indeed? And she did arrange it?’

‘Yes. I didn’t see her for three or four days, then I met her in the train. She said she had fixed up the thing for me and if I would come in early next morning she would introduce me to the man who took the stakes. Our jobs started about one o’clock, you will understand, Mr French, so we had plenty of time earlier.’

‘Of course. I suppose you both worked on till the places closed in the evening.’

‘That’s right. We were done about eleven or a little later. Well, next morning I met her at eleven and we saw the bookmaker, Mr Westinghouse. Gwen had told me that his office was rather far away and that he would meet us in the Embankment Gardens at Charing Cross. And so he did.’

‘Now before you go on you might describe Mr Westinghouse.’

‘I can tell you just what he was like,’ the girl returned. ‘You know those big American businessmen that you see on the films? Clean shaven and square chins and very determined and all that? Well, he was like that.’

‘I know exactly. Right, Miss Darke. You met Mr Westinghouse?’

‘Yes. Gwen introduced me and he asked me my name and a lot of questions about myself and he wrote down the answers in a notebook. Then he said he would agree to act for me, but that I was to promise not to mention the affair, as they wanted to keep it in the hands of a few. I promised and he took my stake. It was only five shillings, but he took as much trouble over it as if it had

been pounds. He wanted to know if I would like to choose my number, but I said I would leave it to the man on the ground.'

'And what was the result?'

'Mr Westinghouse said that he couldn't undertake to let me know before the end of a week, on account of the time it took to write out and back again, and also because the man did not always play, but only when he felt he was going to win. He had a sort of sense for it, Mr Westinghouse said. So I met him a week later. He said I had done well enough for a start. I had won three times my stake. He gave me nineteen shillings, the fifteen shillings win and my five shillings back, less five per cent. I was delighted and I put ten shillings on and kept the nine. That time I doubled my ten and got another nineteen shillings. The next time I lost, but the next I had a real bit of luck.'

'Yes?' French queried with as great a show of interest as he could simulate. The tale was going according to plan. He could almost have told it to Miss Darke.

'That fourth time,' the girl went on, 'Mr Westinghouse seemed much excited. He said I had done something out of the common and that it was only the second case which had occurred since they started. I had won maximum, that meant thirty-five times my bet. I had put on ten shillings and he handed me sixteen pounds twelve and sixpence!'

'A lot of money,' said French gravely.

'Wasn't it? Well, you may imagine, Mr French, that after that I went ahead with the thing. But I never had another bit of luck like

that, though on the whole I did fairly well, at least until lately.'

That, of course, was the next step. She had still to tell of her loss and the penalty. But that, French felt sure, was coming.

'About a month ago,' the girl went on, 'Gwen told me she was leaving town. She had got a better job in the Waldorf Theatre in Birmingham. But I carried on the gambling all the same. But somehow after she left my luck seemed to desert me. I began to lose until at last I had lost everything I had won and all my small savings as well.'

'And what did Mr Westinghouse say to that?'

'I told him what had happened and that I couldn't go on betting. He seemed cut up about it and said that if he had foreseen that result he wouldn't have taken me on. Then he said it was a real pity I couldn't go on a little longer. The luck at the tables came in cycles and they had been passing through a specially bad cycle. Several other people had lost as well as me. He said the luck was due to turn and that if I could hold on I would be sure to win back all that I had lost and more. I said I couldn't as I hadn't the money and that was all there was to it. He said to let things stand for a week and then to come back to him and he would see what could be done.'

'And you did?'

'Yes. Mr Westinghouse told me he was glad to see me as the luck had turned. If I could manage a really good bet he was certain that I should win handsomely. I said I hadn't the money. Then he hummed and hawed and at last said that he couldn't see

me stuck; that he felt responsible for me and that he would help me out. If I would undertake to let him have half the profits, he would lend me enough to clear a good round haul. He took two notes out of his pocket and said here was ten pounds. I could put it on in one bet if I liked, but he advised me to put on four bets of two-pound-ten each instead. Someone or two were sure to get home.

‘I didn’t like the idea, but I was sure he wouldn’t have offered such a thing unless there really was a good chance. So after some time I thanked him and agreed. I know I shouldn’t have done it, but there it is. I’m telling you just what happened.’

French smiled.

‘If we were all as wise as we should be, Miss Darke, there would be no stories to tell. Never mind. Just go on with yours.’

‘Well, you can guess what happened. I lost every single one of my bets! There was I without a penny left and owing Mr Westinghouse ten pounds.’

Miss Darke evidently had something of the dramatic sense. She paused unconsciously to give point to her climax, then went on:

‘He was very nice about it at first, but soon I saw a different side to his character. He began to press for the money and the more I told him I couldn’t pay and asked for time, the more persistent he got. At last, about ten days ago, he said he would give me a fortnight more and that if I had not paid by then he would go to my employers and ruin me. When I said it was his

own fault for tempting me to borrow he got furious and said I'd see whose fault it was and for me to look out for myself.

'I was in a terrible state of mind, Mr French. I didn't know what would happen to me or who to turn to. And then the night before last who should I meet going home in the tube but Gwen Lestrangle.'

Again Miss Darke paused at her climax and French, who had been listening carefully though without a great deal of interest to the commonplace little story, offered a sympathetic comment. How many times had just such a little drama been enacted, and how many times it would again! Probably since before the dawn of history gambling had been used to get fools of the human race into the power of the knaves. There was only one point in the episode still unrevealed—the source of wealth to which this silly girl had access and from which Westinghouse expected to be paid. That, however, would no doubt soon be revealed. For French could not bring himself to believe that it was anything so crude as robbing the till in the cinema, the only thing which appeared to follow from the story.

'Gwen seemed pleased to see me. She said her mother had been ill and she had got a couple of days' leave from Birmingham. She asked me to have coffee with her next morning at Lyons' Corner House, so that we could have a chat.

'I think I told you I started work about one o'clock, and shortly before twelve next day I joined her at Lyons'. She exclaimed at once about my looks. "Why, what on earth's wrong with you,"

she cried. "You're in trouble of some kind."

'I didn't want to talk about myself, but she insisted on hearing, and when she learned what had happened she was very angry. "That old scoundrel!" she cried, "and I used to think he was straight!" She got quite excited about it. She advised me to tell Westinghouse to go to hell and dare him to do his worst. He couldn't do me any harm, she said. I had only to deny the story and say he had been persecuting me and he could produce no proof. But I knew that was no good and that the mere raising of the question with the cinema manager would lose me my job. And it would have, Mr French.'

'I daresay it would,' French admitted.

'Well, I wasn't on for it anyway, and when she saw I wasn't she let that drop. Then she said that she felt sort of responsible for me, seeing that it was through her I got into the thing, and that she would therefore try and help me out. There was a cousin of hers, a really good sort, who might be able to help me. He had helped her at one time when she was in the same trouble herself. She would stake her reputation that he at all events was straight, and if I wished she would introduce me to him.

'Well, I needn't take up your time by telling you all our conversation. It ended in my agreeing to go to Mr Style, as the cousin was called. Gwen fixed up a meeting. I was to be at St Pancras when his train came in from Luton, where he lived, and he would talk to me on the platform. I went there and he found me at once.'

‘You might describe Mr Style also.’

The girl shivered as if at an unpleasant memory.

‘I can easily do that,’ she said, and her expression became almost that of horror. ‘As long as I live I’ll remember his appearance. He was thin and tall and sallow, with a small, fair moustache. But his eyes were what struck you. He had such queer, staring eyes that would look at you as if they could see right into your mind. They made me feel quite queer. Sort of uncanny, if you understand what I mean.’

French nodded and she went on:

‘He said that his cousin, Miss Lestrangle, had told him of me and the fix I was in, and he thought he could do something to help me. He said he had a job which he thought I could do and which would pay me well. It was easy as far as actual work was concerned, but it required a young lady of good appearance and manner and some shrewdness to carry it through. Also it was highly confidential and the young lady must be above suspicion as to character and discretion. Those were his words as far as I remember.’

Again French nodded.

‘I said I already had a job which I didn’t want to give up, but he said I could do his job at the same time as they didn’t clash. It was perfectly easy and perfectly safe, but old-fashioned people mightn’t altogether approve of it and that he was glad to know that I had no prejudices in that respect.

‘As you may imagine, Mr French, I wasn’t very pleased at

this, and I asked him rather sharply what he meant. And then he said something which upset me horribly and made me wish I had never seen him. I scarcely like to repeat it.'

'I'm afraid you must.'

'He asked what I thought of a young lady who betted on borrowed money which she couldn't repay if she lost. Then, always with his horrible smile, he went on to say that a potential thief could scarcely be tied down by out-of-date ideas of morality.'

'Plain speaking.'

The girl made a hopeless little gesture.

'You may say I should have got up and walked away,' she continued, 'but I just couldn't. Somehow I felt as if I had no strength left to do anything. But I was terribly upset. I had not realised that I had done anything so serious and I grew sort of cold when I thought of it. He watched me for a moment, then he laughed and said not to be a fool, that I had done what anyone would have done in my place, and that he only mentioned the matter so that I might not imagine that I was above the little weaknesses of ordinary people. I said I never imagined anything of the sort, and he answered that that being so we might get to business.'

Though Miss Darke was now telling her story as clearly and collectedly as French could have wished, it was evident that the personality of Style had profoundly impressed her. The more she spoke of him, the more nervous and excited she grew. But

French's sympathetic bearing seemed to steady her, and after a short pause she continued.

'He said then that he would make me a confidential offer. He would take over all my liabilities and make me an immediate advance to get me out of my present difficulties. He would also guarantee me a substantial increase to my income, without in anyway prejudicing my present job, if I would do as he asked. He assured me that what he would ask was absolutely safe if I was careful, and that though it might not exactly accord with certain straightlaced ideas, it would not injure anyone or cause any suffering. He also declared on his honour it was nothing immoral or connected with sex. But he said he had no wish to coerce me. I could think the offer over and I was perfectly free to take it or leave it as I thought best.'

'A plausible ruffian.'

'I asked him then what the job actually was. But he said there was time enough for that, and he began to ask me about the cash at the Milan and how it was checked, and if I was overlooked in the box office and how often the manager came round, and so on. I can tell you I didn't like it, Mr French, and I began to feel I just couldn't have anything to say to his job.'

'Yes!' French queried as the girl stopped. 'And then?'

'And then,' repeated Miss Darke excitedly and with an unconscious dramatic effort, 'then he raised his arm and I saw his wrist. Mr French, it had a purple scar like a sickle on the inside!'

French Makes an Assignation

If Thurza Darke had surprised French by her dramatic declaration, he surprised her even more by his reply.

‘Miss Darke,’ he said gravely, though the irresponsible twinkle showed in his eye, ‘you’re a born story-teller!’

The girl started and flushed angrily, but he held up his hand.

‘No,’ he said with a smile, ‘I don’t mean it that way. I believe everything that you have said. But I really must compliment you on the way you’re telling your story. You did that climax uncommonly well. And I’m not laughing at you either,’ he went on as her expression changed once more. ‘I can assure you I consider your statement very important and am following it closely. Go on now and tell me what happened after that. By the way, do you smoke?’ He took a box of cigarettes from a drawer of his desk and held it out.

His little ruse succeeded. Miss Darke had become very much excited, and though he liked artistic narrative, he felt it would be too dearly purchased at the price of accuracy. His intervention brought her back to earth. She lit a cigarette and went on more soberly.

‘I just sat and stared at the mark while I thought what poor Eileen Tucker had said. This must be the man she had described.

I thought of what had happened to her and I shivered with fear. It was clear what her trouble had been.'

'Well now, it's not so clear to me. Just say what did you think it was?'

The girl looked at him in surprise.

'I supposed that Style had made her rob the till of of the Hammersmith Cinema, and I supposed he would try and make me rob the Milan.'

'Not so easy as it sounds,' French declared. 'But perhaps you are right. Yes?'

'Mr Style evidently saw me looking at the mark, for he seemed annoyed and he covered it up with his sleeve. I felt I had been rude and I looked away. But his manner was not so pleasant afterwards.'

'Do you think he had any idea you had known Eileen Tucker?'

'He asked me the question. That was afterwards, after we had talked for some time. Just as I was going away he said: "By the way, about a year ago I met a young lady in your line of business—a Miss Eileen Tucker. A very nice girl she was too. I suppose you never came across her?"'

'And what did you say?'

'At first I was going to say Yes, then something came over me and I thought it might be safer if I said nothing about it. So I said No, that the name was strange to me.'

'H'm. Do you think he believed you? Did you hesitate before you answered him?'

‘I don’t think I hesitated, or not very much at all events. He seemed to believe me all right.’

Ugly, thought French. If this somewhat rambling statement were true, it looked distinctly ugly. Indeed Thurza Darke’s fears as to her personal safety might not be so misplaced after all. If this Style had murdered Eileen Tucker, Thurza’s obvious recognition of the scar would give him a nasty jar. He would realise that she must have heard of it from Eileen herself, and the very fact that she had denied acquaintanceship with the deceased girl would tell him that she suspected him. For the first time French began to think the matter might be serious.

‘Before Style asked you if you knew Miss Tucker you say you talked for some time,’ he went on. ‘Tell me what you said.’

‘Not very much, Mr French. I didn’t like his questions about the cash arrangements at the Milan, and he saw I didn’t. He said he would like an answer from me, as if I didn’t want the job he could find plenty of others glad of it. I mightn’t like the feeling it was something I couldn’t tell my friends about, but that was what the pay was for. The actual work was nothing.’

‘He made no secret that it was criminal?’

Miss Darke seemed shocked.

‘Such a thing never entered my mind,’ she declared. ‘The worst I thought was that it mightn’t be quite straight.’

‘Well, what did you say?’

‘I said I didn’t like it, and he replied that was perfectly all right and that he respected people who said what they meant. Then he

got up and said goodbye and began to walk off.'

'But you didn't let him go?'

'I didn't,' Miss Darke admitted. 'While I had been talking to him I had almost forgotten about my debt to Mr Westinghouse. But when I saw him going the remembrance of it seemed to come down over me like a great cloud. I said to myself: "If I do what Mr Style wants I may be ruined, but if I don't I shall be ruined without doubt." It seemed the lesser evil and I called him back intending to agree.'

'And did you not agree?'

'No. When it came to the point I just couldn't, and I begged for a day or two to think it over. He said certainly, and for me to meet him at twelve o'clock on Friday—that's tomorrow—in the small room to the left of the Turner Room in the National Gallery. I could give him my answer then.'

'Well,' said French, 'there's one thing certain and that is that you've done a wise thing by coming here and telling your story. And you've told it exceedingly well, if I may say so again. Go on, please.'

'That's about all there is. I was in absolute misery all that day. In the evening my friend at the boarding house, Jennie Cox, noticed that there was something wrong with me and pestered me so much about it that at last I told her everything. She said I should ask Mr Arrowsmith's advice, but I said I would do nothing of the kind. That was all last night.'

'This morning about half past ten she came back to the

boarding house and said that in spite of my objection she had told Mr Arrowsmith the whole story. At first I was real mad with her, then I saw that Mr Arrowsmith might help me out. So I went to his office with Jennie and told him everything, just as I have to you.'

French nodded. For a moment he remained silent, then leaning forward, he spoke with decision.

'Now, Miss Darke, I may tell you at once that you're not to be alarmed about yourself. We'll see you through. But you must do exactly what I tell you.'

'You may trust me, Mr French,' the girl said earnestly.

'Very well. Tomorrow you must go to the National Gallery, as Style asked you. You will tell him that you have thought over what he said and that you have decided to do as he asked, provided he will give you an undertaking to pay you the money he promised. Don't show any hesitation so far as the moral side of the matter is concerned, but be stiff about the payment. You understand what I'm after? I want him to think he has got you. Finally agree to his terms and say you are willing to start at once.'

Miss Darke looked rather scared as she promised.

'Please remember that you have nothing to fear. As a matter of fact you will be watched at the National Gallery by one of our men and you will be perfectly safe. But don't go away anywhere with Style or Westinghouse or Miss Lestrangle. Just do as I've said and I'll look after the rest. Now I'll say good day, and again I congratulate you on your wisdom in coming to tell me your story.'

That he really was on to something serious, French was now inclined to believe. It was worth looking into at all events, and he determined he would not only follow up Miss Darke's adventures, but also investigate the death of Eileen Tucker.

His first inquiry could be made immediately. Picking up his telephone, he put through a call.

'That the Bijou Theatre in Coventry Street? Scotland Yard speaking. I am trying to trace the movements of a young lady called Gwen Lestrangle. She states she was barmaid with you up till about a month ago. Can you give any information about her?'

'Must be some mistake,' came the reply. 'There never was anyone of the name here.'

'She might have been with you under another name,' French went on. 'She was tall and well built and fair with blue eyes and a heavy chin. Always well dressed—a fur coat and so on.'

'No, we had no one answering to that description. Besides, no barmaid left here about a month ago.'

French next repeated his inquiry to the Waldorf Theatre in Birmingham. But no one of the name was known there either, nor had a new barmaid been employed within the last four months.

It was what he had expected to hear. Methodically he turned to the next obvious inquiry. Sending the descriptions of the three suspects to the Record Department, he asked if anything was known of them.

But here again he drew blank. The gang was not known to the police nor was any of the three an habitual criminal.

So far as he could see nothing more could be done till the next day. He therefore put the affair out of his mind and took up the routine matters with which he had been engaged before Thurza Darke's call.

About 11.30 next morning French, after an interview with his immediate superior, Chief Inspector Mitchell, left the Yard and turned his steps in the direction of Trafalgar Square. As he walked his thoughts were occupied with a revolting and mysterious murder which had taken place the previous evening near Skipton. He thought it not unlikely that the help of the Yard would be requisitioned, and he wondered, if so, whether the case would fall to him. None of the other men, so far as he knew, were disengaged, while he, except for this trifling business he was now concerned with, was at a loose end. He hoped he would get it. He liked the country, especially in summer, and he was getting accustomed to working away from his base. His two last big cases, at Starvel in Yorkshire and down in Devonshire at that Dartmoor affair, had been completed without the help of his staff at headquarters, and he had found little difficulty in working alone.

He reached the National Gallery, and going into the Turner Room, became engrossed in the splendid exhibits hung therein. Though technically ignorant of art, he liked pictures, and of all the pictures he had ever seen, Turner's gave him the most pleasure. The fact that Miss Darke's interview was to take place in the adjoining room did not prevent his making the most of his

opportunities before she and her dubious acquaintance arrived.

He moved round, looking at canvas after canvas, and returning again and again to the Fighting Temeraire, which was to him a source of never-ending delight. But all the time he kept half an eye on the door, resolved that when once Mr Style should appear, he should be kept in sight until he reached his office or his dwelling or some place from which he could be picked up again when and if he was required.

Time passed quickly under such pleasant conditions and soon twelve o'clock, the hour of the interview, arrived. But there was no sign of either of the principals. As the minutes slipped away French suddenly grew anxious. Had he bungled the affair already?

He had chosen the room beyond that of the interview in the hope that Style would not see him, so that he could trail him with more ease and security. Now he began to wonder if Style had met the girl at the door and altered the venue to some other room. If so, he might pick them up as they were leaving the building. He therefore strolled to the entrance, and there taking up an inconspicuous position, watched those departing.

For over half an hour he waited, then remembering that Miss Darke began work at the Milan at one o'clock, he concluded his luck was out and went along to the cinema.

It was a fine new building in Oxford Street, not more than a hundred yards west of the Circus. Palatial was scarcely the word with which to describe it, as it was built in a vastly more lavish

and ornate manner than ninety per cent of the palaces of the world. French entered a huge hall of marble and gold in which were a row of box offices and from which massive bronze doors led to the auditorium. Only two of the six box offices were open. French glanced into each, but in neither was his friend.

Having learnt from an attendant that though the girl was due for duty, she had not yet arrived, he sat down to wait. Time crawled slowly on. One-thirty came, then one-forty-five, then two, and still she did not appear.

At two o'clock French could stand it no longer. He saw the manager. But from him he learnt nothing. Miss Darke had no leave of absence nor had she sent any apology. She was a reliable girl and had never before missed an attendance. The manager had no explanation to offer.

'I should be obliged if you would let me know at the Yard if she turns up,' said French as he took his leave.

He was now acutely anxious. Fears of the worst filled his mind as he drove rapidly to the boardinghouse in Orlando Street, Clapham.

In a few minutes he was sitting with Mrs Peters, the landlady. At once he obtained news. On the previous evening about half past eleven an attendant had rung up from the Milan. He had explained that Miss Darke had asked him to say that her sister had unexpectedly turned up from Manchester and that she was going to spend the night with her at her hotel.

As a matter of form French rang up the Milan. But the reply

was only what he expected. Miss Darke had left at her usual time without giving any message to anyone. Sadly French found himself forced to the conclusion that there could no longer be any doubt that the gang had got her.

The thought of her disappearance profoundly upset him. It hurt like a personal affront. An appeal had been made to him for help. He had promised help. And he had not given it ...

‘They’ve been too much for her,’ he thought. ‘That ruffian Style saw that she suspected him of Eileen Tucker’s murder and no doubt he shadowed her to the Yard. He’s told his friends that she’ll blow the gaff and they’ve done her in, or I’m a Dutchman.’

In accordance with his usual custom he had added a description of his caller to the papers which already formed the beginning of the dossier of the case. It was the work of a few seconds to call up the Yard and direct that an urgent call for four wanted persons should be circulated—those described under the names of Thurza Darke, Gwen Lestrangle, Westinghouse and Style in the file in the top left-hand drawer in his desk. Then he turned back and with the landlady’s permission made a detailed search of the missing girl’s bedroom. But with the exception of a photograph of the girl herself, he found nothing useful.

On his way back to the Yard he called at Mr Arrowsmith’s and interrogated Miss Cox, Miss Darke’s boarding house friend, once again without result. Nor did a visit to telephone headquarters in the hope of tracing the mysterious call lead to anything.

By the time he had completed these inquiries it was getting on

towards eight o'clock. As the hours passed he had been growing more and more despondent. But there was nothing more that he could do that night. By now the description would be in the hands of the police within at least fifty miles of London, and that he had not heard from any of them seemed to confirm his worst fears.

He was just about to leave the Yard when the telephone in his room rang.

'Call through from Portsmouth about that Thurza Darke case,' said the officer in the Yard private exchange. 'Will you take it, Mr French?'

'Right,' said French, an eager thrill passing through him. 'Scotland Yard. Inspector French speaking.'

'Portsmouth Police Station. Sergeant Golightly speaking. Relative to the inquiry as to the whereabouts of a young lady named Thurza Darke received this morning, I think we have some information.'

'Right, Sergeant. Go ahead.'

'At about nine-thirty a.m. today a report was received here that the body of a girl had been found in the sea at Stokes Bay, some three miles east of Portsmouth. A party of yachtsmen leaving for a day's sail had seen it floating about a mile from the shore. They brought it in and we had it medically examined. The cause of death was drowning. So far we have been unable to identify the remains or to find out how the girl got into the sea. It looks like suicide. We had already issued a circular when we saw yours. The remains answer the description you give.'

‘Girl been in the water long?’

‘Six or seven hours, the doctor thought.’

‘Has the inquest taken place?’

‘It’s arranged for ten tomorrow morning.’

‘Right, Sergeant. I’ll go down tonight, if possible. Wait a moment till I look up the trains.’

‘There’s an eight and a nine-fifty, sir, from Waterloo.’

French glanced at his watch.

‘I’ll get the eight. Can you meet me?’

‘Certainly, sir.’

The hands of the station clock were pointing to ten minutes before ten when French, armed with his emergency suitcase, left the train at Portsmouth. A smart looking sergeant of police was waiting on the platform and to him French introduced himself.

‘The girl was with me on the previous day Sergeant, so I can identify her myself. Otherwise I should have brought someone who knew her.’

‘Quite so, sir.’ The sergeant was deferential. ‘We believe she was a stranger. At least, we haven’t been able to hear of anyone missing from anywhere about this district. And your description just covers her. The body’s lying at the station, so you’ll know in a few minutes.’

‘Right, Sergeant. Let’s walk if it’s not too far. I’m tired sitting in that blessed train.’

French chatted pleasantly as they stepped along, true to his traditional policy of trying to make friends and allies of those

with whom he came in contact. The sergeant was evidently curious as to what there might be in this girl's death which so keenly interested the great Yard. But French forbore to satisfy his curiosity until he should himself know whether or not he was on a wild goose chase.

The remains lay on a table in a room off the yard of the police station. The moment that French raised the sheet with which the head was covered he recognised the features of the girl he sought. Poor pretty little Thurza lay there still and peaceful, her small peccadillos and troubles, her hopes and her joys, over and done with. As French gazed upon her pathetic features, he grew hot with rage against the people whose selfish interests had led to the snuffing out of this young life. That she had been deliberately murdered there could be little doubt.

'It's the girl right enough,' he declared. 'Now, Sergeant, as you may have guessed, there is more in this than meets the eye. I have reason to suppose that this is neither accident nor suicide.'

'What, sir? You mean murder?'

'I mean murder. As I understand it, this girl was in the power of a gang of sharpers. She got to know more about them than was healthy for her and this is the result. I may be wrong, but I want to be sure before I leave here.'

The sergeant looked bewildered.

'There is no sign of violence, as you can see,' he suggested hesitatingly. 'And the doctor had no suspicion of murder.'

'There has been no post-mortem?'

‘No, sir. It wasn’t considered necessary.’

‘We’ll have one now. Can you get the authority from your people? It should be done at once.’

‘Of course, sir, if you say so it’s all right. There will be no difficulty. But as a matter of form I must ring up the superintendent and get his permission.’

‘Certainly, Sergeant, I recognise that. Can you do it now? I should like to see the doctor as soon as possible.’

While the necessary authorisation was being obtained French examined the body and clothes in detail. But except that a tiny bit of skirt had been torn out, as if it had caught on a splinter or nail, he found nothing to interest him.

A few minutes later he and the sergeant were being shown into the consulting room of Dr Hills, the police surgeon.

The doctor was a short man with a pugnacious manner. To French’s suave remarks he interposed replies rather like the bark of a snapping pekinese.

‘Murder?’ he ejaculated when French had put his views before him. ‘Rubbish! There were no marks. No physical force. No resistance. Not likely at all.’

‘What you say, doctor, certainly makes my theory difficult,’ French admitted smoothly. ‘But the antecedent circumstances are such that murder is possible, and I’m sure you will agree that the matter must be put beyond any doubt.’

‘No doubt now. Made my examination. What you want next?’

‘A post-mortem, doctor. Awfully sorry to give you the trouble

and all that, but Superintendent Hunt agrees that it is really necessary.'

The doctor was full of scorn at the idea. He had made an examination of the remains in his own way and that should be sufficient for any layman.

But it was not sufficient for French. He held to his point and it was arranged that the post-mortem should take place immediately.

'A word in your ear, Dr Hills,' French added. 'Keep the idea of subtle murder before you. These are clever people, these three whom I suspect, and they'll not have adopted anything very obvious.'

'Teach grandmother ... suck eggs,' barked the doctor, but there was a humorous twinkle in his eyes at which French could smile back with a feeling of confidence that the work would be done thoroughly and competently.

'He's always like that,' the sergeant volunteered. 'He pretends to be annoyed at everything, but he's really one of the best and a dam' good doctor too. He'll make that examination as carefully as the best London specialist and you'll get as good an opinion when he's finished.'

If time was a criterion, the job was certainly being well done. French, sitting in the nearest approach to an easy chair that the sergeant's office boasted, had read the evening paper diligently, had smoked three pipes, and finally had indulged in a good many more than forty winks, before Dr Hills returned.

‘Kept you up, Inspector?’ he remarked, glancing at the clock, whose hands registered half past three. ‘Ah, well, been worth it. Found something. You’ll not guess. No sign of murder. No force applied. No resistance made. Death by drowning only. All as I said. *But—*’ He paused in his stream of explosives and waited impressively. ‘*But—*water in lungs and stomach—*fresh*, Inspector, *fresh*. What do you make of that?’

French was considerably impressed.

‘What do you make of it yourself, doctor?’ he asked.

‘Drowned in the sea. Fresh water in lungs. Pretty problem. Your funeral.’ He shrugged his shoulders, gave a quick, friendly smile, barked ‘Night!’ and was gone.

3

The Inquest

The problem with which Dr Hills had presented French was not so difficult as it appeared at first sight. There could indeed be only one solution, but that solution carried with it the proof of what French had up to then only suspected, that Thurza Darke's death was the result of neither accident nor suicide, but definitely of murder.

If the water which the poor girl had swallowed were fresh, it obviously followed that she had been drowned in fresh water, her body having afterwards been put into the sea. Why the three fiends had committed their revolting crime in this way French did not know, but it was clear that the placing of the body in the sea could have been done with but one object—to conceal the fact of murder by creating the appearance of accident. And had it not been for the special knowledge which French possessed, it was more than likely that the trick would have been successful.

A further problem immediately arose, trifling in comparison to that of the girl's death, but still requiring a decision. Should the discovery be mentioned at the inquest?

To allow the conspirators to suppose that their scheme had succeeded would have the obvious advantage of making them less careful. In the course of his career French had many times

experienced the value of lulling his adversary to complacency, if not to sleep.

On the other hand it would be difficult to keep the matter quiet. The doctor would certainly refuse to hold back such material evidence. This would involve confiding in the coroner and adjourning the inquiry on some technical ground, as that official would not allow a verdict inconsistent with the facts to be returned. But an adjournment would not have the effect desired by French. Until the case was finally disposed of and a verdict of accidental death returned, the murderers would remain on tenterhooks, alert and careful.

Eventually French came to the conclusion that it would be best to let matters take their own course. At the same time he would try to keep out of the affair, so that Scotland Yard's interest in it might remain a secret.

In this case he would not give evidence of identity. His decision therefore plunged Sergeant Golightly into an orgie of telephoning, in order that the inquest might be postponed until he could secure the attendance of Mrs Peters, the deceased girl's landlady.

The proceedings opened in the early afternoon. French had taken his seat amongst the crowd of loafers and other casuals who invariably attended such gatherings, and held no converse with the police. The room was crowded, the affair having produced a mild sensation.

The first witness was a tall, bronzed man of about thirty,

named Austin Munn. He deposed that he lived at Lee-on-the-Solent and was the owner of the schooner yacht *Thisbe*. At about 6.30 on the previous morning he and three yachting friends had started off in the *Thisbe* for a long day's sail. They were going east through Spithead and towards Brighton. When they were passing through Stokes Bay, some three or four miles from Lee, he saw something in the water. He was at the tiller and he altered course to pass it closely. When they came near they saw that it was the body of a young woman. They hove to immediately and brought it aboard. They tried artificial respiration for over an hour, though none of them thought it would be any good. The girl looked as if she had been dead for some hours. The body was that on which the inquest was being held. They turned into Portsmouth and on arrival one of his friends had gone to inform the police. The sergeant had come down at once and arranged for the removal of the remains.

Sergeant Golightly stated that about 8.30 on the previous morning Mr Lewis Pershaw, one of Mr Munn's yachting party, reported that his yacht had picked up the body of a young woman when starting out for a cruise. He, Golightly, had gone down and taken charge of the remains. The deceased was dressed in a light fawn coat and skirt, with white silk blouse, flesh-coloured stockings and black patent shoes. She had no hat. On her left wrist was a watch which had stopped at seven minutes past one. She wore a necklace and earrings of imitation pearls. Her face was calm and peaceful.

As a result of his inquiries he had learnt that the deceased was a Miss Thurza Darke, an employee at the Milan Cinema in Oxford Street, London. She lodged in a boarding house in Clapham and the landlady was present and would give evidence of identity. He had been unable to find out how the body had reached the place in which it had been found.

Mrs Peters was then called. She deposed that the remains were those of her late lodger, Thurza Darke. The girl had lived with her for nearly a year. She was quiet and well-conducted, prompt in payment and popular with the other boarders. She, Mrs Peters, had become quite fond of her and this tragedy had come as a terrible shock.

Further questions elicited the fact that the witness believed that her boarder had recently been in some serious trouble. For the last couple of weeks in particular she had lost a good deal of her brightness and seemed to have some worry on her mind. But she had not said anything on the subject and Mrs Peters had not tried to force her confidence.

The witness then told of the telephone call. Though this had surprised her, never having heard Miss Darke mention any of her relations, she had not doubted its genuineness at the time. It was not till afterwards that she had learnt from the police that Miss Darke had not sent it.

The fat was then in the fire. When Mrs Peters left the box Sergeant Golightly was recalled and asked if he had made inquiries into the authorship of the message. His reply that he

had ascertained that it had not been sent by any of the officials at the cinema, was the first hint those present had received that the case might not be quite so straightforward as up to then it had seemed. Interest in the proceedings perceptibly quickened and the spectators leant forward and fixed their eyes more intently on the witness. But except to obtain the statement that Golightly had been unable to trace the call and had no idea who sent it, the coroner had no further questions to ask.

Dr Hills was the next witness. He deposed that he had at first made an external examination of the remains, by means of which he had satisfied himself that the deceased had died from drowning. He gave technical details as to the condition of the body, stating that in his opinion death had taken place some eight hours previous to his inspection. That had been made about ten o'clock and this, if he were correct in his opinion, would place the hour of death somewhere between one and two in the morning.

‘That would agree with the time at which the watch stopped,’ the coroner remarked, turning over his notes. ‘The hands were pointing to 1.07, Sergeant Golightly has told us. Now, Dr Hills, you said that at first you made an external examination of the remains. What exactly did you mean by “at first”?’

‘Last night late the police came to my house. Said they were not satisfied. Had an idea there might be foul play. Wanted a post-mortem. I made it with Dr Carswell.’

‘And did you find anything which might be taken to support their idea?’ the coroner asked, while the recently aroused interest

intensified.

The doctor hesitated.

‘Found a peculiar fact,’ he answered. ‘Outside my province to draw inferences.’

‘And the fact?’

‘Water in the lungs and stomach was fresh.’

This statement produced something in the nature of a sensation. The faces of most of those present assumed an expression of bewilderment, but a few seemed instantly to grasp its significance.

‘And what,’ went on the coroner smoothly, ‘did this fact convey to you?’

Dr Hills shrugged. ‘Girl was drowned,’ he declared, ‘but not in sea. Couldn’t have put herself into sea. Body must have been put in by someone else. Least, strikes me that way.’

‘Did the remains show any sign of force or compulsion?’

‘None.’

For a moment the coroner hesitated when he had written down this reply, his forehead wrinkled from thought.

‘Now, doctor,’ he said at last, ‘you know this country pretty well, I take it?’

‘Lived here all my life.’

‘Is there, so far as you know, any river or fresh water area into which this poor girl could have fallen and from which her body could have been carried to the sea where it was found?’

‘Don’t know of any.’

Again the coroner hesitated.

‘It must be evident to you, Dr Hills, that your evidence suggests at least the possibility of foul play. I want to ask you now, not only from a medical point of view, but also from your experience as a man of the world, whether you can suggest any explanation of the facts other than that of the murder of the deceased?’

At the ominous word a little ripple of movement passed over the assembly, followed immediately by a silence as those present settled down to listen even more intently. Dr Hills shrugged again.

‘Utmost respect; scarcely my province. Since you ask: private opinion: girl was murdered.’

‘But there is no definite medical evidence for that view?’

‘None. Girl was drowned in fresh water. That is all.’

The coroner looked round.

‘Would any member of the jury like to ask the witness a question before he stands down?’

A small foxy-faced man like a tradesman or small shopkeeper rose to his feet.

‘I would like to ask the doctor just what the police said to him about foul play, and then I would like to ask the sergeant just what made him say it.’

‘That is an important point and one I have already noted,’ the coroner replied. ‘Dr Hills stated,’ he referred to his notes, ‘that he was asked to make a post-mortem, as the police had an idea there might be foul play. Have you anything further, Dr Hills, to

add to that statement?’

‘Nothing. That covers everything.’

‘The nature of the police suspicion was not revealed?’

‘No. Not in detail.’

‘And was the doctor not curious? Did he not ask?’ interjected the foxy-faced juror.

The coroner frowned. ‘The witness has said the nature of the suspicions was not revealed in detail,’ he said coldly, glancing at the juror. ‘Were you told in a general way that murder was feared?’

‘In a general way, yes. No details.’

‘Who spoke to you on the subject?’

This was the question French was dreading. If the matter were pressed there would be nothing for him but for him to give evidence.

The doctor looked as if he was going to hedge, then he seemed to think better of it and answered.

‘Sergeant Golightly and a representative, as I understood it, from Scotland Yard.’

At this a little ripple of movement swept over the assembly. From the spectators’ point of view things were going better and better.

‘And it was the Scotland Yard man, I presume, who promulgated the suspicion?’

‘That is so.’

‘You may stand down, doctor, but please don’t go away. Recall

Sergeant Golightly. You didn't tell us, Sergeant, that you had received a visit from an officer of Scotland Yard?'

'You may rest assured, sir, that all the essential facts would have been put before the court. As you know, sir, it is not customary for the police to state the sources of their information.'

'I am not criticising your conduct, Sergeant, nor do I wish to embarrass your handling of the case, but if there is further information as to how your suspicions became aroused which you can properly give us, we should be glad to hear it.'

The sergeant glanced at French. To the latter it seemed that less harm would now be done if he himself gave evidence than if a mystery were to be made of the affair. He therefore nodded and the sergeant replied:

'There is no mystery in the matter, sir. I can tell you everything that occurred. I admit that no suspicion of foul play was aroused by the finding of the body. It seemed to me a case of either accident or suicide. But that afternoon a call was received from Scotland Yard, a general call, sent, I understand, to all stations. This said that a young lady was missing, giving her description and asking for a lookout to be kept for her. When I read it I thought it probably referred to the deceased. I telephoned so to the Yard and there was a reply that an inspector would come down by the evening train to see if he could identify the remains. Inspector French arrived and did so. He said that the possibility of foul play must not be overlooked and suggested that a post-mortem should be made. With the consent of my superiors the

matter was arranged. Inspector French then told me who the deceased was and where I should go to get a witness of identity.'

'Has Inspector French returned to London?'

'No, sir. He's here.'

'Here now? Good. Then call him.'

As French entered the box the little ripple of excitement was repeated. A full-fledged inspector of the famous C.I.D. was an unwonted sight in the local courts and people craned forward to see what manner of man he might be.

In the meantime French had made up his mind as to what he would say. He would of course tell the truth, but perhaps not the whole truth. In such matters his conscience was a trifle elastic. He justified his conduct by considering the admirable end for which his evasions were invariably made.

'Now, Mr French,' the coroner went on when he had noted the witness's name and occupation. 'Will you please tell us all you properly can of this matter.'

'There is not much to tell, sir,' French replied in his pleasant but respectful manner. 'Some time ago I had occasion to visit the Milan Cinema in Oxford Street and I became acquainted with one of the young ladies in the box office, a Miss Thurza Darke.'

French, with an admirable air of candour, made a slight pause as if he had reached the end of a paragraph. Immediately he went on:

'Yesterday I was again at the Milan, and I noticed that Miss Darke's place was empty. I asked about her and what I was told

did not seem quite satisfactory. As a result I made some inquiries and learned that Miss Darke had left the Milan at her usual time on the previous evening, quite in her ordinary frame of mind and without making any special remark to anyone there. From Mrs Peters, her landlady, who gave evidence here today, I learnt about the telephone message. The fact that the message was a false one confirmed my suspicion that all might not be well, particularly as no reason could be suggested for the girl's disappearance. Considering all the circumstances, it was judged wise to issue a circular that she was missing. This was done and there was a reply from here, as you have heard. I came down and saw that the deceased was Miss Darke.'

'And have you any idea as to how her body got into the sea?'

'None, sir.'

'What does the fact that fresh water was found in the deceased's lungs convey to you, Inspector?'

'Just what the doctor has said, sir; that she was drowned in fresh water and that her body was afterwards put into the sea.'

'Can you account for that in any way other than that the girl was murdered?'

'That is certainly the most probable explanation, though I think there are others. For instance, the girl might have been drowned accidentally or committed suicide, and her body might have been found by someone who feared that he might be accused of murder and, therefore, in a moment of panic, tried to get rid of it in a way that he hoped would keep him from

suspicion.’

‘That doesn’t seem very probable.’

‘It does not, sir, but one has to consider all possibilities.’

The coroner continued asking questions, but without learning anything further of interest. Then he turned to the jury and made a short speech. Having surveyed the evidence he continued:

‘The questions which you have now to consider, gentlemen, are three in number. First, you have to find the cause of death, if in your opinion the evidence justifies you in doing so. Now to my mind there can be no doubt of this. Dr Hills has told us definitely that it was drowning. Secondly, you have to decide whether this drowning was caused accidentally or whether it was suicide or whether it was murder. Here the evidence is not so direct. It has been established, however, that the girl was drowned in fresh water and the body afterwards placed in the sea, because apart from Dr Hills’s testimony, we all know that there is no river hereabouts into which the deceased could fall and in that space of time be carried by the current to where she was found. It is difficult to see with what object this could have been done save that of hiding a crime. If you think that these views are borne out by the evidence you will return a verdict of wilful murder. If on the other hand you consider some other explanation tenable, such as the ingenious one advanced by Inspector French, you may return that of accidental death. If you consider that the evidence points to suicide, you will find accordingly.

‘Your third question follows from the answer you give to the

second. If you find that murder has been committed you must state, if you can, the guilty party or parties. As to this it appears to me that no evidence of any kind has been placed before you. But here again you must form your own opinion.’

Contrary to French’s expectation, the jury elected to retire. For half an hour they considered the matter, then at last brought in the verdict which had seemed to him self-evident—wilful murder by some person or persons unknown.

4

French Makes a Start

‘I should like to introduce you to Major Bentley, our chief constable,’ said Sergeant Golightly to French as they left the courthouse.

The major was a small dark man with a rather Jewish cast of countenance. French had noticed him come in late to the inquest and had imagined he was a police official.

‘I was talking over this affair with the superintendent this morning,’ the major began. ‘He’s knocked up at present and I went to his house. That’s why you haven’t met him. In the absence of complete knowledge we rather took the view that the key to the matter lay in London and that Portsmouth came into it only as the result of an accidental selection. I should like to know, Inspector, if that’s your view also?’

‘As a matter of fact, it is, sir. I have some further information which I didn’t think it necessary to lay before the coroner, but which I should be pleased to give to you. It tends in that direction.’

The chief constable smiled.

‘I rather imagined your evidence was, shall I say, bowdlerised. It occurred to me that you were mighty quick in assuming that the girl had disappeared. All the details strictly accurate?’

‘Strictly, sir.’ French smiled also. ‘But if a meaning other than

that I intended were taken from what I said, that would not be my fault, would it?’

‘Of course not. Naturally the energies of the police must be directed towards hoodwinking the courts, eh?’

French laughed outright.

‘It has its uses,’ he admitted, glancing with amusement at the sergeant’s scandalised countenance. ‘But this time I fear our adversaries are too wide awake to be taken in by it.’

‘That so? Well, come along, will you, to the sergeant’s office and let’s have our chat.’

When they were seated and had lit up three of the chief constable’s Egyptian cigarettes, French told in detail about his interview with the dead girl and the inquiries he had already made. Both men listened with keen attention and without interrupting.

‘What’s it all about, Inspector?’ Major Bentley said when he had finished. ‘Those three ruffians get these girls into their power, or try to. But what for? Have you any theory?’

‘I’ve not,’ French admitted. ‘At first it looked like an attempt to rob the tills of the cinemas, but all they’d get from that wouldn’t be worth their while. It might, of course, be for immoral purposes, but somehow I don’t think so. In any case the motive for the second murder is clear. This Style believed that the girl Darke connected him with the first crime, the murder of Eileen Tucker.’

‘Possibly they found out that she had gone to the Yard and

thought she had given them away?’

‘That’s my view. Probably they shadowed her. If so, they would see that her ability to identify three of their members would make her so dangerous that their only policy would be to make away with her.’

‘Quite. That’s clear enough. But it doesn’t explain the first murder.’

‘It does not, sir. It looks as if there was some game going on to get the cash out of those cinemas, but how it could be done I can’t see.’

‘Nor I.’ The chief constable shrugged his shoulders. ‘Well, that’s all very interesting, but the point about which I really wanted to consult you is this: If the key to the matter lies in London, as I think we are agreed that it must, the matter is one for you and not for us.’

‘The body was found here, sir. It is technically a matter for you.’

‘I know, but that is a detail which can easily be put right. If we apply for help from the Yard you can sail ahead without delay.’

‘That’s true, sir, or at least the Yard can. I should have to report and wait for orders. But as I’m mixed up with the case already, and as I have no other job on hand, I am sure I should be the man sent. Shall I get on the ’phone to the Yard?’

‘I think you should. Tell them we’re applying to the Home Office for help from them, and that I’ve suggested that as you’re here, you might carry on.’

‘Right, sir. I’ll do it now.’

But when French got through to Chief Inspector Mitchell he was surprised by receiving a recall.

‘Come and see me first, French, at all events,’ said his chief. ‘We’ll fix it up then.’

French travelled to Waterloo by the 8.06. p.m. from Portsmouth, and early next morning knocked at the Chief Inspector’s door.

‘Morning, French,’ Mitchell greeted him. ‘I was a good deal interested by the summary of those proceedings down at Portsmouth. I fancy there’s more in this thing than we’ve got down to yet. Just start in and give me details of what took place at the inquest.’

French obeyed. Mitchell listened without interrupting and nodded his head when his subordinate had finished.

‘I sat here,’ he said slowly, ‘last night for a solid hour after I had received your telephone, trying to remember a name. At last I got it. Does Arundel convey anything to you?’

‘Arundel?’ French repeated. ‘Near Eastbourne that is, isn’t it?’ Mitchell’s eyes twinkled.

‘Eastbourne your grandmother. It’s ten miles east of Chichester and some four miles from the coast. That help you?’

French slowly shook his head. ‘Afraid not, sir.’

‘Well, I’ll tell you. Past that little town there flows a river, the Arun, and in that river one day last October was found the body of a young woman. The medical evidence was that she

had been drowned and as there were no signs of violence or other suspicious circumstances a verdict of accidental death was returned. But, French,' Mitchell leaned forward and became very impressive, 'she was employed in the box office of a big London cinema!'

French stared.

'Good Lord, sir! Another one?'

'Well, what do you think? And there's more in it than that. This girl, Agatha Frinton, was alone in the world, at least no relatives could be discovered; she was living in a boarding house, and the landlady stated that she had seemed very depressed for some ten days before her death.'

French swore rather luridly.

'I agree,' said Mitchell, the slight twinkle again showing in his eyes. 'It looks to me like the last time your friends wanted a recruit for their little scheme, whatever it is.'

'That's what I think. It's going to be a big case, this. The further you go into it, the bigger it grows. That's three girls we believe they've murdered and goodness knows how many more there may be that we haven't got on to yet.'

'I have a man on that,' Mitchell declared. 'He's looking up the files. I told him to go for any cases of the death of girls in box offices of places of amusement, including accidents, suicides and murders. That should cover it?'

'That'll cover it all right. But there's another point, sir. We believe they murdered Thurza Darke because they found out that

she had been at the Yard and they suspected she was going to give them away. Had this other girl, this Agatha Frinton, been to the Yard?’

‘Quite right, French,’ Mitchell approved. ‘I have a man on that too. He’s making a list of girls who lodged complaints which might apply. There’s this girl, Agatha Frinton, and also that other, Eileen Tucker, to start with. But it doesn’t follow that they need have actually called here. A first step might have been what Sherlock Holmes used to call oscillation on the pavement. They might have come and looked at the door and their courage might have failed them at the last minute. But if the gang saw them do that it might be enough.’

‘It would indicate what was in the girl’s mind,’ French agreed.

‘True, O king. Now there is another thing. Can we learn anything from the geography of the affair?’

French looked his question.

‘Here we have murders taking place at Caterham, Arundel and Lee-on-the-Solent. As geography doesn’t seem to be your long suit, hand over the atlas and let’s look them up. See,’ he went on when the places had been found, ‘when you add London they make a curve: London, Caterham, Arundel and Lee: something like three, four, five and six on a clock. Anything in that?’

French pondered, then slowly shook his head.

‘Well, bear it in mind,’ Mitchell advised. ‘Later it may give you a hint as to this precious gang’s headquarters.’

‘Then, sir, I am to take up the case?’

‘Certainly. Get right on with it at once.’

‘Very good, sir. I’ll go round to the cinema and Thurza Darke’s boarding house again now I’m here, but I fancy my best hopes are at Portsmouth. There’s quite a chance that they may have left traces when they were getting the body into the sea.’

‘Quite. It shouldn’t take you long to bring them in. You’ve plenty to go on. You have the descriptions of at least three of the gang and you have three murders to go into, for I think we may take it this Arundel affair was part of it.’

‘I’ll get at it immediately. I suppose,’ French hesitated, ‘you’ve no idea what they might be up to?’

‘I’m afraid not. Some way of robbing the cinemas occurs to one at once, but I don’t see how it could be done on a big enough scale to be worthwhile.’

‘That’s what I thought. In fact, I don’t see how it could be done at all.’

‘You’ll get an idea before long, I fancy. Well, get ahead, French. If you get tied up at Portsmouth you can try Arundel, and if you make a mess of that you can move on to Caterham. Between them all you should pull off the job.’

French lost no time in getting to work. Beginning with the boarding house, he interviewed not only Mrs Peters, but the servants and some of the boarders with whom the deceased girl had been on specially intimate terms. Unfortunately, from them he learnt nothing. Nor did a meticulous search of Miss Darke’s belongings give better results. Then he drove to Mr Arrowsmith’s

office and interrogated the typist, Jennie Cox. From her he obtained a good deal of information as to the dead girl's life, but again none of it threw light on his present problem.

By the time he had finished with Miss Cox, the Milan was open, and after lunch he went there to continue his inquiries. Here, after considerable trouble, he learned one new fact, not indeed an important one, but still something.

An attendant whom he had not seen on his previous visit had been on duty in the entrance hall on the night on which Miss Darke had disappeared. About quarter before eleven a young lady had come in. As the show was nearly over he had wondered what she had wanted and he had watched her particularly. She had gone to Miss Darke's box and a short but animated conversation had taken place between the two ladies. He had overheard the stranger say as she was leaving: 'Cheerio, then. I'll wait for you at the corner.' She was a tall, good-looking girl, stylishly dressed, with a fur coat, and she seemed eager and excited and as if pleased about something. The attendant had noticed also that Miss Darke had hurried away as soon as she could.

In spite of the man's somewhat meagre description, French had little doubt of her visitor's identity. That she was Gwen LeStrange he would have bet long odds. He immediately set to work on the clue. After examining the remainder of the cinema staff, he arranged for the interrogation of the police who had been on duty in the immediate neighbourhood on the night in

question, and circulated an inquiry among the taximen of the district in the hope that the girls might have engaged a vehicle.

The great machine of the C.I.D. having thus been set in motion in London, he returned at eight o'clock to Portsmouth. Smoking a meditative after-dinner pipe in the train, he set himself to take stock of the facts which he had already learnt, and to see if they would yield any deductions which might indicate the way in which he should go.

He saw at once that the inquiry resolved itself into two separate and distinct problems. There was the immediate question of the identity of the trio who had murdered these poor girls. For French believed with his chief that all three crimes were the work of the same *parties*. But behind that there was the further problem of motive. What were these three people doing that should lead them to so terrible an expedient?

It did not require much thought to show French that he must concentrate on the first of these questions. Until the criminals were discovered, the second question could scarcely be approached. Indeed, the establishment of their identity might lead directly to the discovery of their motive.

Of the murder of Thurza Darke, therefore, just what did he know?

She had left the Milan at 11.15p.m. in her usual health and spirits, and her dead body was found in the Solent at about 7.00 the next morning. The evidence of her watch tended to the belief that she was murdered at 1.07 and this was supported by the

doctor's statement.

French wondered if he could make a provisional timetable of the happenings on that tragic night. Again and again he had found that nothing had so cleared up his views on a case as the fixing of a duration to each incident. Perhaps in this case also it would bring light.

In the first place he considered the time which he should allow for the actual murder. Even with his case-hardened mind he did not care to dwell on the ghastly details. But he felt sure that it could not have been completed in less than half an hour. When he added the time necessary for the kidnapping, he felt sure a good deal longer would have been required. Assume, however, half an hour. 1.15 to 1.07, less half an hour, was about 80 minutes.

It was evident in the next place that the journey from London must have been made by car. There was no train and the difficulties of using an aeroplane would have been overwhelming. Moreover, the fastest motor launch would have taken too long for a sea passage to have been taken.

He had brought a map and guide book of the district and these gave the distance from London to Lee as something like 78 miles. From the above facts, it followed that the crime could not have been committed at Lee. It must have been done within an 80-minute journey from London.

In 80 minutes French thought it unlikely that more than thirty miles could have been done. With such a freight no driver would have run the risk of being held up by the police for speeding.

Thirty miles from London in the general direction of Portsmouth brought him to the district containing Wokingham, Aldershot, Godalming, Horsham, and Ashdown Forest. He thought that a provisional assumption was justified that the murder had been committed either in London or somewhere on the London side of this circle.

Some fifty miles had then to be covered. On these country roads a higher speed might be admitted. Still French did not believe Lee could have been reached before about half past three in the morning.

The remains would then have to be put into the sea, an operation which would also have taken time. Suppose it took half an hour. This would have brought the time to four o'clock. About four it would be beginning to get light, and French was sure the criminals would do their utmost to get away as soon as possible from a place with such dangerous associations.

When the train ran into Portsmouth station, French was smiling contentedly. He was pleased with his progress. From nothing whatever he had evolved the definite conception of a car arriving at a point near Lee at some time between, say, 3.00 a.m. and 5.00 a.m. on the morning of Tuesday, the 19th of June, and of the carrying of the body from this point to the sea. Possibly a study of the shore and currents might enable him to fix that point within short limits. If so, it would be strange indeed if he did not find some further clues. In a hopeful frame of mind he put up at the Splendid at Southsea, his plans for the next day settled.

5

Lee-on-the-Solent

When French woke next morning he found a brilliant sun pouring in through his window. A good omen, he thought, as he gazed out on a sea just as blue and sparkling as the Mediterranean had looked from the Hotel in Nice at which he had stayed when investigating the wanderings of the Pyke cousins. With luck he would make progress today.

A short journey through Portsmouth and Gosport brought him to Lee-on-the-Solent, a pleasantly situated little town of new houses, stretched out along the shore. Five minutes later he was turning in at the gate of Austin Munn's neat villa.

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