

INSPECTOR FRENCH

and
SIR JOHN
MAGILL'S LAST
JOURNEY



*Freeman
Wills Crofts*



Freeman Wills Crofts
Inspector French: Sir John
Magill's Last Journey

Аннотация

From the Collins Crime Club archive, the sixth Inspector French novel by Freeman Wills Crofts, once dubbed 'The King of Detective Story Writers'. A MURDER MYSTERY WITHOUT A CLUE When Sir John Magill, the wealthy Irish industrialist, fails to show up at his home town on a well-publicised visit, neither his family nor the Belfast police can explain his disappearance. Foul play is suspected when his bloodstained hat is discovered, and Scotland Yard is called in. With his characteristic genius for reconstruction, Inspector French evolves a gruesome theory about what happened to the elderly man, but his reputation – and that of Scotland Yard – will depend on finding out who was responsible . . .

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FREEMAN WILLS CROFTS

*Inspector French and Sir
John Magill's Last Journey*



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Published by COLLINS CRIME CLUB

An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers Ltd*

1 London Bridge Street

London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

First published in Great Britain by Wm Collins Sons & Co.

Ltd 1930

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Cover design by Mike Topping © HarperCollins*Publishers*

Ltd 2017

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Source ISBN: 9780008190736

Ebook Edition © March 2017 ISBN: 9780008190743

Version: 2017-01-23

Dedication

TO MY MANY GOOD FRIENDS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

For the sake of verisimilitude the scenes of this story have been laid in real places. All the characters introduced, however, are wholly imaginary, and if the name of any living person has been used, this has been done inadvertently and no reference to such person is intended.

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Scotland Yard

It was on Monday morning, the 7th of October, that Inspector French first heard the name of Sir John Magill. A commonplace name enough, certainly a name bearing no suggestion of exasperating mystery, still less of grim and hideous tragedy. All the same there came a time when French might well have said of it, as Queen Mary is supposed to have said of that of Calais, that when he died it would be found graven on his heart.

For the Sir John Magill Case proved perhaps the most terribly baffling of all the baffling cases French had tackled. Never had truth seemed so elusive, nor had he been put to such shifts to capture it, as during that long-drawn-out inquiry. Never had his conviction been stronger that crime, ugly and sinister, lurked behind the activities he was investigating, yet seldom had the proof that all was well seemed more convincing. In short, many times before the case dragged on to its inevitable and dramatic close French found himself wishing nothing so much as that he had never heard of the unfortunate man who gave it its name.

French had had a busy year. Since the night, now thirteen months past, when he and Sergeant Carter had fought for their lives and the life of Molly Moran on the deck of that spectral launch in Southampton Water, he had handled no less than five

major cases. Moreover, four months of the time had been spent with a score of associates in trying to trace the author of one of those terrible series of sex murders which every now and then recall the shuddering days of Jack the Ripper. By the time this unhappy madman had been laid by the heels, September was well advanced, and then had come the blissful break of French's annual holidays.

He had spent it among the old world towns and rocky hills of Provence. When he was tracing the movements of the Pykes in the Burry Port-Dartmoor tragedy he had worked along the French Riviera and up through the Rhône Valley to Lyons and Paris. He remembered that Jefferson Pyke had recommended a stay at Avignon, and the night he had spent there on that investigation had convinced him of the excellence of the advice. Accordingly this autumn he had made the old city of the popes his headquarters. From there he and Mrs French had explored the country by automobile excursion, had marvelled at the arenas of Arles and Nîmes, with bated breath had crossed the Pont du Gard, had seen mediævalism in the walls and towers of Aigues Mortes, had climbed through the sinister ruins of Les Baux; in short, as far as fourteen brief days would allow, had steeped themselves in the enthralling atmosphere of Roman France. And now he had scarcely settled down to a winter's work when the name of Sir John Magill had flashed into his firmament as a portent of menace and evil.

It was then on Monday, the 7th of October, shortly after

French had reached the Yard, that a telephone call summoned him to the room of his immediate superior, Chief-Inspector Mitchell. With him he found a tall, well-built man with that in his carriage, even as he sat, which bespoke the drill ground. A strong, rugged face, a powerful jaw and a pair of light blue eyes sparkling with intelligence showed that this was a person to be reckoned with. But in spite of the suggestion of ruthless strength, there was a directness in the look and a good humour in the expression to which French felt immediately drawn. The man was quietly dressed in a suit of brown tweed, his grey Stetson hat and cloth overcoat lay on a chair, while on the ground beside him stood a brown paper parcel shaped like a cardboard hatbox.

‘Ah, French,’ said Mitchell. ‘This is Detective-Sergeant Adam M’Clung of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, stationed at Belfast. He thinks we’ve let one of our problems slip over to Ireland by mistake and he’s come to see if he can’t shove it back on us.’

Sergeant M’Clung glanced quickly at the chief inspector and then smiled. ‘I don’t know, sir, that that’s just the way I’d have put it,’ he said in a pleasant voice, though with an intonation that was strange to French, half Irish, half Scotch it sounded. ‘Pleased to meet you, Mr French. I’ve known your name for many a year, but I’ve never had a chance of speaking to you before.’ He held out an enormous hand which closed like a vice on French’s.

‘The sergeant was just telling me he crossed over last night by Kingstown and Holyhead,’ went on Mitchell. ‘But I thought, Sergeant, it was Kingstown no longer?’

‘That’s so, sir,’ Sergeant M’Clung agreed. ‘It’s now officially Dun Laoghaire, but’—he shrugged, and French enjoyed the note of tolerant superiority of the northern speaking of Free State activities—‘there’s not many that bother their heads about that; not from the north anyway.’

‘I know Dublin well,’ Mitchell said reminiscently. ‘Used to be over there often before the troubles. I liked it. But I never got to Belfast. You’ve been there, French, haven’t you?’

‘Only once, sir, and it’s a goodish while ago. I was in Belfast in ’08, during the Royal visit.’

M’Clung turned to him with evident interest.

‘It’s queer you should have mentioned that, Mr French, for I was just going to speak of it. I’m over here about what’s happened to Sir John Magill, and it was through that same Royal visit that he got his knighthood.

‘And what has happened to Sir John Magill?’ Mitchell inquired.

‘That’s just it, sir. Barring that he’s disappeared in circumstances pointing to foul play, that’s just what we don’t know. And that’s just where we want your help.’

‘Well, Sergeant, we’ll do what we can. Suppose you tell us all about it.’

The sergeant moved nervously, then leaning forward and thrusting out his face towards the others, he began to speak.

Though this was the ringing up of the curtain on as grim a tragedy as had taken place for many a long day, there was

no suggestion of tragedy in the bearing of the three detectives. Rather they gave the impression of business men assembled to discuss some commonplace detail of their firm's operations. The room with its green-tinted walls and dark plainly-finished furniture looked what it was, an office for the transaction of clerical business, and though the Englishmen listened to their companion with grave attention, for all the excitement they showed he might merely have been reciting the closing prices of British Government stocks.

'I'd better tell you who the Magills are first,' said Sergeant M'Clung. 'They're a wealthy Ulster family who made their money in linen. At the present moment old Sir John, if he's alive, is supposed to be worth not less than a million and there are pretty valuable mills as well.

'These mills are in Belfast—at the head of the Shankill Road—and the family lived at a place called Ligoniel, up in the hills overlooking the city. They had a big house there with fine grounds, though it's sold now and the place broken up for building.

'The family consists of five persons, Sir John, his son, his two daughters and his nephew. Lady Magill is dead these many years.

'Sir John was born in '57, that makes him seventy-two this year. The son, Major Malcolm Magill, is over forty, and the daughters, Miss Beatrice and Miss Caroline, can't be far short of it.'

'Are these three married?'

‘The son is married, sir, but neither of the daughters. Well, that’s about the family, for the nephew has lived away from the others from a child. Now there’s one other thing I must tell you so that you’ll understand what’s happened. While Sir John was in Belfast, living with his daughters near Ligoniel, he managed the mills himself. He also took a lot of interest in the city, in politics he was a prominent Unionist and he was also one of the leaders of the Orange Order. All that time up to the end of the War the mills were very prosperous, making any quantity of money. In 1922 Major Magill was demobilised and came back to Belfast and then Sir John, feeling he was tired of the work, handed over the whole concern to the son. He and the daughters left Belfast and settled down in London, at 71 Elland Gardens, Knightsbridge. From that day till last Thursday, so far as we know, Sir John has never been back in Ireland.’

French had already begun the dossier of *L’Affaire Magill* by noting on a sheet of official paper all these names and dates. The details so far were somewhat dry, but there was that in M’Clung’s manner which suggested that a crisis in the story was approaching. Mitchell sat with his arms crossed, but as French ceased writing he moved.

‘That’s five people you’ve mentioned, Sergeant,’ he said. ‘Let’s see that I’ve got ’em right. There’s Sir John Magill, the head of the family, aged 72, who has disappeared; his son Malcolm, who became a major during the War, his two daughters, Beatrice and Caroline, and a nephew, name still unrevealed.’

‘That’s right, sir. Well, to continue. Major Magill took over the running of the mills. He left the small villa he had at Ligoniel, not far from the big family house, and settled down beyond Larne, on the Coast Road to Portrush.’

Mitchell interrupted again.

‘You’re mentioning a lot of places, Sergeant. We’d better see where they are. Get hold of the atlas, will you, French?’

M’Clung moved round the table.

‘There’s Belfast,’ he explained, pointing with a huge finger of a rich dark brown shade. ‘And there’s Larne, and this is where the Coast Road runs.’

They bent over the map.

‘I follow you,’ said Mitchell. ‘This big south-west cut into the land is Belfast Lough, with Belfast city at its head. Larne is on the coast just outside and above the entrance to the Lough. Looks about twenty miles away.’

‘Twenty-four, sir.’

‘Twenty-four, is it? Then this Coast Road that you speak of runs from Belfast through Larne and along the shore to the north?’

‘That’s right, sir. It’s mostly a tourist road and there’s plenty of traffic on it in summer, but not much in winter. It was on this road, about four miles beyond Larne, that Major Magill took the house. It was not a big house, but there was a nice place with it, sheltered by a wood and with a good view out over the sea.

‘It was a good way to come into business every day, the most of

thirty miles each way, but Major Magill travelled pretty quick in his Rolls Royce. He lived there with his wife and two daughters, both children. Well, gentlemen, that's pretty well the way things were when this business happened.'

Sergeant M'Clung's hand stole absently to his pocket, then came hurriedly away. Chief-Inspector Mitchell, recognising the action, pulled open a drawer.

'Won't you smoke, Sergeant?' he invited, holding out a box of cigars. 'A little tobacco helps a story.'

The sergeant accepted with alacrity and the three men lit up. Mitchell was a strict enough disciplinarian, but he considered a little relaxation in minor matters made the wheels of life rotate more easily.

'Last Friday morning,' resumed M'Clung, 'we had a visit at Chichester Street—that's our headquarters in Belfast—from Major Magill. He told us he had an extraordinary story to report, but whether there was anything criminal in it he couldn't say for sure. Our Superintendent¹ Rainey saw him at once and he sent for me in case an investigation should be required.

'Major Magill said that on the previous Tuesday evening—that was three days earlier—he'd had a letter from Sir John. Fortunately he hadn't destroyed it and I brought it over to show you.'

M'Clung paused while his hearers bent over the letter. It consisted of a single sheet of grey-tinted paper headed '71 Elland Gardens, Knightsbridge, S.W.1' in small black letters. It was

written in a strong and masculine, but elderly hand and read:

‘DEAR MALCOLM,—I hope to go to Ireland next week about my linen-silk invention, which at last looks as if was going to come to something, though not quite in the way I had hoped. I expect to arrive in Belfast on Thursday and would make my way down to you that evening if you could put me up. Please reply to the Grand Central Hotel whether this would be convenient.

‘Your aff. father,

‘JOHN MAGILL.’

‘Did Major Magill know what the invention was?’

‘He did, sir. He said that his father was a bit of a mechanic and that for years he had been trying to find an improved way of combining artificial silk with linen, in the hope of getting some valuable new product.

‘Major Magill was pleased at the thought of his father coming over and he replied to the hotel that he would be glad to see him on the Thursday evening. On his way into work on that same Thursday morning he called at the hotel. He saw his letter waiting there, but Sir John hadn’t turned up. So the major went on up to the mills. During the afternoon he rang up the hotel to make further inquiries, but still there had been no word of Sir John. The major, while a little surprised, assumed his father had been somehow delayed and that he would turn up on the following day.’

Sergeant M’Clung paused to draw at his cigar, which he apparently found hard to keep alight during the processes of

narration. In spite of his North of Ireland accent and occasional strange turns of phrase, the man was telling his story well. His hearers could picture the little drama as it slowly unfolded and with placid attention they waited for the *dénouement*.

‘Major Magill reached home in due course that evening and there he found that though Sir John’s luggage had turned up, the man himself had not arrived nor had he sent any message. The luggage had come from Larne and the major therefore telephoned to the station. The stationmaster replied that Sir John had reached Larne that morning by the Stranraer boat and had gone on by the boat train to Belfast, and that he had asked that his luggage be sent to Major Magill’s, mentioning that he was going down there himself that evening.

‘Once again the major rang up the Grand Central Hotel, but still there was no news there of Sir John. The major was rather worried about him, but he supposed he would be down later and they went on with dinner. Then just about nine there was a phone from Sir John.

‘He was ringing up, he said, from Whitehead. I should explain, gentlemen, that Whitehead is a little town on the northern shore of Belfast Lough, about thirteen miles from Belfast. It’s on the way to Larne and Sir John would pass through it if he was going down there.

‘Sir John said he’d had a busy day and hadn’t been able either to call at the mill or to get down sooner to Larne. He was now in Whitehead, where he had gone to look up a man on business. But

when he had inquired where his friend lived he had learned that he had moved to Bangor a couple of years earlier. Sir John was therefore stuck in Whitehead, for there wasn't a train to Larne for an hour. So he wanted the major to take out the car and come for him. If the major could do so he would walk out along the Larne road to meet him.

'Well, the major was puzzled about the whole business, but he supposed there was some good explanation. Anyway he wasn't long getting out the Rolls. It's about ten miles from Larne to Whitehead and his place is four miles on the other side of Larne, say a fourteen mile run altogether. He did it in about half an hour. For the last couple of miles he went slowly and kept a good lookout, but he didn't see a sign of Sir John. It was dark at the time, but his headlights were bright and he was sure that if the old man had been on the road he would have seen him. When he got to Whitehead he inquired at the two or three telephone places open at that hour. At the station he got what he wanted. The stationmaster told him that an elderly gentleman had come off the Belfast train arriving at 8.47 p.m. He had asked to be directed to a Mr Rimbolt's house, an engineer employed in one of the Belfast works. The stationmaster knew Mr Rimbolt. He had lived at Whitehead formerly, but a couple of years earlier had moved to Bangor. When the old man heard this he asked where there was a telephone and the stationmaster had shown him the booth on the up platform. The man had gone in and a few minutes later the stationmaster had seen him come out and

cross the bridge towards the town.

‘The major went back to the car and searched the roads and made inquiries at houses in Whitehead where his father might have called. But he couldn’t get any trace of Sir John and at last he gave it up and went home. He wasn’t exactly alarmed about the old man, though he thought the whole thing more than queer. Next day he called first thing at the Grand Central Hotel and there he got news that seemed queerer still and that made him think something really was wrong.’

Again M’Clung paused, shifted his position, and drew his dying cigar up to a fervent heat. Neither Mitchell nor French spoke. So far the story did not seem to call for remark and in a moment the Ulsterman resumed.

‘As Major Magill walked into the hotel the first person he saw was Sir John’s private secretary, a man named Breene. Mr Breene, it seemed, was also looking for Sir John and he was more puzzled and upset than the major. He said that on the Monday previous Sir John had told him he was going over for three or four days to Belfast and that he wanted Breene to accompany him. It was about his linen-silk invention. He had an appointment with an engineer, with whom he was thinking of entering into an agreement. He wasn’t sure whether this agreement would come off, but if it did he would want Breene to make a draft to send to the lawyers and also probably to get out details for a patent specification. One day would do the thing so far as Breene was concerned and he might have the other two or three days with

his people. It seems that Breene is a Belfast man who had gone over to England with Sir John and his people live at Comber—that's a small town about eight miles from Belfast.

'The major immediately asked Breene when he had last seen Sir John. Breene told him in London, for they had travelled by different routes. Sir John had crossed by Larne and Stranraer, as he liked the short sea passage and didn't require to be in early. That service gets in at 9.10 a.m. Breene had gone by Liverpool, which gets in about 7.30 a.m., as it enabled him to go down and breakfast with his people at Comber before meeting Sir John. Sir John had asked him to be at the Grand Central Hotel at half past ten and he had been there promptly to time. That was on the previous morning. Sir John had not turned up and Breene had waited in the building for him ever since.

'This story made the major anxious. He feared something must have gone wrong. So he told Breene to wait on at the hotel in case the old man turned up and he himself came along to report at headquarters. He asked us to make some private inquiries. Well, we did so, but from that moment to this Sir John Magill has never been heard of.'

'Disappeared without trace?'

'Not altogether, sir. I'm coming to that. Our people started a search at once. They got the local men on the job everywhere and I was sent to Whitehead to try and pick up a trail from there. I wasn't there an hour till I'd found something.

'About a mile or less from Whitehead along the road towards

Larne there were signs of a struggle. It's a lonely, deserted place. The road runs on an easy curve between fairly high hedges. There is a grass border at each side with a sod mound and the hedges grow from the back of the mounds. The marks were on the grass, which was trampled and beaten down. Unfortunately none of the prints were clear. Twigs were broken from the hedge. Here and there were traces of blood, very little blood, not more than half a dozen drops. I searched round and I found a hat sticking in the roots of the hedge. It was trampled and there were two stains of blood on it. It was a good grey felt hat stamped with a London maker's name and the letters "J. M." I have it there in the parcel to show you. I searched on round for the most of the morning, but there wasn't another trace of anything, neither of the body if the man was murdered, nor of a car stopping nor of anything at all. And not another thing has been heard of Sir John anywhere.'

'That sounds a puzzle and no mistake, Sergeant,' Mitchell commented slowly. 'I suppose you tried round the houses at Whitehead?'

'Yes, sir. When we found the hat we thought the thing must be serious, so we made public inquiries. We had a house-to-house call in all the town and surrounding country, but we couldn't hear of anything.'

'Was the man in Bangor expecting Sir John?'

'No, sir. He was absolutely surprised at the whole thing. He had no business with Sir John and hardly knew him.'

'I suppose your people checked up Major Magill's statement?'

‘At once, sir. We started men at Larne Harbour to trace the old man’s movements. They found two stewards on the boat, both of whom had been on that service for years. Both had known Sir John when he was living in Belfast and both recognised him again. He had booked a private cabin and went straight to it when he got aboard at Stranraer and stayed there all the time. He didn’t have anything to eat though it was a calm morning and he was quite well. When they were coming into Larne one of the stewards went to call him and found him asleep.

‘He’d gone ashore at Larne Harbour and spoken to the stationmaster about his luggage. “I want this stuff sent to my son’s, Major Malcolm Magill’s,” he had said. “I’m going on to Belfast and I’ll be down again in the evening.” He asked the cost and paid. The stationmaster saw him into the Belfast train.

‘Our men then saw the guard of the train, who happened to be at the harbour. He remembered seeing the man in question talking to the stationmaster and the stationmaster seeing him into the train. Before the train started he collected the tickets and he noticed Sir John alone in a first-class compartment. He noticed him again on the platform at Belfast. He was carrying a medium-sized despatch case.’

Chief-Inspector Mitchell reached forward and carefully removed the ash from his cigar.

‘Bit of luck getting all that evidence surely?’ he remarked, while French nodded emphatically.

‘It was, sir, and yet not so much as you might think. There

aren't many cross by that morning service at that time of year and Sir John was striking-looking enough to have been noticed.'

'Lucky for you, Sergeant, all the same. Well, you've got him to Belfast.'

'Yes, sir. At Belfast we lost him, but we made a cast round and we soon picked him up again. He had gone to the Station Hotel, that's at the Northern Counties station where he arrived. He must have gone straight there, for our men were able to check up the time and it was just after the boat train came in. He saw the reception clerk and said: "I'm Sir John Magill. Is there a letter for me?" There wasn't, and he thanked the clerk and said it didn't matter. He sent the hall porter for a taxi and drove off.'

'That might explain why he didn't call at the Grand Central, might it not?' French suggested. 'He mixed up the hotels and went to the wrong one.'

'That's what Superintendent Rainey thought,' M'Clung returned. 'Our people saw the hall porter and from him they got the taxi man. He said that Sir John had told him to drive to Sandy Row, where the Donegall Road crosses it. That is in a more or less working-class part of the city. Well, they drove to the place and Sir John paid the taximan. As the man was starting he saw Sir John standing in an uncertain-looking way on the pavement. Except for the stationmaster at Whitehead that night when Sir John telephoned to Major Magill, that was the last time anyone saw him, at least, so far as we've been able to learn up to now. The superintendent said he'd 'phone if anything else came out.'

‘The stationmaster confirms the incident?’

‘In every detail.’

The sergeant had evidently reached the end of his story. He made a brief peroration to the effect that when Saturday night came and the affair had not been cleared up, Superintendent Rainey, in consultation with Major Magill, had decided to call in Scotland Yard in the hope of finding a solution of the mystery in London.

All three men shifted their positions as if turning over a fresh page in the proceedings.

‘You certainly haven’t lost much time,’ Mitchell declared. ‘I congratulate you on some good work. It’s not easy to check up a trail so thoroughly as you have done.’

Sergeant M’Clung grinned self-consciously, delighted at the compliment.

‘We would have liked to have done better,’ he protested. ‘We would have liked to find the murderer if it was murder.’

‘I dare say. All the same I don’t think you’ve got much to reproach yourselves with. But so far we’ve been talking about Sir John. Now what about Major Magill himself? Did you check up his statement of his own movements?’

M’Clung gave the other a shrewd glance as if he fully appreciated what lay beneath the question, but he merely answered:

‘The superintendent put a couple of men on it, but when I left they hadn’t finished. They found out that the major left home and

returned back there at the time he said and that he called at the station at Whitehead. But when I left they hadn't been able to get confirmation of the rest of his movements. It wasn't so easy as tracing Sir John for the major was mostly alone.'

'Quite; I'm not criticising. I was merely wondering about the major himself. Motive and opportunity, you know. We don't know if he had notice, but he certainly seems to have had opportunity. You considered that of course?'

M'Clung smiled.

'We did that, sir. But we thought he was all right. They're a well-thought-of family and of good position. Major Magill is well in with the Northern Ireland Government set, a friend of the Prime Minister's and all that. It's hardly likely he'd be guilty of murder. Of course we can't say for sure, but we don't think there's anything to be got that way.'

'There was no bad feeling, I take it, between father and son?'

'Not that we ever heard of.'

'But you said that Sir John had not been over for seven years. That doesn't look like friendly relations.'

'It's not the whole story, sir. If Sir John didn't go over to Belfast the major came over here. He said he'd been in London with his father within the last month.'

Once again Mitchell nodded slowly. He paused in thought, then resumed his questions.

'Well, Sergeant, there's one thing clear at all events. Sir John Magill reached Ireland safely and it was in Ireland that this

mysterious affair happened. Now you've come across to consult us. Just what do you want us to do?'

'Well, sir, it seemed to Superintendent Rainey that this wasn't a local crime at all. He thought it had likely arisen out of something that had happened over here. And if so, it would take you to go into it. He wasn't going to suggest what you might do, but he thought you might look up Sir John's history.'

'If your superintendent is correct the matter would certainly have to be dealt with from here. I suppose he hadn't anything more definite in his mind?'

'No, sir. He said that of course the immediate thing was to get the hat identified. Then he suggested that we should check up the motive for Sir John's journey and get a list of the people who knew he was going to travel. He thought it would be worth while trying to find whether anyone had an interest in his death. Also he wondered if the old man had much money on him and if so, who would be likely to know about it.'

Mitchell smiled.

'I see that your superintendent's ideas are very like our own. Those are the lines we should go on, eh, French?'

'That's right, sir. It seems the kind of case you'd get to the bottom of from routine work. Who had an interest in his death? Who of these people were in Northern Ireland at the time of the crime? It seems to me we wouldn't have to go much further than those two questions.'

'I agree and I'm afraid it's you for it. You see, we pretty well

must act, whether we want to or not. The Belfast authorities have put in a formal application for assistance through the Home Office. Everything is in order and you may take over as soon as you can. Will you go over to Belfast?’

‘I don’t really know, sir, as yet. I think I should get what I can here first at all events and then be guided by circumstances. What do you think, Sergeant?’

The sergeant grinned.

‘We’ll be very glad to see you in Belfast, Mr French, if you decide to come over. But I think what we want mostly lies in London. However, as you say, you’ll know better later on.’

For some time further they discussed the case, finally deciding that French should carry on as suggested. M’Clung not being required in London, he was to return that evening to Belfast, keeping French advised of developments there and undertaking to meet him should he decide to go over.

2

Knightsbridge

It was with mixed feelings that French settled down to consider his new case. As a rule he disliked working with a strange police force. In spite of the invariable fact of his having been invited to assist, jealousies arose. Those whose work he was doing felt that they had been weighed in the balance and found wanting. Hence he was frequently met by a veiled opposition, the overcoming of which took half his energies. Moreover with the best will in the world strangers could not give him the help he was accustomed to from his own trained staff.

On the other hand, if he had to go to Ireland, here was a new and by all accounts a very pleasant country to explore. It was true he had once before been in Belfast, but on that occasion his job had occupied all his time and he had been unable to see anything of the place. Now he promised himself at least a Sunday in Portrush and a trip round the far-famed Coast Road, should these delights prove at all possible.

Of course it was by no means certain that the case would take him to Ireland. Indeed he felt he would be surprised if the matter should not prove to be wholly Irish. Sir John had spent his life in Northern Ireland and his connections there must be of the closest. A successful business man usually makes enemies. One

who takes a strong lead in politics invariably does so. Who could tell what old enmity might not have flared up as a result of this last visit?

But with these possibilities French saw that he had nothing to do. Rightly or wrongly Scotland Yard had been asked to intervene and that intervention had crystalised into the making of certain inquiries by himself. He had his instructions and the sooner he carried them out, the better for all concerned. A visit to Sir John Magill's house seemed to be his first move, and he therefore put aside the routine work he had been engaged on and set off to Knightsbridge.

71 Elland Gardens proved to be a comparatively small double house in an old-fashioned but aristocratic-looking terrace. The door was opened by an elderly butler who might have stepped out of a play, so incredibly true was he to type; in fact the whole scene of French's arrival and announcement might well have been taken from the stage of a theatre. Sending in his official card, French asked for either or both of the ladies.

Inside the house the evidences of wealth were more apparent. Even the entrance hall contained costly objects of art, and the library, into which French was shown, was a veritable museum. Silver predominated, and tables and shelves bore almost priceless examples of the skill of the old craftsmen. Books lined the walls between the ornaments, and the light reflected from them and the walnut furniture was mellow and restful. In the centre was an old-fashioned desk, closed, a table bearing a half-completed

model of some machine stood in a window, and deep armchairs were placed here and there on the thick carpet. In one corner was a built-in safe.

French had scarcely taken in these details when the door opened and a lady entered. Slightly below medium height, she was plain of feature and rather stern of expression. But her manner was gracious enough as she advanced towards French.

‘Detective-Inspector French?’ she said, glancing at the card in her hand. ‘We were expecting a representative from Scotland Yard. My brother, Major Magill, wrote that the Belfast police were consulting you. Won’t you sit down?’

She spoke calmly, but French could see that her nerves were on edge and that she was holding herself on a tight rein.

‘We had a communication from Belfast this morning,’ he answered with the respectful courtesy which he found so much lightened his labours when dealing with this class of witness. ‘In consequence I have called to obtain some information about Sir John.’

‘I will gladly tell you anything I can,’ she replied, with evident sincerity. ‘What do you want to know?’

French bowed slightly.

‘You will understand, madam, that I know nothing about the case and must therefore begin at the beginning. But I shall be as brief as possible. Tell me first, please, a little about your family and household. Just a word about each member.’

The lady paused, evidently to arrange her thoughts, Then

began:

‘Our family consists of only five members, my father, my brother Malcolm, my sister Beatrice, myself and our cousin Victor. My father, my sister and I have lived here since we moved from Belfast about seven years ago. At that time my father gave over the direction of the mills to Malcolm. I should have said that he owned large linen mills in the Shankill district of Belfast. Malcolm lives with his wife and two children in Ireland, near Larne. He is now the managing director, indeed the virtual owner, of the mills and he goes there to business every day.

‘My father and sister and I have lived here very quietly. Beyond visiting a few friends we don’t go into society. Though at one time my father took a good deal of interest in parliamentary and municipal affairs, he ceased to do so when we left Belfast. During these last seven years he has indulged his two hobbies, mechanical invention and the collection of silver, specially old silver. You see what he has in this room, and the collection in the music room is even finer.’

‘I was admiring it before you came in. I’m not an authority, but even to me a lot of it looks almost priceless. You mentioned a cousin, a Mr Victor; is it Mr Victor Magill?’

‘Yes, he is the son of Arthur Magill, my father’s younger brother.’

‘Tell me about him, please.’

‘My Uncle Arthur was in partnership with my father in the mill until he died in—I’m not quite sure of the year, but it was

about 1901 or 1902. Victor was at school in Belfast then and it was intended that he also should go into the business. But after my uncle's death his wife moved back to Reading; she was the daughter of a manufacturer of that town. She took Victor from school in Belfast and he went to some English school. From there he went into the regular army. He was invalided out after the War had lasted a couple of years and is now agent for a firm of motor car manufacturers. I believe he does very well out of it too.'

'I follow you. Now, Miss Magill, I want to ask you a straight question. Do you know, or can you suggest anything, no matter how trifling, which might in any way throw light on Sir John's disappearance?'

Miss Magill made a despairing little gesture.

'Absolutely nothing!' she declared emphatically. 'The whole thing is utterly puzzling. My father is the last person to be mixed up in anything abnormal.'

'His health is good?'

'His health is excellent. For his age it is even remarkable. If you had seen him sawing or planing in his workshop you wouldn't ask. He is as hale and vigorous as a man of forty.'

'I suppose I need scarcely ask this either, but still, what about his mind? Any signs of old age showing there?'

There were none. His mind was as clear as French's own. Even his memory, whose decay first announces the sere and yellow leaf, remained clear and strong. Nor was there any mental weakness in the family. Nor yet, so far as Miss Magill knew, had

he any trouble or worry on his mind. French tried again.

‘Can you tell me if Sir John has any enemies?’

He had none. Miss Magill was positive. Sir John was somewhat retiring in disposition, not given to making friends easily, but in a quiet way he was popular. No one, she felt sure, harboured ill feelings against him. Business rivals? No, she was certain there were none. Political? Nor political either. French would get no help that way. He turned to another point.

‘Do you happen to know why Sir John went to Belfast?’

‘Something about one of his inventions, he said. I’m afraid I can’t tell you the details. He’s always working at some invention. As I think I said, he has a workshop fitted up at the back of the house with a lathe and other quite big tools. He’s certainly extraordinarily clever with his hands and makes the most beautiful things in both wood and metal. The work has been a splendid outlet for him and I’m sure has helped to keep him fit.’

‘Hobbies have kept many an elderly man alive,’ French declared oracularly, ‘and constructive hobbies are the best of all. Now, Miss Magill, I have heard that Sir John is a rich man. Is that so?’

‘That’s a comparative term, isn’t it? I don’t know exactly what his income is, but he must be pretty well off. The linen business in old times was very profitable and during and immediately after the War he made a lot of money. Of course it’s different now. Linen has been passing through a bad time lately.’

‘So I’ve heard. But that wouldn’t have affected Sir John, since

he has given over the mills to Major Magill?’

‘No. Poor Malcolm has the loss and the worry, I’m afraid. However, things are supposed to have turned the corner now.’

‘I hope they have. Could you tell me the terms of Sir John’s will?’

Miss Magill glanced at him almost reproachfully. The question brought home to her the dread conclusion to which she was evidently so unwilling to open her mind. But she answered calmly enough.

‘Only in a general way. My father has great pride of race and a strong desire to perpetuate the family name. After comparatively small legacies to myself, my sister and my cousin Victor, the remainder goes to my brother Malcolm for his lifetime. If Malcolm had a son it would go on to him. If Malcolm had no son it would go on Malcolm’s death to Victor for his son.’

‘And has Major Magill a son?’

‘No. My brother has two daughters, but no son. On the other hand Victor has two sons, but no daughter.’

‘I follow. Let me see if I’ve got that right. As things are, the bulk of Sir John’s money goes to Major Magill. Owing, however, to its being entailed, the major will only have the life use of it. At his death it goes to Mr Victor Magill in trust for his eldest son.’

‘I believe that’s correct, though I’m not absolutely sure. My father is reticent in disposition and we did not care to question him on such a matter.’

‘Naturally. Can you tell me who is Sir John’s legal adviser?’

‘Messrs Hepplewhite, Ingram & Ingram, of 71B Chancery Lane.’

‘Thank you. Now, Miss Magill, Sir John crossed to Belfast via Larne and Stranraer on the night of Wednesday, the second instant. Do you know who took his tickets and arranged his journey? Did he do things like that for himself?’

‘I expect Mr Breene did that. Mr Breene is his secretary.’

‘Ah, then I should like to see Mr Breene. Who else is there in your household?’

‘Just Myles, the butler, Nutting, the valet and chauffeur, and three women servants.’

‘All reliable?’

‘So far as I know, absolutely.’

‘Thank you, Miss Magill. I’m sorry for having had to give you this trouble. I’m afraid I shall have to see your servants now and also to go through Sir John’s papers.’

She raised her hand.

‘Just a moment. Now, Mr Inspector, you’ve been asking me a lot of questions and I’m going to ask you one in return. Quite honestly, what do you think has happened to my poor father?’

French was accustomed in such circumstances to this demand. He always answered it as truthfully as he could.

‘Honestly, Miss Magill, I don’t know. I haven’t enough information to say. Everything is being done to find out.’

‘Still,’ she persisted, ‘you must have some idea?’

French shrugged. He was sorry for this kindly lady, who

evidently felt her position so keenly, yet who had eased his task by so sternly controlling her feelings. There was real sympathy in his voice as he replied: 'Well, we must admit things don't look too well. I don't want to buoy you up with false hopes; all the same I don't think you need necessarily accept the worst.'

She nodded.

'I suppose that's all you can say, and thank you for saying it.' She rang the bell. 'Do everything you can to assist Mr French,' she told the butler. Then shaking hands with French, she left the room.

'Well, Myles,' French began, 'this is a sad business about Sir John.'

The butler closed the door and came forward, standing respectfully before French.

'I have heard no details, sir, except that he has disappeared. I should like to know—Sir John has been a good master to me—I should like to know if anything further has been learned?'

'I'll tell you all I know myself, which isn't much,' French said kindly. 'But first, I wonder if you could give me a little information.' He unpacked the hat and held it out. 'Did you ever see that before?'

'Sir John's!' the man said instantly. Then he took the hat and examined it carefully. 'Yes, sir,' he declared firmly, 'there is no doubt whatever about it. It is the hat Sir John was wearing when he left here. I brushed it for him and I am quite certain.' He turned it over and stared at the blood stains. 'This is terrible, sir,' he

went on in a lower tone. 'Does this mean—an accident? That he is dead?'

French shrugged.

'It certainly doesn't look too well, does it?' he admitted. 'It was found on a lonely road a mile from where Sir John was last seen.'

'And there was no sign of the body? Excuse me, sir, but as I said, Sir John was a good master to me indeed, if I might say it without presumption, a good friend. I should be sorry if anything were to happen to him.'

There was genuine feeling in the man's tones and French at once told him all that was known.

Myles was a good deal upset by the recital. That Sir John was the victim of foul play he seemed to have no doubt. 'I hope you'll get them, sir,' he said earnestly. 'I hope they'll hang, whoever did this. He was a good master.' He shook his head sadly.

'Well, Myles, the best thing you can do to help that on is to answer my questions. And first of all, can you get me a photograph of Sir John? And, wait a minute, of Major Magill and Mr Victor as well?'

'Certainly, sir. He left the room and in a moment returned with three cabinet portraits. One showed the head of the house of Magill as a rather fine-looking old man with a large nose, jaws bordering on the nutcracker, a high forehead and very intelligent eyes. Between him and his son and nephew as well as Miss Magill there was a certain family resemblance, on which French commented.

‘Yes, sir, all the family are somewhat alike in appearance. But it’s coming out more strongly in the second generation. Mr Victor’s son is Sir John over again.’

‘Wonderful thing, heredity,’ French remarked, and he went on to question the butler as to the family relations and to possible enemies of Sir John. But he did not get much information. According to Myles the missing man, while thoroughly good-hearted, had been somewhat distant in manner and a trifle secretive in disposition. Intercourse with his associates was therefore restrained in cordiality. But with no one was Sir John on bad terms, in fact, it was rather the other way about.

One point French noted as possibly important. When questioning Myles as to Sir John’s recent letters, telegrams and visitors, the man stated that on two recent occasions a stranger had called. His card showed that he was a Mr Coates and that he came from Belfast. Unfortunately Myles could not remember the remainder of the address. The man was tall and well-built, with very bright red hair. Quite a remarkable-looking man. On the occasion of each call he had stayed with Sir John for about half an hour.

‘I suppose you’d know him if you saw him again?’

Myles declared he couldn’t be mistaken and French, having indicated that the interview was at an end, asked for Mr Breene.

The secretary was a somewhat striking-looking man of about five and thirty. Tall and spare without being actually thin, he gave the impression of extreme physical strength and fitness.

His head was small, altogether out of proportion to his height. His face suggested a curious blend of the Red Indian and the Scandinavian; high cheekbones and ruggedly chiselled features combined with fair hair and the lightest of blue eyes. Energy, ambition and decision were written on every line of the man's features. In fact before he opened his lips French realised that here was one who would get what he wanted or know the reason why.

'I crossed over last night,' he explained in answer to French's question. 'There was nothing to keep me in Belfast and things were getting behind here.'

'I should be glad, Mr Breene, if you would tell me all you can about this unhappy affair. And first as to yourself. Have you been long with Sir John?'

'Eight years. He appointed me private secretary while he was still running his mills in Belfast. When he gave them up and moved over here he asked would I care to remain with him as general confidential secretary and assistant. He made me a liberal offer and I accepted.'

'You're an Irishman yourself?'

'A Belfast man. My brother and sister still live near Belfast.'

'There can't be much for a secretary to do here?'

'There isn't. It is simply that Sir John likes to amuse himself in his workshop and can't be bothered with correspondence.'

French nodded and asked what sort of man Sir John was. He invariably repeated his questions to as many witnesses as possible

in order to discount individual idiosyncrasies.

‘Well,’ Breene returned, ‘he is not what Americans call a good mixer. He is dry in manner and retiring in disposition and doesn’t make friends easily. And between ourselves, though I’ve no complaint to make, he is not particularly liberal about money. But when you’ve said that you’ve said everything. He is straight and honourable, and in his own way kindly. He is the type of man that the better you know him, the better you like him.’

‘Is he on quite good terms with all the other members of his family?’

French asked the question perfunctorily, but he watched keenly for Breene’s reaction. He was considerably interested by the result. Though the man said, ‘Oh, quite,’ without perceptible hesitation, French could have sworn it was with less conviction. He thought quickly. If, as Miss Magill said, Malcolm had suffered losses during the linen depression, if the old man was not liberal about money, if Malcolm was to a considerable extent his heir ... Added to all that curious business at Whitehead ... French decided to bluff.

‘I rather gathered,’ he said, with a sidelong glance and bending forward confidentially, ‘that relations between Sir John and his son were just a trifle strained?’

‘An exaggeration,’ Breene answered promptly. ‘Admittedly they didn’t see eye to eye about money matters. But to say that relations were strained is untrue.’

French chuckled inwardly as he bluffed again.

‘Probably you are right. It was this money question that I had in mind all the same. I wish you’d explain just what took place about it.’

‘There’s no mystery about that,’ Breene declared. ‘Major Magill, as you doubtless know, was in difficulties in connection with his business. Linen has been having a bad time in Ireland lately and more than one old and respected firm has gone down. As far as I understood it, the major was faced with having to close down, which of course he didn’t want to do. He wrote asking Sir John to put some more capital into the concern, so that he might install some new and more efficient machinery. But Sir John wouldn’t. He took the line that when he was in charge he had had to meet difficulties and that the major could do the same. It was not perhaps very reasonable, as the slump was due to conditions the major had very little control over; mostly it was the result of the War. But there it was. Sir John wouldn’t move. The major came over to see him a couple of times, but it was no good. But they were perfectly friendly and all that, for I saw them together.’

‘Quite,’ French agreed. ‘I suppose you cannot tell me where I could find Sir John’s will?’

‘I don’t even know if he made a will, though I suppose he must have.’

‘What does he keep in the safe? Can you open it for me?’

‘No. Sorry I can’t help you there either. Sir John keeps the key himself and only on one occasion did I see inside. It seemed to contain only papers, but there may have been objects of his

collection too valuable to leave unprotected.'

It suddenly occurred to French that here was rather a serious difficulty. Though he had not actually gone the length of formulating the words, 'The Case Against Malcolm Magill,' he realised that the formulation on such a phrase was by no means an impossibility. From the information gained in Ireland Malcolm was *a priori* the most likely person to have disposed of Sir John's body, and now here seemed the beginnings of a theory of motive. For to Malcolm's unprosperous condition must be added the fact that he stood to gain by his father's death.

French pulled himself up sharply. This would never do. Cases were not conducted in such a way, at least not successful cases. Let him get his facts before jumping to conclusions. At the same time ... He turned to Breene.

'I understand that Sir John went to Ireland about some invention?'

Breene agreed. Sir John was always working out some idea. He was very ingenious and worked as if brought up to the trade.

French nodded.

'Do you happen to know the exact nature of this Belfast business?'

Breene took out a cigarette case and automatically selected a cigarette, as an afterthought handing the case to his companion.

'To a limited extent only,' he answered. 'Sir John warned me to say nothing about it, but I suppose I'm free from that now. Not that it seems of any importance.' He twirled his flint and held

out the lighter. 'For some years Sir John has been working on one invention which really would be valuable if he could bring it off. He has been trying to find an improved way of combining artificial silk with the finest linen. He thinks it might be possible to produce a fabric which would be as light and smooth as silk, while strong and uncreasing and giving good wear. He believes such a fabric, if cheap enough, would supersede both real and artificial silk. A jolly fine idea, if he could only do it. There'd be an immense future for such a product. Incidentally it would set the Ulster linen trade on its feet again, make it boom, in fact.'

'Incidentally also it would make the inventor a millionaire—if he handled his cards well.'

'Quite. Well, Sir John had found a name for his new product; he was going to call it "Sillin," a portmanteau of "silk" and "linen," you understand. But unfortunately that was all he had found. The product itself eluded him. His visit to Belfast was in connection with it.'

'Just how, can you tell me?'

'I can't. He told me he was going to see an engineer in Belfast about it and as he might want to enter into an agreement with him he would like me to go over to take the necessary notes. Also he said something about a possible patent. It looked to me as if either he or the engineer thought they had solved the thing, though he did not say so.'

In answer to French's questions Breene repeated the story M'Clung had already told. He, Breene, had crossed via

Liverpool, gone out on arrival to his brother's at Comber, breakfasted and returned to Belfast in time to be at the Grand Central Hotel at half past ten, the hour at which he was to meet Sir John. There all that day and night he had waited fruitlessly for the old man. Next morning he had determined to go up and see Major Magill at the mills, but just as he was about to leave the hotel the major had entered. Since then he had made a statement to the Belfast police, and after consulting the major, had returned to London.

‘I suppose, Mr Breene, you have no idea who Sir John had the appointment with?’

Breene had no idea. He had at first supposed it might be a firm of engineers named M'Millan & Maxwell, as these people were constantly doing work for Sir John. This view had been supported by the fact that their works were in Sandy Row, to which Sir John had driven. But when the police had gone to this firm they were told that Sir John had not been to them. So far as Breene knew Sir John had not written to anyone in Ireland before leaving.

‘You're wrong there,’ French pointed out. ‘He wrote to Major Magill asking if he could put him up.’

Breene hadn't known about that. He certainly hadn't written such a letter. Nor, he said in answer to French's further questions, had he met or heard about a caller from Belfast named Coates, nor could he imagine who this might be.

‘Who arranged Sir John's journey, Mr Breene?’

He did it himself except for the actual taking of the tickets.

In the ordinary course I should have done that and gone with him to Euston and seen him off. But as I told you I crossed that night by Liverpool, which meant my leaving Euston nearly two hours before him. Nutting therefore saw him off. Nutting is the chauffeur.'

French nodded.

'There is just one other thing,' he concluded. 'I want you to tell me about the relations between Mr Victor Magill and the family here.'

'There was nothing remarkable about their relations,' Breene answered. 'As a matter of fact I have not seen a great deal of Victor, though of course I know him quite well. He has visited Sir John occasionally since I have been here, but I don't know whether on business or as a friend.'

French bluffed again.

'I understand relations were strained there too?'

'If so, I know nothing about it.'

'Well, Mr Breene, I'm much obliged to you. That's all I want, except to look through Sir John's desk. I have Miss Magill's permission.'

'So she told me,' Breene returned dryly. 'Here are the keys. I suppose you'll not want my help? I've an appointment down town shortly.'

French reassured him with secret satisfaction. Solitude was the very thing he wanted. He would see the other servants and then get along with the search of the desk.

Nutting, the chauffeur, was the first comer. He was able to tell very little. He positively identified the hat as that Sir John was wearing on the night in question. He had driven him to Euston, taken his tickets for the journey and the sleeper, and seen him into the train. The berth had been engaged and the attendant was expecting him.

More as a matter of form than otherwise French saw the maids, though from them he learned nothing. Then locking the library door, he settled down to go through the desk.

It did not take French, long to see that Sir John, or Breene, whichever of them used the desk, was a man of method. The top was clear, save for a tickler file open at the current date and a small pile of papers evidently awaiting attention. The three lower drawers on each side had been made into one, and contained a modern vertical correspondence file. Separate drawers held neatly docketed papers relating to various subjects, bills, receipts, investments. But nowhere could French find anything to help his quest.

His eye strayed longing to the safe. It was quite on the cards that inside lay Sir John's will, and a sight of Sir John's will, he felt, was vital to his investigation. However, at present at all events, he had no power to have the safe forced. He could only go to the solicitors in Chancery Lane and hope for the best. But he greatly feared that in spite of the persuasiveness of his tongue, of which he had a not inconsiderable opinion, they would be unwilling to let him see the document.

Wishing, as he so often did, that the men of the C.I.D. were as well favoured in such matters as their confreres in other countries, he rang for Myles, and having handed him the keys of the desk, was shown out.

3

Belfast

French's researches at Elland Gardens had occupied him during the whole of that Monday afternoon, the first of his new inquiry. It was not, therefore, till the following morning that he was able to call on Messrs Hepplewhite, Ingram & Ingram, Sir John Magill's solicitors. From them, unfortunately, he learned little. Mr Ingram, senior, whom he interviewed, admitted that he had drawn up Sir John's will, but on its completion he had sent it to Elland Gardens, in accordance with the old man's request. For this reason he found himself unable to state its contents, though so far as his memory went its terms were as suggested by the inspector. This was the extreme limit to which Mr Ingram could be induced to go, and with this French had therefore to be content.

At his next visit, to the motor agency for which Victor Magill acted as representative, he drew almost as complete a blank. It was true that he did not expect to learn much. But as a matter of routine, it was necessary to see everyone who might in any way throw light on the case.

Messrs Hopwood & Merrythought were agents for a number of the most expensive makes of luxury cars on the market. Mr Hopwood, the senior partner, when assured of the gravity of

the affair, proved willing to tell French all he knew about his travelling agent. But it did not amount to much. Victor Magill had joined the firm some five years previously and during this period had proved himself an excellent salesman. In private life he mixed with a smart crowd, belonging to at least three exclusive clubs. This gave him opportunities of doing unobtrusive business, which he utilised so tactfully that while selling an ever-increasing number of cars, he was accepted by his clients as their benefactor rather than as the unmitigated nuisance such salesmen so often are. He was paid a retaining fee of £500 a year, with a large commission on results. This commission had grown every year until in the previous year it had amounted to over £1500. From Victor's mode of life Mr Hopwood imagined he must also have considerable private means.

As a result of French's routine, but probing questions, Mr Hopwood admitted that at one time Victor had seemed very short of cash. For the most of half a year stringency had obtained and there had been hints of gambling and serious debt. Mr Hopwood had been a good deal worried about the affair, though he had not had sufficiently definite information to justify him in taking the matter up officially with Victor. Then suddenly, some four months previously, things had come right. Whether Victor had made a lucky venture with the Goddess of Chance or whether he had come in for a legacy, the senior partner did not know, but Victor was again evidently flush and the ugly rumours of debt died down.

With regard to Victor's personality Mr Hopwood had little to say. In the senior partner's view Victor was a thorough man of the world, suave, polished and excellent company in any society. He was at present on holidays, a yachting cruise up the west coast of Scotland, and was not expected back for another two or three weeks.

As French returned to the Yard he felt rather up against it. Had he been acting alone he would unhesitatingly have gone to Ireland. Not only did he believe that the solution of the mystery lay there, but he felt that he had done all that was necessary in London. He smoked a couple of pipes over it and then went in and put his views before Chief Inspector Mitchell.

The chief inspector heard him without comment.

'If that's your view,' he said at last, 'better go over and say so. See their superintendent and have a chat with him. And see here, French. Do anything you can for them. If they want you to stay and lend a hand, do so. Better ring them up now and go over tonight.'

From the tone of the Belfast superintendent rather than from his actual words, French sensed that he would be a welcome visitor. Evidently they were getting no further with the case, and equally evidently they were worried about it. French would have expected a resentment at his appearance in Ireland, but nothing of the sort was suggested by the superintendent's reply. It was finally arranged that he should cross via Larne and Stranraer and that Sergeant M'Clung would meet him at the station in Belfast.

It did not seem possible that anything could have occurred during Sir John's journey which might have borne on his subsequent fate. At the same time French determined to travel as the old gentleman had done and to keep a careful note of his surroundings so as to visualise the other's experiences.

He began therefore by engaging a sleeping berth at Euston. On inquiry he was directed to a stationmaster's office on No. 6 platform. There a clerk made the reservation, handing him a voucher. This voucher he presented at the booking office when taking his tickets, a first-class return for the journey and a single for the sleeping berth.

The train left at 7.40 p.m. from No. 12 platform. There he found that all arrangements had been made for his reception. His name was on the list on the window of the sleeping coach and the attendant was expecting him and showed him to his stateroom. Immediately after starting the man came to him for his tickets. He was most civil, making a point of addressing French by his name and fixing up when he should call him next morning.

For a time French sat watching the lights flit by, then thinking he would be more comfortable in bed, he undressed, switched on his reading lamp and became immersed in a novel. At the end of a couple of hours this palled and he turned off the light and composed himself to sleep.

His efforts in this line were not particularly successful and he lay listening to the rhythmic beat of the wheels on the rail-joints and dreamily wondering whether Malcolm Magill had

really killed his father. There were few stops. At only one had he the curiosity to look out: it was Carlisle. Presently he heard Dumfries called and then he fell into a really deep sleep, from which he seemed instantly to be aroused by the attendant with a tea tray and the words, "*Alf* an hour to Stranraer, sir."

A gorgeous colour scheme in the eastern sky was ushering in the dawn as French stepped from the train at Stranraer Harbour. On the platform at the door of the sleeper was the ubiquitous attendant, who with a 'Good morning, Mr French. Thank *you*, sir,' saw him off the premises so far as his car was concerned. A few yards down the pier brought him to the steamer, at the gangway of which his ticket was checked. A short delay and there came the welcome sound of the breakfast bell, and when French came on deck again they were half-way down Loch Ryan.

In the early sunshine of that autumn morning the surroundings of the loch struck him as quite beautiful. The shores, particularly on the starboard side, rose gently into bare rounded hills, which grew wilder and rockier as they approached the open sea. Between were wooded valleys which French no sooner saw than he longed to explore. But it was the colouring that appealed most to him, the dark greens of grass and leaves, shaded here and there to greys and russets, the golden browns of heather and bracken, the darker tints of rock, turning almost to black at the base of the cliffs, the thin blue of the sky and the steel grey of the water, all these were presented with the soft rich tones of the western atmosphere. Then out into the open sea, with the sugar loaf of

Ailsa Craig standing blue and sharp on the northern horizon and the Irish coast a faint line right ahead.

French enjoyed every minute of that crossing. The sea, he knew, could be as rough here as anywhere, but on this charming morning it was like the proverbial glass. For the hour or more of the passage he paced the deck, watching the Scotch coast fade and the Irish grow. And when at last they turned round the end of Islandmagee and entered Larne Lough, he saw that the Irish side was nearly, if not quite, as beautiful as the Scotch.

He took the broad gauge train on the left of the platform, and as he sat waiting for the mails to be transhipped, he could follow vividly Sir John Magill's movements six days earlier. There was a traveller talking to the stationmaster, no doubt just as had Sir John, and there it chanced was the guard passing and looking at both. Presently this same guard collected French's ticket, as doubtless he had collected Sir John's. History indeed seemed to be repeating itself for his, French's, benefit.

The run to Belfast occupied about half an hour. The line ran along the shores, first of Larne Lough, then of Belfast Lough. Just where they came down on the latter French noted the little town of Whitehead. Waiting for him on the platform at Belfast was Sergeant M'Clung.

'How're you, Mr French?' he exclaimed, pronouncing the 'How're you?' with the rhythm of 'bowery.' 'You must have had a good crossing this morning.'

French described his journey, and as they passed to the

entrance of the station M'Clung pointed out the hotel at which Sir John had called.

'I've a car waiting,' he explained. 'We'll go along to Chichester Street. The superintendent's expecting you.'

Police headquarters was about a mile from the station and there in a comfortable little office sat Superintendent Rainey. He was a thickset man of medium height, with a rather stern face which, however, lit up and became attractive when he smiled. He did so as French was shown in.

'Very good of you coming over, Inspector,' he said pleasantly, rising and holding out his hand. 'You had a good crossing, I expect?'

French wondered if this remark was made by every Belfast citizen to every traveller arriving in his city. He reassured the superintendent.

'What about a spot of breakfast?' went on Rainey. 'That six o'clock affair on the boat's all right, but it hardly runs you to lunch.'

French thought that in his case it might. But Rainey would not hear of proceeding to business until his visitor had had something to fortify his inner man, and French not caring for spirits, M'Clung was instructed to take him to an adjoining restaurant for coffee. There for a while the two men sat smoking, chatting principally of the beauty spots of Northern Ireland which M'Clung said French must see before he went back.

'You came over at the right time, Inspector,' Rainey began

when they were once more seated in his office. 'I have a visitor coming in whom you'll be interested to meet: Victor Magill.'

'Victor Magill?' French repeated with a smile. 'It's well I hadn't made my report. I'd have told you he was cruising somewhere up the west coast of Scotland.'

'You would have been right in a way,' Rainey admitted. 'When you got your information he was there. His launch touched at Oban and there he got wires which Major Magill and the sisters had sent. He had just time to catch a train to Glasgow and get the Belfast boat. He got in this morning and went up to see the major at the mill. It was from there he 'phoned me he was coming down. I told him to call at twelve so that we could have our discussion before he came. And now, Inspector, I hope you've some good news for us?'

'Not very much, I'm afraid,' French answered, and he launched into a detailed account of his activities in London. The two Belfast men listened attentively and when he had finished Rainey summarised the position.

'That is to say, Inspector, you have learnt that Malcolm Magill was in low water and that he stood to gain a large sum at his father's death. Secondly, you have not been able to find anyone else with an adequate motive. Victor Magill and the daughters were legatees also, but as far as you know to nothing like a sufficient extent to account for murder. In any case these legacies supply no real motive at all, as all three were well enough off. All three besides have alibis. On our present information, therefore,

these three may be at least temporarily eliminated. There are no other suspects.’

‘That’s right, sir.’

‘On the grounds of motive, therefore, Malcolm Magill is so far our only suspect. And when we look into the circumstances of the actual disappearance we again find him our only suspect. On the other hand all we know of the history and character of Malcolm Magill is in his favour. That’s about it, I take it?’

‘That’s about it,’ French repeated, while M’Clung nodded appreciatively. ‘All the same, Superintendent, I shouldn’t put too much dependence on a man’s previous character in a case of this kind. I’ve seen too many cases of the most unlikely people going wrong, and I’m sure so have you.’

‘I agree and I don’t attach too much weight to it. All the same it counts. Now Inspector the only other point you learned was that someone named Coates, with a Belfast address, who was otherwise unknown to his household, had recently called on Sir John?’

French agreed.

‘Now I’ll tell you what we’ve done. We’ve gone over for the second time the whole story as M’Clung told it to you. We’ve learnt nothing to add to it but we’ve got a fairly complete corroboration as to its truth. First, with regard to Sir John himself. We find that he was practically under observation during his whole journey right from London up to the point at which he left the taxi in Sandy Row. You learn that he drove from his

house to Euston and started in a sleeping berth on the 7.40 p.m. to Stranraer. We checked his arrival at Stranraer and his going on board the boat: we found the man who carried his luggage. At Larne he was seen leaving the boat and entering the train. Again at Belfast he was in sight of one or more people from the moment he left the train until he reached Sandy Row. So far as Sir John is concerned the story is absolutely confirmed.'

'Jolly good to get all that independent evidence,' French commented tactfully.

'Principally a series of lucky flukes,' Rainey corrected. 'Now with regard to Major Malcolm Magill. Here also we've got practically complete confirmation as to his movements. M'Clung didn't tell you that?'

'Gilmore hadn't finished, sir, when I left,' the sergeant pointed out.

'Neither he had,' Rainey admitted. 'Well, I'll tell you now. Malcolm Magill's statement was, if you remember, that he got a telephone from his father asking him to come to Whitehead to pick him up and that he, Sir John, would walk out along the Larne road to meet him. That call came, according to Malcolm, at a minute or two before nine. We have checked it up both at Whitehead Station, where it was made and, at the exchanges, and it was actually put through at 8.53.'

'Good enough,' said French.

'Good enough, yes,' Rainey repeated. 'The major went at once and got the car. He estimates that he left his house, Lurigan, at

about five minutes past nine, and this is confirmed both by his wife and the housemaid. Under the circumstances it was natural for Mrs Magill to look at the clock, and the housemaid states she heard the car leaving, about five minutes after the clock had struck. So that also is good enough.'

French again signified his agreement.

'The major states that he drove at a fair speed until he was within a couple of miles of Whitehead, the extreme point to which he thought his father might have walked. Then he slowed down to ten or fifteen miles an hour, keeping a sharp lookout for foot passengers. He met no one and therefore went on into the town to make inquiries. He found that the post office was closed and he was directed to the station where there was a booth on the up platform. He saw the stationmaster, who told him about the elderly gentleman who had come off the Belfast train at 8.47 and who had made a call from the booth. That, the major states, was about 9.45, and this hour is confirmed both by the stationmaster and by an estimate of the time it ought to have taken Malcolm to come from Lurigan. So that was that.'

Superintendent Rainey glanced at French as if to invoke his commendation. French hastened to bestow it.

'Major Magill imagined his father must have got a lift to Larne and he started home again. But he states he was unhappy about the whole affair, and when he had gone seven or eight miles it suddenly occurred to him that he might have missed the old man through the latter making a call in Whitehead. He

therefore turned round and went back again. There were two families in Whitehead with whom the Magills were on fairly intimate terms and he drove first to one and then to the other. But neither knew anything of Sir John, and though they telephoned to other possible houses, no one had seen the old man. The major states that some considerable time was occupied with this telephoning, so that it was almost eleven when he left Whitehead. This again is not only confirmed by an estimate of the time these movements should have taken, but also by the exchange and the local residents. At the last house the daughter declared that she looked at the clock as the car started and that it was exactly ten-fifty-five.

‘The major states that he drove slowly back looking out again for foot passengers, and that again he saw no one. This time, however, he drove home, arriving about eleven-thirty, which once again checks in with distance and probable speed. When he had garaged the car and had a whisky and soda he rang up his friends in Whitehead to report progress, as they had asked him to do. This call has also been traced and it was put through at exactly eleven-forty-three. Incidentally the hour of his arrival home is confirmed both by Mrs Magill, who had waited up to meet Sir John, and by the servants, who slept over the garage and heard the car being put in.’

French made a gesture of astonishment.

‘I don’t think, sir,’ he declared, ‘I ever heard such complete confirmation of any story. Major Magill’s movements have been

confirmed as absolutely as Sir John's.'

M'Clung looked delighted by what he evidently took to be a compliment to the Belfast force. But Rainey shrugged.

'More lucky flukes,' he declared. 'Next with regard to the secretary. Breene's story seems also to have been true. He certainly travelled over by Liverpool on that night and went down to his brother's at Comber. He left Comber, so his sister thinks, about half past nine, and as the only suitable train leaves at exactly 9.30, I think we may take it that he travelled by it as he says. That train arrives at 9.50 and he reached the Grand Central Hotel, ten minutes away, at 10.30. About half an hour of this time is therefore unaccounted for. He says he took a walk through the streets, and as that would have been an eminently likely thing for him to have done, I think we may accept that also. The staff at the hotel absolutely confirm his further statement. He arrived about 10.30, asked for Sir John and said he would be in the lounge if wanted. We have seen his bill and found waiters who served him at lunch, tea and dinner that day and at breakfast the next morning. We have also seen the chambermaid who called him.

'Nothing there, sir,' said French.

'No,' agreed Rainey, 'there's nothing there. But, French, I'm far from satisfied about Malcolm Magill. Things are very black against him.'

Of this French was by no means convinced.

'I don't know, sir,' he answered. 'Looks to me mighty like an alibi.'

‘You think so,’ said Rainey, thoughtfully lighting a cigarette. ‘I’m not so sure. Assuming Sir John has been murdered—for remember we don’t even know that yet—why could Malcolm not have done it?’

‘Well, there’s all this that you’ve been telling me. Besides that there’s the disposal of the body. I don’t see how he could have disposed of the body. Suppose he met Sir John, murdered him, staged the struggle and hid the hat. What would he do with the body? He couldn’t leave it on the road. He couldn’t take it in the car to those people in Whitehead, any of whom might have offered to accompany him on his search. Nor could he hide it, at least not without leaving some trace of beaten-down grass or something of that sort, and no trace was found.’

Rainey moved uneasily.

‘But hang it all, French, Sir John has disappeared. Malcolm Magill had the motive and the opportunity and so far as we know no one else had either. These difficulties that you raise ...’ He held up his hand as French would have spoken. ‘Let’s go back to fundamentals. If he didn’t murder Sir John, where is Sir John? What’s happened to him?’

French shook his head.

‘I realise that all right, sir,’ he admitted, ‘but you’ve just pointed out yourself that the murder theory is still only an assumption. What if Sir John disappeared voluntarily?’

Rainey made a gesture of agreement.

‘That’s quite true, French. Better still, it leads us to something

we do know, and that is that we're theorising too soon. I've something more to tell you—two things in fact.

'The first is a small matter. Among our other lines of inquiry we made a house-to-house visitation in Sandy Row and the adjoining streets in the hope of finding someone who expected or actually met Sir John. That, I regret to say, brought us nothing.

'The second is that we issued a description of Sir John and circulated it to the police throughout the whole of Northern Ireland. And to this we got a reply which I confess surprised me.'

Rainey paused to emphasise his climax. French was impressed by all he had heard. If there was any more efficient way of handling a case than that these men had adopted, he felt he would like to know of it.

'Sir John had been seen once again after he left Sandy Row,' went on Rainey. 'You noticed that big hill with the flat top and the precipitous front to the north of the city as you came in?'

'I was admiring it, sir,' French declared. 'It reminded me of pictures I had seen of Table Mountain.'

'I never saw Table Mountain,' said Rainey, 'and whether it's like it or not I don't know. It's called the Cave Hill and it's about twelve hundred feet high, with a splendid view from the top. Along its lower slopes runs the main road to Antrim, and from this Antrim Road a steep path leads to the top, the Sheeps' Path. Now half an hour after Sir John Magill reached Sandy Row, a constable saw him get out of a tram at the foot of this path, and after looking round in a surreptitious sort of way, hurry up it.

The path disappears immediately into trees, so that the constable lost sight of him at once. Of course he was some distance away, but he is positive he made no mistake about it's being Sir John.'

'By Jove, sir, very strange that! Have you any idea what he might have gone up there for?'

'Well, a possible suggestion is that it was to meet someone about his invention. But there doesn't seem to be any reason for such a theatrical kind of secrecy.'

'That path doesn't lead near any houses?' French asked.

'It leads up through the grounds of Belfast Castle. But there are many private houses along the inland side of the Antrim road and no doubt you could get to these from the path. You could go along parallel to the road on the side of the hill and drop down at the back of any of the houses. But why?'

'Somebody in one of those houses working at the same idea?'

The superintendent glanced at Sergeant M'Clung.

'That's what M'Clung suggested,' he answered, 'and we have made a list of the occupiers of the houses for investigation. But I'm not hopeful of it myself.'

'Have you any other theory, sir?'

Rainey shook his head.

'I confess I haven't. Sometimes I wonder if the old man hadn't gone dotty, but there's little to support that.'

'Mightn't he have just been out for a walk?'

'We considered that also,' the superintendent admitted, 'but I think it's unlikely. Sir John was too old and didn't seem keen on

that sort of thing. Then there was his secretive manner when he disappeared up the path. No, it's certainly a puzzle—unless the constable made a mistake after all.'

Rainey paused and there was silence for some moments. Presently he went on.

'Now there are one or two inquiries suggested by your statement, Inspector. M'Clung, you get away to M'Millan & Maxwell's and ask them if they know anything of a Coates who might have called on Sir John, or who is interested in inventions or silk or linen. At the same time I'll get a systematic search made among all of the name in the city. With any luck we should get something there.'

French agreed that both these avenues should be explored. Once again he felt impressed by the efficiency with which the case was being handled. These North of Ireland men had nothing to learn from London. He had to admit that even he himself could not have done much more in the time.

In half an hour M'Clung re-entered. A glance at his face gave his news.

'No good, sir,' he reported. 'I saw M'Millan himself. They don't know anybody called Coates that would suit.'

'Had they been working on this silk-linen invention?'

'Never even heard of it, sir.'

'I thought that would be the way,' Rainey declared, 'so I'm hardly disappointed. Better luck next time, Sergeant.'

Before either man could reply a knock came to the door.

‘Gentleman to see you, sir,’ a constable said, handing Rainey a card.

“‘Mr Victor Magill.’” Yes, this is the time I asked him to call. We’d better see him, Inspector.’

He glanced at French, and the latter having signified his agreement, he told the constable to send Mr Magill in.

4

Belfast

Victor Magill was a small man, thin and wiry, and walking with a considerable limp. His features were strongly marked, the bones standing forward. His eyes were surmounted by a heavy frontal projection, his cheekbones were high and his chin and jaw well developed. A mobile expression and a nervous, eager manner gave him an appearance of energy and force, but this was countered by a weak mouth.

‘Good morning, Mr Magill,’ Rainey greeted him. ‘I am Superintendent Rainey and this is Detective-Sergeant M’Clung of our service. You have come at an opportune moment, Mr Magill, for we have with us here Detective-Inspector French from Scotland Yard, who who has come over to consult with us about Sir John’s disappearance.’

‘This is a terrible and most mysterious affair,’ Victor said as he shook hands. ‘I came directly I heard of it. My cousin, Malcolm, has just been giving me the details. He would have come down with me, but he had a directors’ meeting. I should like to know if you have learned anything fresh?’

‘I’m sorry to say we have not,’ Rainey answered. ‘We were just checking over how we stood with Inspector French, and we certainly haven’t much to go on. When I got your phone this

morning I began to hope that you were going to give us some information.'

'I?' Victor Magill shook his head. 'I should be only too thankful, were I able. But I'm afraid I know nothing that could help you. In fact the thing staggers me altogether. My poor uncle was the last man to be mixed up in anything abnormal. He was so conventional and—respectable is scarcely the word—I might perhaps say that he was a pillar of ordered society. I suppose'—he hesitated—'you have no doubt that he is dead?'

'We don't know,' Rainey returned, 'but I must admit it doesn't look very hopeful.'

Victor shook his head. 'I'm afraid not. If he were alive we would have heard of him before this. I can see that Malcolm has lost hope too. Very sad and puzzling beyond belief.'

'How did you hear of it, Mr Magill?'

'Malcolm and my cousin Caroline—Miss Magill, you know—both sent me wires. I have been on a yachting cruise, or rather a motor launch cruise up the west coast of Scotland. I left a list of places where we'd call. It was at one of these, at Oban, that the wires were waiting. That was yesterday morning. I just managed to catch the twelve o'clock train for Glasgow, which brought me in time for last night's steamer to Belfast. This morning I went up to see Malcolm at the mill and then came straight down to you.'

'Very glad to have the benefit of your views,' said Rainey. 'May I ask if you have formed any opinion yourself as to what might have happened?'

Victor made a gesture of impotence.

‘Not the faintest,’ he declared. ‘The whole thing is utterly inexplicable to me. My uncle seemed so well the last time I saw him. He was in fine spirits and even cracked jokes, not his usual way at all.’

‘When was that, Mr Magill?’

‘On Sunday; Sunday week, that is; the Sunday before he left town.’

‘Four days before he disappeared?’

Victor agreed.

‘And nothing passed at that interview which would tend to explain the disappearance?’

There was nothing—absolutely nothing. Victor would have been only too thankful if he could have made some suggestion, but he could not.

‘He was in unusually good spirits on that Sunday, you say. Do you know of any special cause for that?’

‘Well, I do. He had just pulled off an invention that he had been working at for years and he was frightfully bucked. He was like a child with a new toy.’

‘We had heard that he made a hobby of mechanical work. Do you know the nature of this invention?’

‘Oh, yes, he told me all about it. It was in the park that I met him that Sunday afternoon. I said: “Well, uncle, how’s the magnum opus?” for he had shown me his trial models and I knew he thought he was near a solution. His face broke out into

smiles and he caught me by the arm in his eagerness—a thing that normally he would never have thought of doing. “Got it, my boy,” he almost shouted. “I’ve got it at last.” He tapped his breast pocket and repeated: “Got it here. I’m not telling the others, for between you and me they’ve always been a bit superior about my efforts. But you’ve always believed in me,” he said, “and I’ll tell you.”

‘And he did?’

‘Yes, he showed me his sketch plans. His idea was an improved combination of artificial silk and linen. He said that at last he had found a way of running a very fine linen thread through a solution of the silk so that it came out out coated with silk, same as very fine electric wires are coated with a liquid insulator. He’d got this silk-covered thread all right in his workshop, but he didn’t know how it would weave up and he was going to Belfast to get a special loom fitted up to try it.’

‘That’s important news, Mr Magill. We knew that it was about this invention that Sir John had come to Belfast. Do you know who he was going to meet here?’

Victor had no idea.

Rainey nodded, then leaning forward, he spoke more earnestly.

‘I hope you can tell us something more than this, Mr Magill. Do please think carefully. Was there any reason why Sir John might want to disappear? Had he no enemies? Was there no one who wanted his money? We are speaking in confidence. Tell

us even your slightest suspicion, no matter how unsupported by evidence. Even if you're wrong no harm will be done. A hint at this stage might prove invaluable.'

It was no use. Victor would have been only too glad to help, but he knew no more than Rainey.

'I confess I'm disappointed,' returned the superintendent, 'but of course it can't be helped. You can't manufacture evidence any more than we can.'

For some minutes they continued discussing the affair. To French, Victor seemed not only shocked by what he evidently believed would prove a tragedy, but he appeared also personally distressed about his uncle's fate. In fact he presently put his feelings into words. 'I didn't see a great deal of my uncle,' he said, in answer to one of Rainey's questions, 'but I had a great respect and indeed admiration for him. And I think he liked me. He was always very decent to me anyway and I should be distressed on personal grounds to think of anything happening to him.'

Presently the conversation swung round to Victor's cruise, and French, speaking for the first time, began to press for information. It was not likely to be needed, but there was no harm in knowing where Victor had been at the time of the tragedy.

'That's a matter, Mr Magill,' he said, 'in which I happen to be a good deal interested. A friend of mine has a motor launch and he wants me and a couple of other men to join him in just such a trip. It fell through this summer, but we hope to do it next spring. Would you mind dropping business for a moment and telling me

something of your itinerary?

Victor Magill looked at French with a slight surprise. His manner conveyed delicately that he had expected a more serious consideration for his family tragedy from a representative of Scotland Yard. But he replied politely enough.

‘Certainly. The trip was suggested by a friend of mine named Mallace, who is keen on that sort of thing and has done a lot of it. Mallace has business relations with Barrow and knows the town intimately. He knew of a motor launch there for hire, a fifty-foot boat with good cabin accommodation and he asked me and two other men to join him on a cruise up the west coast as far as Skye.’

‘My friend’s boat is not so large,’ French interjected.

‘Fifty foot is a convenient enough size,’ Victor went on. ‘You want to keep your boat as small as possible for ease of handling as well as economy. On the other hand she must be big enough to stand a fair sea. Among those islands it sometimes blows up so quickly that you can’t run for shelter. This boat suited us well. Normally one person could handle her and she was dry in a sea—full decked and plenty of freeboard. But she was slow. Old and rather clumsy and slow.’

‘Petrol fuel?’

‘No, she had a petrol paraffin set. She was economical in oil, but a bit smelly. That’s the worst of paraffin.’

‘It creeps, doesn’t it? Ends by getting in the beer and the butter.’

Before answering Victor gave a derogatory little cough and his manner made it clear that he intensely disapproved of the line the conversation was taking. But French did not seem to mind, continuing in his pleasantest way to extract information as to the other's movements.

He and his friend Mallace, Victor explained, had travelled up from London to Barrow on the day express on the Wednesday, three days after he had seen Sir John in the park. They had reached Barrow about eight and had left almost at once for Portpatrick. There next day they had picked up the other two members of their quartet. One of these had been motoring in Scotland and had driven to Stranraer, garaging his car there till the end of the cruise. The other had unexpectedly been detained in London and had been unable to travel to Barrow. He had therefore travelled to Stranraer by the night train on Wednesday, going to Portpatrick on the Thursday.

'Then,' said French, 'he must have travelled in the same train as Sir John.'

Victor stared at him.

'I suppose he must,' he agreed. 'I hadn't thought of that. In fact, I don't know till this morning how my uncle had travelled. That's certainly a coincidence. Well, Joss, that's my friend's name, can't have seen him or known he was there, or he would have said something about it. Though on second thoughts, I don't believe they knew each other.'

'Then you really didn't make up your party till you reached

Portpatrick?’

‘No. Mallace and I weren’t in more than a few minutes when the others joined us. Mallace had business in Stranraer, so we lay in port all day and that night left for Campbeltown. From Campbeltown we went to Port Ellen in Islay, then to Jura by Oronsay and Colonsay and through the Firth of Lorne to Oban. We were to go on, and the others have gone on, through the Sound of Mull to Skye, round Skye and home by the Sound of Sleat, Staffa and Iona and down the Sound of Jura. Quite a decent round.’

‘By Jove, yes! A jolly trip,’ French declared. ‘I’m afraid we’ll not manage anything so elaborate, but it’s been very interesting to hear what you did.’

There was a pause, then Victor turned to Rainey.

‘Well, Superintendent, I thought of staying over here for a day or two. I don’t suppose you’ll want me, but if there is anything I can do you’ll find me with Major Magill. I’m going down to Larne now. I take it you’re pushing the investigation all you can.’

‘You may rely on us, Mr Magill. Directly we get news we’ll pass it on.’

‘None of that very illuminating’ said Rainey, when Magill had taken his departure. ‘If we find this thing out, we’re going to have to do it for ourselves. Now, Inspector, we’ve talked enough about it. Let’s decide on what we’re going to do and get on with it. Any proposals?’

With the change in the superintendent’s manner French also

became more official.

‘If you ask me, sir, I think we should concentrate on finding the body.’

Rainey jerked himself round in his seat.

‘There’s not much doubt about that,’ he agreed. ‘Certainly we should find the body. There’s nothing we’d all like so much as to find the body. But how do you suggest we should do it?’

French also moved uneasily.

‘Well, sir, of course that’s the trouble. I’ve been trying putting myself in the murderer’s place. There he was with the body; fatal evidence which he’d got to get rid of. Now it seems to me that one of two things must have been done. Either the body must have been put into the sea or it must have been buried. And on the face of it the latter is the more likely.’

Rainey looked up sharply.

‘Why do you say that?’ he asked.

‘Only from my general experience,’ French answered. ‘I’ve had a number of cases in which bodies were got rid of in the sea and I’ve never known one successful. The bodies were always washed ashore or seen from a ship or hooked by a fisherman or got hold of in some other way. Of course I know this is not conclusive.’

‘No, it’s not conclusive,’ Rainey agreed, ‘but it’s my own opinion also and I’ve already gone into it. As it happens it’s supported by a further consideration, not conclusive either, but still carrying a certain weight. It is this. There are only two places where such a scheme might be attempted. There is the sea on

the Belfast Lough side of Islandmagee, that is here'—he pointed to the map—'and there is the sea along the Coast Road beyond Larne. These two places are on the open sea, for I think we may dismiss Lough Larne from our consideration—no one would be mad enough to try to hide a body in that shallow, land-locked area. Now take these others in turn. With regard to the coast near Whitehead there is nowhere, except in Whitehead town itself, where you could get a car, especially a Rolls-Royce, anywhere near the actual shore. To get the body down would involve carrying it a long way. Further, most of the paths lead past houses and nearly all these houses have watchdogs. Now we have made inquiries, and no dogs were heard to bark that night. So the chances are against Whitehead.'

French nodded without speaking.

'Now with regard to the Coast Road shore,' Rainey went on. 'Here the actual difficulties would be less—the road runs beside the beach and is lonely and deserted. But here with a flowing tide a strong current sets along the coast which would tend to wash the body into the path of shipping approaching Belfast. If Malcolm knew that, and he can scarcely have failed to do so, he would think twice before running such a risk. So that, quite tentatively, your second theory, burial, looks the more likely.'

'That's just the way I should put it, sir,' said French. 'Well then, it seems to me a matter of eliminating unlikely places and searching the remainder for signs of digging.'

Rainey smiled ruefully.

'Some job, Inspector,' he protested.

'I don't think it would be such a very big job,' French returned. 'From what the sergeant here tells me, I should say that the areas that need be considered are very small indeed. There are no old mines or disused quarries or uncultivated lands in the neighbourhood. In fact, sir, I was going to suggest that somewhere about the major's own estate would be the most likely. The sergeant said it was sheltered by a wood. Where else could he guarantee the necessary privacy?'

Rainey paused.

'It's an idea and you may be right,' he said dubiously. 'M'Clung, you have been out at the place. What do you think of the inspector's idea?'

M'Clung moved uneasily.

'It might be right enough, sir,' he answered without enthusiasm. 'There's certainly a planting between the Coast Road and the avenue that wouldn't likely be disturbed. You couldn't tell what might have been done there.'

'We'll have a look at it,' Rainey decided. 'Now, Inspector, that's your theory, and very good it seems as far as it goes. But it does not go far enough. Sir John's coming to Ireland, his going first to Sandy Row, then to the Cave Hill and then to Whitehead, all seem to me to require some agent besides Malcolm. In short, I don't see how Malcolm could have arranged these.'

French admitted that no more could he.

'Very well,' Rainey went on, 'that brings us back to my original

theory—that the full solution is to be found in London.’

French shook his head. He did not see what more could be learned in London. He was very willing to go back and try again, but he had little hope of the result.

‘I think you’ll have to try,’ Rainey insisted, ‘but wait till we see what this search of Lurigan produces. You might go down there with M’Clung and have a look round. To work properly in London you should know all that’s known here. Of course call in and see me before you go.’

‘We’ll have a bite of lunch, Mr French,’ M’Clung suggested as they left the room, ‘and then get away on down.’

But the start was destined to be delayed. On returning to headquarters for the necessary search warrant they were told that Superintendent Rainey had that moment telephoned that they were to be stopped and sent in to him. They found him leaning back in his chair with a letter in his hand, at which he gazed with an expression of the keenest interest. He glanced up as they entered.

‘Sit down again,’ he directed. ‘Here’s something that’ll surprise you. Look at this.’

5

Lurigan

Superintendent Rainey passed over a short, typewritten letter. The paper was of medium quality, a sheet torn off one of those multitudinous blocks or pads which are sold in every stationer's, and which unless through some accident, are so impossible to trace. The typing suggested that the writer was a novice in the art, there being seven mistakes in the lettering and three in the spacing. With some satisfaction French saw that the machine used had worn type. There should be no difficulty in identifying it, were he only lucky enough to come across it. The letter read:

Belfast, 7th October.

'The Chief of Police, Belfast.

'SIR,—In view of certain rumours which, as you know, are current, I feel it my duty to inform you of the following facts:

'While driving alone in my car along the Coast Road towards Larne at about 2.30 on the morning of Friday, 4th inst., I felt cramped from long sitting and decided to stop for a moment to stretch my legs. I did so just after passing Ballygalley Head and close to the gates of Lurigan, Major Magill's residence. Among the trees of the small plantation between the road and the avenue I saw that some operations were in process. At least one figure was moving about and there were occasional gleams of a light. I

do not know who was there or what he was doing, nor did I go to investigate.

‘This fact may have no significance—I trust it has not. But for the reason mentioned I think it my duty to report it to you. I do not wish to be brought into the affair, and as I can see that—whether there is anything wrong or not—my evidence is not essential, I am suppressing my name and address.

‘Yours, etc.,

‘X.Y.Z.’

French gave vent to a low whistle as he read this communication.

‘Bless my soul!’ he said, ‘that’s a bit of a coincidence, that is! Here were we talking about possible operations on that night at Lurigan, namely, the burial of Sir John Magill’s body, and here not an hour later comes in a letter to say that such operations were actually seen! Here, Sergeant,’ he went on, obeying a gesture from Rainey, ‘have a look over that. I suppose, sir,’ he turned back to the superintendent, ‘it’s not likely to be a hoax?’

‘A hoax? I should say it is, extremely likely. But we’ll take it seriously for all that. I always do so in such cases as a matter of principle.’

‘So do we, sir. And many a vital hint we’ve got in just such a way. Two-thirty a.m.!’ He paused, then added:

‘What’s to prevent Malcolm committing the murder, arriving home at eleven-thirty, as he says, garaging the car with the body inside, and when his wife was asleep stealing out of the house,

getting the body out of the car, and burying it?'

'Sounds all right, Inspector,' Rainey agreed. 'That'll be something more for you to look into when you're down there this afternoon.'

'We'll certainly look into it. I suppose, sir,' French went on, 'we couldn't get anything from the letter? The paper is ordinary, but the typewriter's old and distinctive.'

'Not much good, that, to find our man,' Rainey returned. 'Useful to identify him if we had him, of course.'

'What about finger prints?'

'I'll have the paper tested, but the same remarks apply.'

'The envelope?'

Rainey tossed it across.

'No help there either, I'm afraid. You see, it's simply addressed with the same machine to "The Chief of Police, Belfast." I'll try the inside of the flap for prints, but there's not much chance of getting any.'

There was a pause, then Rainey continued: 'Well, is that all? If so, I think you and M'Clung should get away. I'll see you when you get back.'

The day was one of the finest French remembered for the time of year, as he and the sergeant set off in a police car for Larne. The road led along the shore of Belfast Lough, with high above them on the left the dominating outline of the Cave Hill. 'There,' said M'Clung, pointing to a couple of black dots at the bottom of the precipitous cliffs near the summit, 'are the caves

it gets its name from. They say they're prehistoric dwellings, but I don't suppose anyone knows that for sure.' Some nine miles out came Carrickfergus with the fragments of its old walls and its splendidly preserved church and castle, built, tradition has it, when the second Henry sat on the English throne. Then on again, rising to a high windy cutting in the rock, aptly called the Blow Hole, where they called a momentary halt to see the view. From the shore far below them Belfast Lough stretched away to the city itself, with the range of the Antrim hills dominating it to the west and the County Down coast and its islands and lighthouse opposite. To the north were Lough Larne and Islandmagee, while farther east the Scotch coast showed dimly with, very faint and spectral in the far distance, the rocky cone of Ailsa Craig. M'Clung swung down into Whitehead and pointed out the telephone booth at the station, then returning to the main road, drew up at the place at which the hat had been found. After a look round they ran on through the picturesque country to Larne and out along the Coast Road.

About four miles beyond Larne, a few hundred yards before the turn round Ballygelley Head, lay Lurigan, the only house in sight. From the road, indeed only the chimneys were visible, for it stood back: on a little plateau some fifty or sixty feet above the sea. M'Clung parked the car and they got out and looked about them.

Curiously enough, the point at which they had stopped formed the junction between two varieties of scenery. In front all was

bleak and rugged. To the left was the series of cliffs which terminated in Ballygallay Head, not very high, but rocky and precipitous and strikingly massed, with the road at its base and the sea at the further edge of the road. All harsh and forbidding, without trees, and softened only by patches of rough grass clinging here and there on the stone. But the view looking back towards Larne might have been in another country. Here in the foreground the rocky cliffs gave place to grass slopes, which a little further along were covered by a thick matting of alders. These softer outlines ran back in a wide sweep to the headlands at Larne, with the spiky memorial tower showing in the gap at the mouth of the harbour. Beyond, the line of Islandmagee continued on, with Muck Island looking as if some giant had chopped a bit off the end of the promontary.

The sea was a gorgeous blue right out to the horizon. Straight opposite, some five or six miles out, were the islands and lighthouses of the Maidens. Behind them, faintly in the distance, was Ailsa Craig, with far away on the left the hummock of Kintyre and on the right, to balance the picture, the long line of the Wigtownshire coast. Everywhere were birds, mostly gulls, poised or slowly wheeling on their graceful wings and uttering mournful cries as they went about their lawful occasions.

But interesting, and delightful as were these sights, it was not upon them that French concentrated. The car had stopped at a quarry near a slight bend of the road, and not a hundred yards behind them was the Lurigan entrance. The drive, facing

towards Ballygalley, swung round quickly through nearly two right angles and ascended the grassy slopes until it dived into a thicket of alders. There it turned inland, leaving a wide belt of trees between it and the road. To this belt M'Clung pointed.

'There's what we want, Mr French,' he declared. 'That'll be where our friend X.Y.Z. saw the moving light.'

There could be no doubt on the matter. The plantation was the only part of the Lurigan estate which could be overlooked from the road. If X.Y.Z. were telling the truth it was among these trees that they might expect to make their find.

Having noted the area inside which they must search, the two men climbed to the wood and began walking backwards and forwards, examining every inch of the surface. Here and there there were stunted firs and beneath them the ground was more or less clear, but the alders made a dense undergrowth. Search through these thickets was slow, but the men worked steadily on, not passing a single foot until they were sure the ground had not been disturbed. And then as they had reached the centre of the little wood, French's nerves gave a thrill and he came to a sudden stop. Yes, X.Y.Z. had not misled them nor had their deductions been faulty! Here was what they had been looking for.

Screened by alders before and behind was a clump of branches which at once attracted French's attention, for their leaves were drooping and they stood at awkward and unnatural angles. He gave one a sharp tug. As he expected, it came up without difficulty and proved to have no roots. Softly he called to

M'Clung and the two men began to clear away the clump. The branches covered a freshly sodded mound some six feet long by two feet wide. Moreover on all the surrounding ground were traces of yellow clay!

'Boys, Mr French!' whispered M'Clung, his excitement causing him to revert to the speech of his fathers. 'Did ever you see the like o' that? It's a grave!'

'It's a grave sure enough,' French agreed, 'and if it was made on that Friday morning as X.Y.Z.'s story suggests, it's not hard to imagine whose body's in it.'

M'Clung shook his head.

'It looks like the major,' he declared. 'It's hard to see who else could have done it.'

'We'll consider that later,' said French, glancing at his watch. 'It's now after five o'clock and it'll be dark in no time. Suppose you run back to Larne and ring up your chief and arrange with him about opening this up. I'll stay here till you come back. I'm sure Superintendent Rainey will agree that Major Magill should be present at the opening. And if you ask me, mum's the word. This should be sprung on the major.'

When M'Clung had gone French began slowly to pace to and fro. Certainly he agreed with the sergeant, this discovery did look bad for Major Magill. So far as he could see, no one but the major could have carried out the crime. No one else had the opportunity and the means. If the body of Sir John Magill lay here in this lonely plantation, it could only have been brought

from Whitehead in a car, and who beside the major had on that night at once the necessary car, the motive and the knowledge?

In about an hour M'Clung returned and with him two constables from the Larne barracks. French joined them on the road.

'I rang up the superintendent,' said M'Clung. 'He says we can't open this up without an order from the Ministry of Home Affairs and he'll get one tomorrow. He'll come down first thing the day after. Meantime, Mr French, we're to clear out now and these two men will watch the place.'

'Right, Sergeant. What do we do then? Go back to Belfast?'

'A matter for yourself, sir. You'd likely be more comfortable in Belfast, but if you stay over in Larne it will save you an early start. The superintendent is starting at six-thirty to get the major in before he leaves for town.'

'You're going back, are you?'

'I am, sir.'

'Then I'll go too.'

At thirty-three minutes past six two mornings later a large car left the city. In it were French, Rainey, M'Clung, two constables and Dr Finley, the police doctor. They retraced the road along which French had driven a couple of days earlier. The morning was exquisitely fresh and the colouring warm and vivid in the light of the rising sun. At a good speed they ran to Carrickfergus, then after a slack through the town, they pressed on again, until in just an hour and four minutes after starting they pulled up

outside the gates of Lurigan.

For some minutes Rainey moved about, examining the grave and the lie of the surrounding land. Then with French he walked to the door and knocked.

‘Is Major Magill about yet?’ he asked the somewhat surprised-looking servant.

‘He’s in at breakfast, sir.’

‘Then give him my card and say that I should like to see him as soon as he has finished.’

They were shown into a drawing room on the right of the hall, from the bow window of which there was a fine view out over the sea. But they had not long to enjoy it. A thin, dark energetic looking man soon bustled into the room.

‘Good morning, Superintendent,’ he said doubtfully, holding out his hand. ‘Nothing wrong, I hope?’

‘Let me introduce Detective-Inspector French of the C.I.D.,’ said Rainey gravely. ‘We want to see you, Major Magill, on rather serious business, but we can wait till you’ve finished your meal.’

Malcolm Magill’s face changed.

‘What?’ he exclaimed. ‘Is there any news? Anything about my father?’

‘There is some news,’ Rainey returned, ‘but, as I say, we can wait till you’ve breakfasted.’

‘Let’s get on right ahead with it now,’ said Malcolm briskly. ‘I was just finishing and I’ve had all I want. Will you smoke?’ He held out a gold cigarette case.

‘No, sir, thank you. We want you, if you’ll be good enough, to come out with us.’

‘Good Lord, but you’re darned mysterious,’ said Malcolm with a smile, though there was no laughter in his eyes. ‘Is it close by?’

‘Not five minutes away.’

As they left the house the Superintendent said in formal tones: ‘I have to tell you, Major Magill, that acting on information received, a search was made two days ago on this property.’ As he spoke his watch on the other was very keen. ‘A discovery was made, a very suggestive discovery, which may or may not prove important. Investigation of it was put off until this morning in order to have the benefit of your presence. This is the explanation of this early call. Here is the warrant under which we are acting.’

French, also watching keenly, saw the bewilderment in the major’s eyes change subtly to apprehension.

‘As I said, you’re darned mysterious,’ he repeated, but there was less assurance in his tone. ‘What is the nature of this discovery?’

‘You will see in a moment.’

By this time they had reached the point at which it was necessary to turn aside from the drive into the plantation. A moment more and they passed through the screen of trees and came in sight of the grave.

French found himself wondering whether anyone could show such signs of amazement as Major Magill did without really feeling it. Either the man did not know the grave was there or he

was one of the best actors French had met. In somewhat shaky tones he gave vent to an oath and demanded of the superintendent what this thing meant.

‘That’s what we’re here to find out,’ Rainey answered. ‘We wondered if you would care to make any statement about it. You needn’t, of course, unless you like.’

‘Statement?’ Magill cried. ‘I? Good heavens, Superintendent, you don’t imagine I know anything about it, do you? I can assure you the thing’s an absolute mystery to me. What it means or who made it I haven’t the slightest idea!’

‘I’m glad to hear you say so,’ said Rainey. ‘The suggestion made is that this is a grave and it looks like a grave, so we’re going to open it. It was necessary for you to be present while we did so.’

The hint underlying the superintendent’s words was not lost on Malcolm Magill. He paled somewhat and was evidently acutely uneasy. Both French and Rainey continued to watch him keenly. Two or three times he made as if to speak, but finally relapsed into silence, while a troubled look settled down on his features.

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