

INSPECTOR FRENCH

and the STARVEL HOLLOW TRAGEDY



*Freeman
Wills Crofts*



Freeman Crofts

**Inspector French and the
Starvel Hollow Tragedy**

«HarperCollins»

Crofts F. W.

Inspector French and the Starvel Hollow Tragedy / F. W. Crofts —
«HarperCollins»,

From the Collins Crime Club archive, the third Inspector French novel by Freeman Wills Crofts, once dubbed 'The King of Detective Story Writers'. THREE CORPSES FOR INSPECTOR FRENCH A chance invitation from friends saves Ruth Averill's life on the night her uncle's old house in Starvel Hollow is consumed by fire, killing him and incinerating the fortune he kept in cash. Dismissed at the inquest as a tragic accident, the case is closed – until Scotland Yard is alerted to the circulation of bank-notes supposedly destroyed in the inferno. Inspector Joseph French suspects that dark deeds were done in the Hollow that night and begins to uncover a brutal crime involving arson, murder and body snatching . . .

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FREEMAN WILLS CROFTS
Inspector French and the Starvel Hollow Tragedy



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Dedication

TO
MY WIFE
WHO SUGGESTED THE IDEA FROM WHICH
THIS STORY GREW

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1

The Tragedy

Ruth Averill moved slowly across the drawing room at Starvel, and stood dejectedly at the window, looking out at the Scotch firs swaying in the wind and the sheets of rain driving across the untidy lawn before the house.

The view was even more depressing than usual on this gloomy autumn afternoon. Beyond the grass-grown drive and the broken-down paling of posts and wire which bounded the grounds, lay the open moor, wild and lonely and forbidding. A tumble of dun-coloured sedgy grass with darker smudges where rock outcropped, it stretched up, bleak and dreary, to the lip of the hollow in which the dilapidated old house had been built.

To the girl standing in the window with a brooding look of melancholy on her pretty features the outlook seemed symbolical of her life, for Ruth Averill was not one of those whose lives could be said to have fallen in pleasant places.

But, in spite of her unhappy expression, she was good to look at as she stood watching the storm. Though rather under medium height she had a charming figure and something of a presence. She was dark, as though in her veins might flow some admixture of Spanish or Italian blood. Her features were small and delicate, but her firmly rounded chin gave promise of character. She scarcely looked her twenty years of age.

But though she had the fresh vitality of youth, there was something old-fashioned in her appearance not out of accord with her surroundings. She wore her long dark hair piled up in great masses over her broad forehead. Her dress was of the plainest, and in the fashion of three years earlier. Though scrupulously neat, it was worn threadbare. Her shoes were cracked and her stockings showed careful darns.

For Ruth Averill was an orphan, dependent on the bounty of her uncle, Simon Averill, for every penny. And Simon Averill was a miser.

Ruth was born in Southern France, and she had dim recollections of a land of sun and warmth, of jolly people and bright colours. But since she had come to this gloomy old house in the wilds of the Yorkshire moors the joy had gone out of her life. Her companions during childhood had been the two not very prepossessing servants and the still less attractive gardener and outdoor man. With her uncle Simon she had nothing in common. Even at the time of her arrival he was elderly and morose, and every day he seemed to grow more self-centred and less approachable.

After some years a break had come in her life; she had been sent to a boarding school. But she had not been happy there, so that when she was 'finished' she was almost glad to return to the dullness and loneliness of Starvel.

There she had found changes. Her Uncle Simon was now an invalid, querulous and solitary, and living only for the accumulation of money. His passion took the form of collecting actual coins and notes and hoarding them in his safe. He made no attempt to cultivate the friendship of his niece, and had it not been that he required her to read to him once a day, she would have seen him but seldom.

At this time also the two old women servants and the gardener had gone, and their places had been taken by a comparatively young married couple called Roper. Though more efficient than their predecessors, Ruth did not take to either of the newcomers, with the result that the fourteen months which had passed since her return from school were lonelier than ever.

Had it not been that Ruth had developed an interest in flowers and gardening, she would have found herself hard put to it to fill her life. Gardening and her friendship with a semi-invalid entomologist who lived close by, together with occasional excursions to the neighbouring market town of Thirsby, were the only distractions she could count on.

But recently another factor had come into her life. She had met on a number of occasions a young man named Pierce Whymper, the junior assistant of an ecclesiastical architect in Leeds. Whymper was acting as clerk of works during some renovations to the parish church at Thirsby, and when Ruth had gone with one or two of the local ladies to inspect the work he had been particularly attentive. He had begged her to come again to see how the job progressed, and she had done so on more than one occasion. Then one day she had met him walking near Starvel, and she had invited him to come in and have tea. This visit had been followed by others and they had made excursions together on the moor. Though no word of love had been spoken during any of these interviews, she knew that he was attracted to her, and though she would hardly admit it to herself, she knew also that she would marry him if he should ask her.

Such was the general condition of affairs in the old house of Starvel on this gloomy September afternoon, an afternoon which was to be remembered by Ruth as the end of her old life and the prelude to a new existence in a different world.

As she was standing, staring mournfully out of the window, the attendant, Roper, entered the room. She did not know then, though she realised it afterwards, that the message he was bringing her was to be the herald of a series of terrible and tragic happenings, so dark and sinister and awful that had she foreseen them she might well have cried out in horror and dismay. But she did not foresee them, and she turned with her instinctive courtesy to hear what the man had to say.

The message, though almost unprecedented, was in itself the reverse of alarming. Roper explained that Mr Averill had instructed him to hand this note, which he had received in a letter to himself, to Miss Ruth, and to say that he hoped Miss Ruth would accept the invitation it contained. Further, that as there would be expenses in connection with the visit, he wished Miss Ruth to have the ten pounds enclosed in this other envelope. She could go in to Thirsby in the morning, get any little thing she might want, and go on to York in the afternoon.

With rapidly beating heart Ruth unfolded the dogeared corner of the note, which was addressed simply 'Ruth,' and read as follows:

'Oakdene,' Ashton Drive,
York, *September 10th.*

'MY DEAR RUTH,—I hope you will allow me to address you in this way, as your father and I were old friends. I nursed you when you were a baby, and though we have not met for many years, I do not feel that you are a stranger.

'This is to ask if you will come and stay here for a few days and meet my daughters Gwen and Hilda. I do hope you can.

'Our autumn flower show opens on Wednesday, and the roses are always worth seeing. I am sure you would enjoy it, so try to reach here on Tuesday afternoon and you will be in time to go there with us.

'Yours very sincerely,
'HELEN PALMER-GORE.'

Ruth could scarcely believe her eyes as she read this friendly letter. Mrs Palmer-Gore she dimly remembered as a large, kindly, fussily-mannered woman, whom she had liked in spite of her trick of giving unpleasantly moist kisses. But she had never visited her, or ever been to York, and the prospect thrilled her.

But unexpected as the invitation was, it was as nothing compared to her uncle's attitude towards it. That he should have given her permission to go was surprising enough, but that he should have sent her ten pounds for her expenses was an absolute miracle. *Ten Pounds!* What a sum! Why, she had never had the tenth part of it in her possession before! And *what* she could buy with it! Visions of frocks, shoes, hats and gloves began to float before her imagination. Feeling as he did towards money, it *was* good of her Uncle Simon. She turned impulsively to Roper.

'Oh, how kind of uncle,' she exclaimed. 'I must go up and thank him.'

Roper shook his head.

‘Well, miss, I shouldn’t if I were you,’ he advised in his pleasant Scotch voice. He came from somewhere in Fife. ‘The master’s not so well, as you know, and he particularly said he didn’t want to be disturbed. I’d wait and see him in the morning before you go. You will go, I suppose?’

‘Of course I shall go, Roper.’ She hesitated, undecided. ‘Well, perhaps if he said that, I’d better see him in the morning, as you suggest.’

‘Very good, miss. Then I’d best arrange for a car to take you in to Thirsby in the morning? About ten, maybe?’

‘Thank you. Yes, about ten will do. And you might send a telegram to York which I will write for you.’

The man bowed and withdrew, and Ruth gave herself up to glorious dreams of the next few days: not so much of visiting the Palmer-Gores and York, but of getting away from Starvel. Yes, she admitted it to herself at last. It was to get away from Starvel that she really welcomed the invitation. While there had been no chance of quitting it, she had not realised how terribly bitter was her hatred of the place. And not the place only, but of everyone in it. She hated her uncle—in spite of the ten pounds. She hated Roper with his sleek civility, and most of all she hated Mrs Roper, who always treated her with a veiled insolence, as if silently taunting her because of her dependent position. Oh, how splendid it would be to get away from the place and everything connected with it, even for a few days! And she determined she would use the opportunity of this visit to find out what her chances would be of getting some job by means of which she could support herself, so that she might never be forced to return to Starvel or see any of its inhabitants again.

That night she could scarcely sleep from excitement, and next morning she was ready with her shabby little suitcase long before the time at which the car was to arrive.

She was somewhat uneasy about her uncle’s condition. For several days he had been ailing, and when she had gone in to say good-bye to him before leaving she had thought him looking very ill. He was asleep, but breathing heavily, and there was something in his appearance which vaguely disquieted her.

‘I don’t think he’s at all well,’ she said to Roper when she came down. ‘I believe he should have the doctor.’

‘I was of the same opinion, miss, and I took the liberty of calling at Dr Philpot’s when I went in to order your car. But the doctor’s ill. He’s got influenza and is confined to bed. I thought of going on to Dr Emerson, and then I thought if it’s only influenza that’s wrong with Dr Philpot we might just as well wait. He’ll likely be about again in a day or two.’

Dr Philpot was Mr Averill’s usual attendant. He was a youngish man who had come to the place some three or four years earlier, and who had already built up a reputation for care and skill. The other practitioner, Dr Emerson, was old and past his work, and had retired in all but name.

Ruth paused in some perplexity.

‘That’s very unfortunate. But I think you are right that if it’s only a matter of a day or two we should wait for Dr Philpot. I hadn’t heard he was ill.’

‘Neither had I, miss. He was all right on Thursday, for he was out that day to see Mr Giles.’

‘So I understood. How is Mr Giles today?’

‘I haven’t heard this morning, miss, but last night he was far from well. Mrs Roper is just going up to see if there is anything wanted.’

‘I’ll go round to see him on my way to Thirsby,’ Ruth decided. ‘Can I give Mrs Roper a lift?’

‘Thank you, miss, it would be a convenience. I’ll tell her.’

Markham Giles, the entomologist, was their nearest neighbour. He was the son of an old friend of Mr Averill’s and lived alone in a little cottage half a mile away across the moor. He was a pathetic instance of the wreckage left by the War. Never physically strong, he had been rejected for the earlier army drafts, but when the struggle had dragged out and the standard for recruitment had been lowered

he had again volunteered and had got through. He had served in Flanders, had been badly gassed and wounded, and six months later had left the hospitals the shadow of his former self. Being alone in the world and penniless save for his pension, he had headed north to his father's old friend. A small cottage belonging to Starvel being then vacant, Mr Averill had offered it to him at a nominal rent. There he had since lived, occupying his time by keeping bees and by studying the insect life of the moor. On this subject he had become somewhat of an authority, and had written articles which had attracted attention in entomological circles. He and Ruth were good friends and she had helped in the capture and arrangement of his specimens.

Some days previously he had developed influenza, and though he did not seem seriously ill, he was not shaking it off. Mrs Roper had been kind in looking after him and Ruth also had done what she could.

Ten minutes later the two women arrived at the tiny cottage which lay just outside the lip of Starvel Hollow, the big saucer-shaped depression in the moor in the centre of which stood Simon Averill's house. Markham Giles looked worse than when Ruth had last seen him. He lay with half-closed eyes and seemed too dull and listless to more than notice his visitors. But he feebly thanked them for coming and said he was quite comfortable and wanted nothing.

'If he's not better by tomorrow, I think you should send for Dr Emerson,' Ruth declared as she returned to her car.

'I think so, too, miss. Very good, I'll arrange it. And if he seems bad tonight either John or I will come over and sit with him. I don't like his look this morning somehow.'

'It's very good of you, Mrs Roper. But I expect he'll be all right.'

'I hope so, miss. Good morning, miss.'

Ruth's mind was troubled as she turned away. She had always been intensely sorry for Markham Giles, and now she hated leaving him lying there alone. But there was nothing that she could do, and with a half sigh she re-entered her vehicle and was driven into Thirsby.

There she spent the morning shopping, packing her purchases in her suitcase. This was followed by a frugal meal at the local tea shop, and then arose the question of how she should spend the hour remaining until train time.

She left her suitcase at the tea shop, and sallied forth. Involuntarily her steps turned towards the church, though she assured herself that under no circumstances would she enter the building. There could, however, be no objection to walking past the gate.

What she would have done eventually if left to herself will never be known, as fate intervened and arranged her visit for her. Turning a corner she all but ran into Mrs Oxley, the wife of one of the local solicitors. Mr Oxley had charge of all Simon Averill's business, and on his occasional visits to Starvel he had made a point of asking for Ruth and chatting to her in his pleasant cheery way. Mrs Oxley she had known for years, and had experienced many kindnesses at her hands.

They stopped to talk and Mrs Oxley heard of the visit to York with interest and sympathy.

'Well,' she said, 'if you're not doing anything until half past three, come with me to the church. Boyd, the sexton, promised to send me some of the old flags for the rock garden, and I want to know when I'm likely to get them.'

There was nothing for it but to go, and whether Mrs Oxley had any suspicion of how matters stood, or whether she was genuinely anxious about her paving-stones, Ruth was left alone to talk to Whymper for a good ten minutes. And the young man did not fail to improve the occasion. It appeared that he had to go to the station to make inquiries about a consignment of cement, so it was natural that he should leave the church with the ladies. Mrs Oxley, it then turned out, had business in the opposite direction and to her great regret was unable to accompany the others. So the task of seeing Miss Averill off fell to Mr Whymper.

It was with shining eyes and heightened colour that, half an hour later, Ruth Averill sat in the corner of a third-class compartment, while the train moved out of Thirsby. That Whymper loved her

she was now positive. It was true that he had not actually spoken of love, but his every word and look proclaimed his feelings. He had, moreover, insisted on telling her about his family and his position and prospects—a good sign. As to her own feelings, she was no longer in any doubt whatever. She loved him, and in loving him the grey clouds that pressed down upon her life seemed to break and the rosy light of hope to pour in through the rift.

She duly reached York and found Mrs Palmer-Gore waiting for her on the platform. With her for two days she spent a pleasant holiday, enjoying the unwonted good-fellowship. The visit was to have lasted a week, but on the afternoon of the second day, there fell the first of the several blows that she was to experience, and her stay was brought to an abrupt termination.

They had just sat down to lunch when a telegram was handed to her. It was the first she had ever received. Excited and a trifle embarrassed, she hesitated to open it.

But when in answer to Mrs Palmer-Gore's kindly: 'Read it, dear. Don't mind us,' she learned its contents, all thought of herself was swept from her mind.

It was signed 'Oxley,' though whether it came from the solicitor or his wife she could not tell. It read: 'Terrible accident at Starvel. Your uncle injured. Return Thirsby and stay night with us.'

It was characteristic of the girl that her thoughts and feelings were all for old Simon Averill. Was the poor old man badly injured? Was he suffering? Could she do anything to help him? It was kind of the Oxleys to ask her to stay the night, but of course she could not do so. She must go out to Starvel and help with the nursing. Not one thought of the possible effect on herself of the disaster entered her mind. That the old man might die of his injuries and that she might be his heir never occurred to her. Nor did she repine at the cutting short of her first real and altogether wonderful holiday.

By Mrs Palmer-Gore's advice she wired to the Oxleys that she would be with them at 5.40 p.m., and after a hurried lunch she found herself once more in the train. During the journey she had time to ponder over her news. A 'terrible accident' at Starvel! What *could* have happened? It must surely be bad or that ominous word 'terrible' would not have been used. She began to invent possibilities. Had her uncle taken the wrong medicine, perhaps some awful burning stuff that would hurt him horribly? Or had he fallen downstairs or into the fire? Or cut himself and been unable to summon help?

She gave full rein to her imagination, but when she learned the truth she found it vastly more terrible than anything she had thought of. The Oxleys met her at the station, and having driven her to their home, broke the news.

It seemed that when about eleven o'clock that morning the baker was approaching Starvel to make his customary Thursday call, he had noticed a faint pall of smoke hanging in the sky above the hollow. On crossing the shoulder he had glanced down as usual into the curious circular dell, and had instantly been overwhelmed with incredulous amazement. There were the trees, the thin, stunted pines which surrounded the old house, but—*the house was gone!* The long line of slated roof which had stood out above the trees had absolutely vanished. No trace remained. At first sight the man thought that the entire building had disappeared, but a closer approach revealed blackened windowless walls surrounding a still smouldering interior, all that remained of the old place.

No sign of life appeared about the ruins, and the horror-stricken man was forced to the conclusion that all three occupants had lost their lives in the flames.

He drove hurriedly into Thirsby and gave the alarm, and soon Sergeant Kent of the local police force with some of his men, Dr Emerson, Mr Oxley and a number of others were hastening to the scene. They found matters as the baker had described, the smouldering ruins standing gaunt and sinister at the bottom of the dell, lonely and deserted, hidden from the surrounding country by the rim of the strange natural Hollow.

The fire had evidently raged with extraordinary fury. With the exception of an outhouse separate from the main building not a scrap of anything inflammable remained. Floors, roof, staircase, window sashes, all were gone. And in that glowing mass of red-hot debris within the

blackened and twisted walls lay, almost certainly, the bodies of Simon Averill, and of John and Flora Roper.

Anxious that Ruth should not have to learn the terrible news from the papers, Mr Oxley had returned to Thirsby and sent his wire. He had thought it best to make this only a preparation, intending that the full story should be broken more gently on the girl's arrival.

Ruth was terribly shocked and upset. It was the first time, since reaching years of discretion, that she had been brought in contact with tragedy and death, and she was appalled by its horror. She begged to be allowed to go out to Starvel, but neither of the Oxleys would hear of it, pointing out that a visit would only harrow her feelings, and that she could do nothing there to help.

As the long evening dragged away she found herself hoping against hope that Whymper would call. But there was no sign of him and she supposed he had not heard of her return.

Sergeant Kent, however, had heard of it, and about eight o'clock he called and asked to see her. He was a tall, rather brusque man, though in Oxley's presence he was polite enough. He questioned her as to the household and its personnel, but she had nothing to tell him which could throw any light on the tragedy.

The next day it was found possible to attempt some research work among the ruins, and by ten o'clock a number of men were engaged in removing the cooler portions of the débris. Ruth insisted that she must see the place for herself, and the Oxleys, not liking to let her go alone, drove her out in their car. But the terrible picture which met her eyes and the thought of what lay below the sinister mound where the men were working made her feel almost sick with horror. Her feelings too, had changed. Gone was her hatred of the place, and particularly of the three poor people who had met with such an appalling fate. She felt she had been wicked to hate them. Her uncle had been a recluse and fond of money no doubt. But in his own way he had always been kind to her. He had opened his door to her when she was a homeless child, and had since supported her without grudging the money she must have cost him. And he had been ill—continuously ill; and when people are ill they cannot help being depressed and a little trying to others. And the Ropers, had she not misjudged them also? In their own way, they, too, had always been kind to her. For the first time, Ruth saw that the lives of the couple must have been as dull and grey as her own. Though their jobs were underpaid, and rather thankless, they had not complained. And she, Ruth, had never shown an appreciation of their services. She saw now that she had really had no reason at all for hating them, and when she thought of their terrible death, her tears flowed. In silence she allowed Mrs Oxley to lead her back to the car and drive her to Thirsby.

On their way to the little town the second blow fell on the young girl, and coming so quickly on the first, left her weak and trembling. As they mounted the rim of the Hollow they saw a funeral approaching along a converging road. It was a sorry procession; only the hearse, and the vicar and Dr Emerson in the former's car. As the two ladies drew up for it to pass, the vicar also stopped, and he and the doctor came over to express their sympathy with Ruth.

'You will be sorry for poor Mr Giles, also, Miss Ruth,' the vicar went on. 'I understood you were kind enough to help him in his scientific researches.'

Ruth stared at him in horror.

'You don't mean,' she stammered, 'that Mr Giles is—is dead?'

'He died the day before yesterday, I'm sorry to say. After a short illness he passed away in his sleep. He had no suffering. But, only thirty-six! Truly, another tragedy of the War.'

Ruth was stunned. Markham Giles, also! To lose at one blow all four persons whom she had known best—the only four persons in the world she had known at all well! It was too much.

She pulled herself together, however, and insisted on following her friend's body to its last resting-place, but when she reached the Oxleys' house she broke down altogether. Mrs Oxley put her to bed and at last she sobbed herself to sleep.

That evening the charred remains of three human bodies were found within the tragic walls of Starvel.

2 *The Inquest*

When Ruth Averill awoke next morning she found that the overwhelming sense of sick horror which had weighed her down on the previous evening had lightened. She had been worn out in body from the shock and the nervous strain, but sleep had restored her physical wellbeing, and her mind reacted to her body. She was young, she was in perfect health, and—she was in love.

While her feelings of compassion for the trio who had lost their lives in so terrible a way was in no whit lessened, she would have been less than human had she not begun to look upon the tragedy as it affected herself. And here at once was something exciting and a little terrifying. What would happen to her now? She had hated her life at Starvel; would the life that lay before her be better or worse? Scarcely worse, she thought; any change must surely be for the better. She had intended while at York to make some inquiries about earning her own living so that she might leave Starvel. Now this was no longer a matter of choice; in some way she must learn to support herself. Vaguely she wondered if any of her uncle's money would come to her. But she dismissed the idea as too good to be true. Perhaps with luck there might be enough to keep her until she could train for some post, but even about this she could not be certain. However, Mr Oxley was kind and clever. She need not worry overmuch. He would advise her.

While making up her mind to rise and face what the day might bring forth, Ruth was greatly comforted by a visit from Mrs Oxley. That lady presently knocked to inquire if her charge were awake, and she was so kind and understanding and kissed her in such a motherly way that Ruth felt a glow of warmth in her heart. Mrs Oxley brought with her a tiny tray with the daintiest little tea service and the thinnest of bread and butter, and while Ruth enjoyed this unheard of luxury the elder woman sat on the bed and proceeded to feed the girl's mind with healing news. She mentioned, casually and yet with such a wealth of detail, that Mr Whympier had called on the previous evening to inquire for Miss Averill. With really praiseworthy ingenuity she spun out the subject for nearly ten minutes, then she went on to tell something of almost—though of course not quite—equal importance. Mr Oxley had wished her to say, in the strictest confidence—no one at this stage was supposed to know anything about it—but in order to relieve Ruth's mind, he thought he might tell her—that she was not to worry as to her future. He had drawn up old Mr Averill's will and there would be some money. Mr Oxley had not said how much, but Mrs Oxley was sure there would be enough. At all events Ruth was not to worry. And now, breakfast would be ready in half an hour and there was plenty of hot water in the bathroom.

During the morning Ruth went down into the little town and engaged in the melancholy business of buying mourning. Mr Oxley had lent her twenty pounds, explaining that she could repay him when she got her own money. This prospect of money coming to her made Ruth feel excited and important, and she could not refrain from day-dreaming about all the wonderful things she would do when she received it. It was well for her indeed that she had something so absorbing to take her mind off the ghastliness of the tragedy which surrounded her. In fact, if only Pierce Whympier had come to see her again, she would have been really happy. But, as she afterwards learned, the young architect was out of town on business all that morning.

During Sergeant Kent's call on the evening after the tragedy he had warned Ruth that she would be required to give evidence at the inquest. Now he came round to say that this was to be held in the courthouse at three o'clock that afternoon, and that she must be sure to be there in good time. The girl was naturally nervous at the prospect of giving evidence, which she had always heard was a terrible ordeal. But Mrs Oxley reassured her in her kindly way, explaining that she had nothing

to do but answer the questions she was asked, and promising that Mr Oxley would see that nothing untoward befell her.

Shortly before the hour, therefore, the little party approached the courthouse. The building was already crowded, but Mr Oxley's position as the leading solicitor of the town and Ruth's as one of the most important witnesses procured them an immediate entrance and places on the seats usually reserved for counsel. As Ruth looked round the small old-fashioned building she saw many familiar faces. There, surrounded by policemen and looking weighed down with importance and responsibility, was Sergeant Kent. He was moving restlessly about, whispering to various persons and consulting at times a sheaf of papers he held in his hand. Some of the policemen she recognised also. There was the young smiling one with the light blue eyes whom she had met so many times when shopping in the town, and his companion with the long drooping nose and the hollow cheeks. In the seat behind was Mr Snelgrove, the butcher, and Mr Pullar, of the shoe shop. That tall very thin man with the little moustache and the bald head was Mr Tarkington, the bank manager, and the slight, medium-sized man beside him was Mr Bloxham, the clerk whom he used to send out to Starvel with Mr Averill's money. The venerable-looking old gentleman with the short white beard who was just pushing to the front was Dr Emerson. And there—how could she have failed to see him before?—there, at the back of the court, was Pierce Whymper. He looked anxious and troubled, and though when she caught his eye and smiled, he smiled back, there was a something of embarrassment or reserve in his manner that seemed to her strange and disquieting. And just beside him—but a sudden shuffle took place about her, and looking in front of her, she saw that a stout thick-set man with a square face and a walrus moustache had entered from some invisible side door and was taking his seat in the judge's chair.

'Dr Lonsdale, the coroner,' Mrs Oxley whispered, and Ruth nodded. She was surprised to find that the affair began so tamely. She had expected an elaborate and picturesque ritual, but nothing of the kind took place. The coroner opened his bag, and taking out some papers, began to turn them over. Other persons sitting round the table before her also took out papers and shuffled them, while Sergeant Kent, turning round, shouted out 'Robert Judd!' so suddenly and loudly that Ruth jumped. Someone at the back of the court answered 'Here!' and was promptly ordered to come forward and enter the jury box. Other names were called—to some of which there was no reply—until all the places in the box were occupied. Then all stood up and stared vacantly at Kent while he murmured something about 'justly try and true deliverance make,' after which everyone sat down again.

'Have the jury viewed the remains?' asked the coroner, and Kent, answering, 'They're going to do it now, sir,' shepherded his charges out of the box and away through a door just behind it. Everyone began conversing in low tones except the coroner, who kept on steadily writing. Presently the jury trooped in again and the proceedings began in real earnest.

'Call Peter Spence!' Sergeant Kent shouted.

'Peter Spence!' repeated two or three policemen, and a stout redfaced man pushed to the front, and entering the witness box, was sworn.

Spence told his story in great detail. In answer to the sergeant's questions he explained that he drove a breadcart belonging to Messrs Hinkston of Thirsby, and that for over twelve years he had, three times a week, delivered bread at Starvel. He remembered the day before yesterday. On that day, about eleven in the morning when he was approaching Starvel to deliver bread, he had observed a cloud of smoke in the sky. On crossing the lip of the Hollow he happened to look down at the house. He was amazed to notice that the roof, which formerly showed up above the surrounding trees, had totally disappeared. He drove on quickly to the place, and then he saw that the house had been burnt down. Only the walls were standing. There was no one about. He hurried into Thirsby, and reported the matter to Sergeant Kent.

Simple as these facts were, their recital was a lengthy business. After each question a pause ensued while the coroner wrote a *précis* of the man's reply. Finally Dr Lonsdale, after vainly inviting the jury to ask the witness any questions, read over what he had written. Peter Spence, having agreed

that it was a correct transcript of his evidence, was asked to sign the document, and then allowed to step down.

The next witness was a lugubrious looking man in grey tweeds. He deposed that his name was Abel Hesketh, and that he was Town Officer of Thirsby. He also acted as chief of the fire brigade. On the Thursday in question he received a telephone message from Sergeant Kent, informing him that Starvel had been burnt down. He inquired if he should get the brigade out, but the sergeant answered that it would be of no use, the damage being already done. Sergeant Kent asked him to go with him to see the place. He did so, and he would describe what he saw. The entire buildings at Starvel were gutted except a detached outhouse at the opposite side of the yard. He had never seen such complete destruction. Nothing that could be burnt was left. Between the walls the débris was still a red-hot glowing mass. In answer to the coroner, he thought it quite impossible to say either where or how the fire had originated. There was no wind that night, and the outbreak, once started, would creep through the entire building.

Hesketh went on to say that the very heavy rain which fell on the following night had cooled down the red-hot interior, enabling his men to search the ruins. They had come on the charred remains of three human beings. Yes, he could say just where the remains were found. The house was in the shape of the inverted letter ‘##’ with the shorter wing pointing to the west and the longer to the south. At the extremity of the shorter wing—in the north-western corner—were two bodies. The third body was about ten feet from the end of the southern wing. All the bodies were unrecognisable, but he assumed they were those of the three inmates of the house.

After the bodies had been removed he continued his investigations, but he found nothing of interest except a safe, which was in the southern wing, not far from the single body. It was locked, and he had set it up on a pile of débris so that the expert that he understood Sergeant Kent was getting to open it should be able more conveniently to carry out the work.

Sergeant Kent corroborated the evidence of the last two witnesses in so far as their testimony concerned himself, and added that an expert from Hellifield had that morning opened the safe. In it he had found £1952 in sovereigns and a mass of burnt papers.

‘It seems to me an extraordinary thing,’ the coroner remarked when he had noted these details, ‘that a fire of such magnitude could take place without being seen. I quite understand that the Hollow is deep enough to hide the actual flames, but there must have been a tremendous glare reflected from the sky which would have been visible for miles round. How do you account for that, Sergeant, or can you account for it?’

‘As a matter of fact, sir, it was noticed by at least three people, and I have one of them here in case you would like to call him. But I agree with you, sir, that it is very strange that it was not more generally observed. All I can suggest is that it was a clear night with a quarter moon, and there wouldn’t, therefore, be such a glare as if it had been quite dark or if there had been clouds to reflect the glow. Then, as you know, sir, this is a quiet district, and it would be only by chance that anyone would be awake or looking out at the time.’

‘Who were the three who saw it?’

‘First, sir, there was James Stokes, a tramp. He was sleeping in one of Mr Herbert Reid’s outhouses at Low Tolworth, about a mile and a half to the west across the moor. He said nothing about it at the time because he thought it wasn’t his business and he didn’t want his whereabouts inquired into. But he mentioned it in Thirsby in the morning and it came to my ears, though not before the baker had reported. I have Stokes here, if you wish to call him. Then, sir, it was seen by Mrs Eliza Steele, a labourer’s wife living just outside the town on the Hellifield Road. Her husband was ill and she was sitting up attending to him. She did nothing about it because she was busy with her husband and the glare looked far away. She said she thought those nearer it would do all that was possible. The third party, or rather parties, were the two Miss Lockes, elderly ladies who live alone about a mile on the road to Cold Pickerby. Miss Julia saw the glare and awoke her sister Miss Elmina, but

they thought the same as Mrs Steele, that they were not called on to do anything, as they would only get to the town to find that everyone knew about it and that the brigade had gone out.'

'I can understand that attitude,' the coroner admitted. 'It is a pity, however, that no one noticed it in time to give a warning, though indeed it is doubtful whether a warning would have been of any use. I will hear the man Stokes.'

But the tramp had little to say, and nothing which threw any light on the subject of the inquiry. He had seen a glow through the door of the outhouse and had looked out. From the direction of Starvel great masses of smoke were belching up, with a bright flickering glare and occasional jets of fire. The night was calm, and even at the distance of a mile and a half he could hear the roaring and crackling of the flames. That was about four in the morning.

Ruth's feelings were harrowed by these recitals, which seemed to bring home the tragedy to her in all its grim starkness. But she had not time to dwell on the terrible pictures, as after the tramp had signed his deposition and stepped down from the box, her own name was called.

With her heart beating rapidly she left her seat and entered the little pulpit-like enclosure. There she stood while the sergeant repeated a phrase about truth, and then, having given her name, she was told to sit down. The coroner bent towards her.

'I am sorry, Miss Averill,' he said kindly, 'to have to ask you to attend and give evidence in this tragic inquiry, but I promise you I shall not keep you longer than I can help. Now, Sergeant.'

In spite of this reassuring beginning, Ruth soon began to think Sergeant Kent's questions would never cease.

Half the things he asked seemed to have no connection whatever with the tragedy. She stated that she was the late Simon Averill's niece, the daughter of his brother Theodore, that she was aged twenty, and that she had come to Starvel when she was four. She told of her schooldays in Leeds, saying that it was now over a year since she had returned to Starvel and that she had lived there ever since.

Her uncle had recently been in very poor health. She thought his heart was affected. At all events, to save climbing the stairs he had had a room on the first floor fitted up as a bed-sitting room. For the last year he had not been downstairs and some days he did not get up. Recently he had been particularly feeble, and she told of his condition when she saw him two mornings before the tragedy. Then she described her visit to York, mentioning Mrs Palmer-Gore's invitation and the episode of the ten pounds.

There seemed no end to Sergeant Kent's inquisition. He switched over next to the subject of the house and elicited the facts that her uncle's and the Ropers' beds were situated in the extremities of the southern and western wings respectively.

'You heard the last witness describe where the bodies were found,' he went on. 'Would I be correct in saying that if Mr Averill and the Ropers had been in bed when the fire took place their bodies would have been found in just those positions?'

Ruth assented, and then the sergeant asked how the house was lighted. There was oil, Ruth told him, oil for the lamps other than Mr Averill's and for the cooker which was used sometimes instead of the range. There was also petrol. Her uncle's sight was bad and he used a petrol lamp. The oil and petrol were kept in a cellar. This cellar was under the main building, and if a fire were to start there, in her opinion the whole house would become involved. The lamps were attended to by Roper, who had always been most careful in handling them.

'Now Miss Averill,' the sergeant became more impressive than ever, 'I think you said that during the last fourteen months, when you were living at Starvel, Roper and his wife were in charge of the house?'

'Yes, they were there when I came back from school.'

'Now, tell me, during all that time have you ever known either of them the worse for drink?'

'Oh, no,' Ruth answered, surprised at the question. 'No, never.'

‘You have never even noticed the smell of drink from either of them?’ the sergeant persisted.

‘No.’ Ruth hesitated. ‘At least—that is—’

‘Yes?’ went on the sergeant encouragingly.

‘Once or twice Roper has smelt of whisky, but he was never the least bit the worse of it.’

‘But you have smelt it. Was that recently?’

‘Yes, but Roper explained about it. He said he felt a cold coming on and had taken some whisky in the hope of getting rid of it.’

‘Quite so. And how long ago was that?’

‘A couple of times within the last fortnight, perhaps once or twice before that.’ But to Ruth her answer did not seem quite fair, and she added: ‘But he was as sober as you and I are. I never saw him the least bit drunk.’

‘I follow you,’ the sergeant answered, and began to ask questions about Mrs Roper. Here Ruth could truthfully say that she had never even smelled drink, and she insisted on giving each of the deceased an excellent character.

The sergeant next attempted to draw from her an opinion as to how the fire might have originated. Did Mr Averill read late in bed? Might he have knocked over his petrol lamp? Could he have fallen in the fire? Did he take a nightcap of whisky? And so forth. But Ruth had no ideas on the subject. Any accident might have happened, of course, but she didn’t think any that he had suggested were likely. As to her uncle taking drink, he was a strict teetotaler.

This ended Ruth’s examination. None of the jurors wished to ask her any questions, and after her evidence had been read over to her and she had signed it, she was allowed to return to her seat with the Oxleys.

Dr Emerson was the next witness. He deposed that he had examined the remains disinterred from the debris. It was, of course, quite impossible to identify them, but so far as he could form an opinion of the body found in the southern wing it was that of an elderly, tall, slightly built man and the others were those of a man and a woman of medium height and middle age. These would correspond to Mr Averill and the Ropers respectively, and so far as he was concerned he had no doubt whatever that the bodies in question were theirs.

Questioned as to the conditions obtaining at Starvel before the fire, Dr Emerson said that for the last four years he had not attended Mr Averill. At his advancing age he found it too much to visit outlying patients, and Dr Philpot had taken over almost all of them.

‘Is Dr Philpot here?’ the coroner asked.

‘Dr Philpot is suffering from influenza at present,’ Dr Emerson returned, though it was to Sergeant Kent that the question had been addressed. ‘I saw him this morning. He wished to attend, but I persuaded him not to run the risk. It would have been most unwise. He had a temperature of over 101.’

‘I’m sorry to hear he is laid up. But I don’t suppose he could have helped us. I should have liked to ask him about Mr Averill’s condition and so forth, but it doesn’t really matter.’

‘Well,’ Dr Emerson returned, ‘I can tell you a little about that, if I should be in order in mentioning it. I attended him for some eight years, during the last two of which he aged very considerably, growing slowly and steadily weaker. Without going into details I may say that he had an incurable complaint which must eventually have killed him. Four years ago he was already feeble, and since then he can only have become gradually worse.’

‘Thank you, Dr Emerson, that was what I wanted to know. Would you say that his condition rendered him liable to sudden weakness during which he might have dropped his lamp or had some similar accident?’

‘I should say so decidedly.’

A Miss Judith Carr was next called. She proved to be a rather loudly-dressed young woman whom Ruth had not seen before. She was pretty in a coarse way, and entered the witness-box and took her seat with evident self-confidence.

Her name, she admitted heartily, was Judith Carr, and she was barmaid at the Thirsdale Arms, the largest hotel in Thirsby. She knew Mr Roper, the attendant at Starvel. He occasionally called for a drink, usually taking one or at most two small whiskies. She remembered the evening of the fire. That evening about seven o'clock Mr Roper had come into the bar. He seemed to have had some drink, but was not drunk. He asked for a small Scotch, and believing he was sober enough she had given it to him. He had taken it quickly and gone out.

The last witness was a young man with bright red hair who answered to the name of George Mellows. He was, he said, a farmer living at Ivybridge, a hamlet lying some miles beyond Starvel. On the day before the tragedy he had been over in Thirsby on business, and he had left the town in his gig shortly after seven to drive home. He had not passed beyond the lights of the town when he had overtaken Mr Roper, whom he knew. Roper was staggering, and it was not difficult to see that he was drunk. The deceased was by no means incapable, but he had undoubtedly taken too much. Mellows had stopped and offered him a lift, and Roper had thanked him and with some difficulty had climbed into the gig. He had talked in a maudlin way during the drive. Mellows had gone a little out of his way and had set the other down at the gate of Starvel. Roper had opened the gate without difficulty, and had set off towards the house, walking fairly straight. Mellows had then driven home. That was close on to eight, and there was no sign then of a fire.

When Mellows had signed his deposition and returned to his seat, the coroner made a little speech to the jury. He said that everyone must feel appalled at the terrible tragedy which had happened so near to them all. The police had been unable to find relatives of any of the deceased other than Miss Averill, who had given evidence that day, and he took that opportunity of conveying to her their respectful sympathy in her loss. He would remind the jury that their duty on this occasion was threefold: first, to state the identity of the deceased if they were reasonably convinced by the evidence on this point; second, to find the cause of death in each case, and third, to state whether, in their opinion, blame attached to any person or persons, and if so, to whom. He did not think their task would be difficult. On neither of the first two points was there any doubt. He had only one observation to make with regard to the third point—the fixing of responsibility for the catastrophe. It had been shown that the manservant, John Roper, had been to some extent under the influence of drink on the evening in question. The suggestion, of course, was that some careless act of Roper's might have caused the fire. Now, while he approved the action of the police in bringing out this matter—they could not have done anything else—he must point out to the jury that there was no evidence that Mr Roper's condition had had anything to do with the fire. If anything, the evidence tended in the opposite direction. The position of the remains suggested that the three unfortunate people had been burnt in their beds, and if this was so it seemed to involve the presumption that they had been suffocated by the smoke while asleep. If the jury accepted this view they would see that it ruled out the possibility of any accident with lamps, or by falling in the fire or by igniting petrol or paraffin oil. The argument was, of course, not conclusive, but he thought it tended as he had said. In any case he should be sorry that a slur should be cast on the memory of Mr Roper, to whose zeal and efficiency different witnesses had testified, unless that slur were really deserved. It was, of course, for the jury to decide, but he suggested that they might find that Simon Ralph Averill, John Roper and Flora Roper had lost their lives in a fire at Starvel on the night of the fifteenth of September, the cause of which there was no evidence to show.

Without leaving the box the jury found as the coroner directed, the verdict was entered on the records and signed, and the inquest was over.

3

Mr Tarkington Develops a Theory

As Ruth emerged from the comparative gloom of the courthouse into the bright September sunshine her spirits seemed to rise. A reaction had set in from the strain of the inquiry, with its continuous suggestion of the hideous details of the tragedy. Now with the ending of the inquest it seemed to her that the terrible affair was all but over. The final episode, the funerals, would not be anything like so harrowing. Not since the first hint of disaster had come in the shape of Mr Oxley's telegram to York had she felt so lighthearted and in love with life. She seemed to have awakened from an evil dream.

It was therefore no indication of heartlessness that she should glance eagerly around as she and her friends advanced from the shadow of the old building into the little square. She was young and the claims of the living were more to her than those of the dead. And who will reproach her for the thrill of pleasurable excitement which she experienced as the sight she was hoping for met her eyes? There was Pierce Whympers evidently waiting for a chance of speaking to her. With a smile she invited him over, and he came and joined her. At the same moment Mr Tarkington, the thin hawk-like bank manager, whom she had seen in the courthouse, approached and spoke to Mr Oxley.

'Will you go on?' the latter said to his wife. 'I want to go round to the bank with Mr Tarkington. I'll follow in a few minutes.'

Mrs Oxley, Ruth and Whympers moved off in one direction, while Mr Oxley and Mr Tarkington disappeared in the other. For a time the trio chatted with animation, then Ruth grew gradually more silent, leaving the burden of the conversation to the others. She was in fact puzzled and a little hurt by a subtle change which she felt rather than noticed in Whympers's manner. He seemed somehow different from the last time she had seen him—that time in another existence when she had left Thirsby for her visit to York. Then he had been obviously eager for her company, anxious to talk to her, even before Mrs Oxley making no secret of his admiration and regard. But now, though he was just as polite as ever, his manner was less spontaneous, indeed at times she thought it almost embarrassed. It occurred to her that possibly the change might be in herself, and even when their ways parted at the turn to the church she had not completely made up her mind. But whatever the cause, a certain disappointment remained, and when she went up to change for dinner she had lost a good deal of the lightheartedness she had felt on emerging from the courthouse.

Mr Oxley, when he arrived shortly after, also showed a change of manner. He was a kindly, jovial man, fond of a joke and the sound of his own voice, but during dinner he was strangely silent and wore an expression of concern and disappointment. But he did not offer any explanation until the meal was over, and then he followed the ladies into the drawing-room and unburdened his mind.

'I am awfully sorry, Miss Ruth,' he began hesitatingly, 'but I am afraid I have brought you some more bad news. It's about money,' he added hurriedly as the girl turned a piteous glance towards him. 'I'll tell you exactly what has happened. You know, or perhaps you don't, that in spite of the way he lived, your uncle was a rich man. As his solicitor I have known that for many a year, but I had no idea of just how much he had. Tarkington knows I was his solicitor and he was talking about it just now. He tells me that Mr Averill must have been worth between thirty and forty thousand pounds when he died. Of course one would naturally suppose that the money was in securities of some kind, but here is my terrible news. Tarkington assures me that it was not, that practically the whole sum was in Mr Averill's safe.'

'Oh, Arthur!' Mrs Oxley burst out. 'You can't mean that it's gone.'

‘I’m afraid I do,’ her husband answered. ‘It’s awful to think about, but there were only some five hundred pounds in the bank. The rest was in Mr Averill’s safe in notes and gold. The nineteen hundred odd pounds in gold are there all right, but the whole of the paper money has been destroyed.’

‘Oh, how perfectly dreadful! But surely it can be replaced? Surely something can be done by the bank?’

Mr Oxley shook his head.

‘Nothing, I’m afraid. I talked it over with Tarkington. The money is a total loss.’

Mrs Oxley took Ruth into her arms.

‘You poor child,’ she commiserated. ‘I just can’t tell you how sorry I am.’

But Ruth took the news coolly.

‘Dear Mrs Oxley,’ she answered. ‘How kind you are! But indeed I look upon this as a comparatively little thing. I shall have far, far more than I ever expected. I want to get some work, and I shall have plenty to support me while I am training and perhaps even a little after that. I am more than content.’

Mrs Oxley kissed her and commended her spirit, though she felt the girl’s attitude was due more to her unworldliness and ignorance of life than to courage under disappointment. She wished to change the subject, but Ruth asked to have her position made clear to her and begged the others’ advice as to her future. The Oxleys, delighted by her common sense, willingly agreed to discuss the situation, and after a long talk a proposal of Mr Oxley’s was provisionally agreed to.

It appeared that, assuming the old man’s money had really been lost, Ruth’s capital would amount to about £2400. Of this Mr Oxley was to invest all but £100, so as to bring Ruth about £130 per annum. The remaining £100 was to be spent in taking a secretarial course at one of the London training colleges. With the backing of the £130 a year and what she could earn for herself she ought, Mr Oxley believed, to be quite comfortably off. ‘But you must,’ Mr Oxley went on, ‘stay here for as long as you like, until you have rested and got over the shock of this terrible affair.’

Mrs Oxley warmly seconded this invitation, and Ruth thankfully accepted it. It was true that she was anxious to start work as soon as possible, and life in London and the undergoing of the course of training appeared to her as a glorious and thrilling adventure. But even more anxious still was she to meet Pierce Whymper and find out if there really was a change in his feelings towards her. At the time she had imagined that there was, but now she thought that perhaps she had been mistaken and that after the inquest he had simply been suffering from a headache or some other trifling indisposition. That he loved her she had not the slightest doubt, and she could not bring herself to go away until she was sure that no stupid, unnecessary misunderstanding should have been allowed to come between them.

Two days later she met him in the main street of the little town. She stopped to chat and he turned about and walked with her, and presently they had tea at the local confectioner’s. But the interview left her more puzzled than ever. Her belief that Whymper loved her was confirmed beyond any doubt by his manner, by the way he looked at her, by the tones of his voice. But it was evident to her that something was weighing on his mind which prevented him making the proposal which, if the truth must be admitted, she had been expecting. He gave her the impression that he would speak if he could, but that he was being held back by matters outside his own control. And the same state of mind was evident at their subsequent encounters, until Ruth’s pride asserted itself and she grew colder and more distant and their intimacy bade fair to come gradually to an end.

She would have made a move for the metropolis to begin her course of training had not Mrs Oxley, from what was probably a quite mistaken sense of kindness, suggested that a rest would be good for her after the shocks she had experienced. On the excuse of desiring the girl’s assistance in the remodelling of her garden, which, owing to the difficulty of obtaining labour, she was doing with her own hands, the good lady invited her to stay on for a few weeks. Ruth did not like to refuse, and she settled down with the intention of remaining at Thirsby for at least another month.

During the month the little town also settled down again after its excitements and alarms, and events once more began to pursue the even tenor of their ways. The Starvel Hollow Tragedy ceased to be a nine days' wonder and was gradually banished from the minds of the townspeople, until an event happened which was to bring up the whole matter again, and that in a peculiarly sensational and tragic manner.

One morning in mid-October, some five weeks after the fire, Mr Tarkington called to see his friend Oxley. The bank manager's thin face wore a serious and mystified expression, which at once informed Mr Oxley that something out of the ordinary had occurred to disturb the other's usual placid calm.

'Good morning, Oxley,' said Mr Tarkington in his thin, measured tones. 'Are you busy? I should like a word with you.'

'Come along in, Tarkington,' the solicitor rejoined heartily. 'I'm not doing anything that can't wait. Sit you down and have a spot.'

'Thanks, no, I'll not drink, but I'll take one of these cigarettes if I may.' He drew the client's big leather covered chair nearer to Mr Oxley and went on: 'A really extraordinary thing has just happened, Oxley, and I thought I'd like to consult you about it before taking any action—if I do take action.'

Mr Oxley took a cigarette from the box from which the other had helped himself.

'What's up?' he asked, as he struck a match.

'It's about that terrible Starvel affair, the fire, you know. I begin to doubt if the matter is really over, after all.'

'Not over? What on earth do you mean?'

'I'll tell you, and it is really a most disturbing thought. But before you can appreciate my news I must explain to you how Averill carried on his bank business. The poor fellow was a miser, as you know, a miser of the most primitive kind. He loved money for itself—just to handle and to look at and to count. His safe was just packed full of money. But of course you know all this, and that it was through this dreadful weakness of his that that poor girl lost what should have come to her.'

'I know,' Mr Oxley admitted.

'Averill's income passed through the bank, and that's how I come to be aware of the figures. He had between sixteen and seventeen hundred a year and it came from three sources. First he had a pension; he had held a good job with some company in London. That amounted to about three hundred pounds. Next he had an annuity which brought him in £150. But the major portion came from land—land on the outskirts of Leeds which had been built over and which had become a very valuable property. In this he had only a life interest—not that that affects my story, though it explains why that poor girl didn't get it.'

'I know about that property,' Mr Oxley interjected. 'I've had a deal to do with it one way and another. The old man got it through his wife and it went back to her family at his death.'

'I imagined it must be something of the kind. Well, to continue. Averill's income, as I said, was passed through the bank. He received it all in cheques or drafts and these he would endorse and send to me for payment. He had a current account, and my instructions were that when any cheque came I was to pay in to this account until it stood at something between £40 and £60—whatever would leave an even £20 over—and I was to send the surplus cash in £20 notes out to Starvel. Averill evidently looked upon this as a sort of revenue account and paid all his current expenses out of it. It never of course rose above the £60 and seldom fell below £20. To carry on my simile, any monies that were over after raising the current account to £60 he considered capital, and they went out to swell the hoard in the safe at Starvel. In addition he kept a sum of £500 on deposit receipt. I don't know exactly why he did so, but I presume it was as a sort of nest-egg in the event of his safe being burgled. You follow me?'

'I follow you all right, but, by Jove! it was a queer arrangement.'

‘Everything the poor old man did was queer, but, as you know, he was—’ Mr Tarkington shook his head significantly. ‘However, to go on with my story. These monies that were to be sent out to Starvel I used to keep until they reached at least a hundred, and then I used to send a clerk out with the cash. The mission usually fell to Bloxham—you know Bloxham, of course? Averill liked him and asked me to send him when I could. Bloxham has seen into the safe on two or three occasions, and it is from him I know that it was packed with notes as well as the gold.’

‘I never can get over all that money being burnt,’ Mr Oxley interjected. ‘It makes me sick to think of even now. Such stupid, needless, wicked waste!’

Mr Tarkington took no notice of this outburst.

‘It happened that about a week before the tragedy, he went on in his precise manner, ‘a cheque for £346 came in from the Leeds property. The current account was then standing at £27, so I paid £26 into it, raising it to £53, and sent Bloxham with the balance, £320, out to Starvel. The money was in sixteen twenties, the numbers of which were kept. As I said, it was one of the old man’s peculiarities that he liked his money in £20 notes. I suppose it made it easier to hoard and count. Bloxham saw Averill lock these notes away in his safe and brought me the old man’s receipt.’

Mr Tarkington paused to draw at his cigarette, then continued:

‘In my report about the affair to our headquarters in Throgmorton Avenue, I mentioned among other things that these notes, giving the numbers, had been destroyed in the fire. Well, Oxley, what do you think has happened? I heard from headquarters today and they tell me that one of those notes has just been paid in!’

Mr Oxley looked slightly bewildered.

‘Well, what of it?’ he demanded. ‘I don’t follow. You reported that these notes had been destroyed in the fire. But wasn’t that only a guess? How did you actually know?’

‘It was a guess, of course, and I didn’t actually know,’ Mr Tarkington agreed. ‘But I think it was a justifiable guess. I am acquainted with Averill’s habits; he made no secret of them. Monies he paid out he paid by cheque on the current account—everything that one can think of went through it, even the Ropers’ salaries. The cash sent out to Starvel went into the hoard.’

‘All of it didn’t.’

‘Why, what do you mean?’

‘The ten pounds to Ruth Averill didn’t.’

Mr Tarkington seemed slightly taken aback.

‘Well, that’s true,’ he admitted slowly. ‘I forgot about the ten pounds. I—’

‘And there’s another twenty that didn’t,’ Mr Oxley continued, ‘and that’s the twenty that turned up in London. I don’t get your idea, Tarkington. Just what is in your mind?’

Mr Tarkington moved uneasily in the big arm-chair.

‘It seems far-fetched, I know, and I hardly like putting it into words, but are you satisfied in your own mind that business was all just as it appeared to be?’

‘What? The fire? How do you mean “as it appeared to be”?’

‘That it really was the accident we thought it.’

Mr Oxley whistled.

‘Oh, come now, Tarkington, that’s going a bit far, isn’t it? Do you mean arson? What possible grounds could you have for suggesting such a thing?’

‘I don’t exactly suggest it; I came to ask your opinion about it. But what passed through my mind was this: There have been several burglaries lately—skilful burglaries, and, as you know, the police have been completely at fault. Averill was universally believed to be wealthy—the legend of the safe was common property. Is it impossible that some of these burglars might have decided to make an attempt on Starvel? Remember the situation was one of the loneliest in England. Assume that they got in and that something unexpected happened—that they were surprised by Roper, for example. In the resulting disturbance Roper might easily have been killed—possibly quite accidentally. The intruders

would then be fighting for their lives as well as their fortunes. And in what better way could they do it than to murder the other members of the household; lay them on their beds and burn the house down?

Mr Oxley did not reply. The idea was chimerical, fantastic, absurd, and yet—it was certainly possible. There *had* been a number of daring burglaries within the last few months, which were generally believed to be the work of one gang, and in no single instance had the police been able to effect an arrest. The belief in the old miser's hoard *was* universal, and from the point of view of the thief, Starvel would be one of the easiest cribs to crack. Moreover, on second thoughts Tarkington's suggestion as to the origin of the fire was not so fanciful, after all. The safe containing the money was in Averill's bedroom, and the old man would have to be quieted in some way before it could be opened. Roper's attention might easily have been attracted, and the burglars, either by accident or in self-defence, might have killed him. If so, the fire would be their obvious way of safety. Yes, the thing was possible. All the same there wasn't a shred of evidence that it had happened.

'But, my dear fellow,' Oxley said at last, 'that's all my eye! Very ingenious and all that, but you haven't a scrap of evidence for it. Why invent a complicated, far-fetched explanation when you have a simple one ready to hand? Sounds as if you had been reading too many detective stories lately.'

Tarkington did not smile with his friend.

'You think it nonsense?' he asked earnestly. 'You think I needn't tell the police about the note?'

'I don't think you have any evidence: not evidence to justify even a suspicion. You've no real reason to suppose Averill did not hand that twenty-pound note to someone from whom it passed to the man who paid it in.'

'To whom, for example?'

'I don't know. Neither of us knows what visitors the old man might have had. But that doesn't prove he had none.'

Mr Tarkington seemed far from satisfied. He threw away his cigarette and took another from the box, handling it delicately in his long, thin fingers. He moved nervously in his chair and then said in a low voice:

'I suppose then, Oxley, I may take it that you were quite satisfied about that business—I mean at the time?'

Mr Oxley looked at his friend in surprise.

'Good gracious, Tarkington, what bee have you got in your bonnet? Do you mean satisfied that the fire was an accident and that those three poor people were burned? Of course I was. It never occurred to me to doubt it.'

The other seemed slightly relieved.

'I hope sincerely that you're right,' he answered. 'But I may tell you that I wasn't satisfied—neither at the time nor yet since. That's the reason that when I heard about the note I came at once to consult you. There's a point which you and the coroner and the police and everyone concerned seem to have overlooked,' he dropped his voice still further and became very impressive. 'What about the papers that were burnt in the safe?'

Mr Oxley was surprised at his friend's persistence.

'Well, what in Heaven's name about them? For the life of me I don't see what you're driving at.' 'Haven't you ever been in Averill's bedroom?'

'Yes. What of it?'

'Did you notice the safe?'

'Not particularly.'

'Well, I've both been there and noticed it,' He bent forward, and his thin face seemed more hawk-like than ever as he said impressively: 'Oxley, that safe was fireproof!'

Mr Oxley started.

'Good Heavens, Tarkington! Are you sure of that?' he queried sharply.

‘Not absolutely,’ the other replied. ‘It was certainly my strong opinion and if I had been asked before the fire I should have had no doubt. When I heard the evidence at the inquest I concluded I had made a mistake. But now this affair of the twenty-pound note has reawakened all my suspicions.’ He paused, but as Oxley did not reply, continued: ‘Perhaps I’ve got a bee in my bonnet as you said, but I’m now wondering if Roper’s drunkenness doesn’t support the theory? Could he not have been enticed into Thirsby by some member of the gang and treated so as to make him sleep well and not hear what was going on? Remember, he was an absolutely temperate man.’

‘Not absolutely. Ruth had smelt drink on other occasions.’

‘You are right. Perhaps that is a trifle far-fetched. But what do you think on the main point, Oxley? Ought I to tell the police of my suspicions?’

Mr Oxley rose and began to pace the room. Then he went to the window and stood for some moments looking out. Finally he returned to his chair, and sat down again.

‘I declare, Tarkington, I think you ought,’ he said slowly. ‘When you first made your—I might perhaps say—your amazing suggestion I confess I thought it merely grotesque. But if you are right about the safe it certainly puts a different complexion on the whole business. I take it it’s not too late to ascertain? The safe is not too much damaged to trace the maker and find out from him?’

‘I should think the police could find the maker quite easily.’

‘Well, I think you should tell them. If you are wrong no harm is done. If not, there are murderers to be brought to justice and perhaps a fortune to be recovered for Ruth.’

Mr Tarkington rose.

‘I agree with you, Oxley. I’ll go down to the police station and tell Kent now.’

Mr Oxley waved him back into his seat.

‘Steady a moment,’ he said. ‘Don’t be in such a hurry.’ He drew slowly at his cigarette while the other sat down and waited expectantly.

‘It seems to me,’ went on Mr Oxley, ‘that if your suspicions are correct the thing should be kept absolutely quiet. Nothing should be said or done to put the criminals on their guard. Now Kent, you know as well as I do, is just a bungling ass. My suggestion is that we both take the afternoon off and go see Valentine. I know him pretty well and we could ring him up and make an appointment.’

‘Valentine, the chief constable of the County?’

‘Yes. He’s as cute as they’re made and he’ll do the right thing.’

‘Kent will never forgive us if we pass him over like that.’

‘Kent be hanged,’ Mr Oxley rejoined. ‘Can you come in by the three-thirty?’

‘Yes, I’ll manage it.’

‘Right. Then I shall ring up Valentine.’

Five hours later the two friends found their way into the strangers’ room of the Junior Services Club in Leeds. There in a few moments Chief Constable Valentine joined them, and soon they were settled in a private room with whisky and sodas at their elbows and three of the excellent cigars the chief constable favoured between their lips.

Mr Tarkington propounded his theory in detail, explaining that he was not sure enough of his facts even to put forward a definite suspicion, but that he and his friend Oxley agreed that Major Valentine ought to know what was in his mind. The major could then, if he thought fit, investigate the affair.

That the chief constable was impressed by the statement was obvious. He listened with the keenest interest, interjecting only an occasional ‘By Jove!’ as Mr Tarkington made his points. Then he thanked the two men for their information, and promised to institute inquiries into the whole matter without delay.

Two days later Mr Tarkington received a letter from Major Valentine saying that he thought it only fair to inform him in the strictest confidence that his belief that the safe was fireproof was well founded, that he, the chief constable, strongly suspected that more had taken place at Starvel on that

tragic night than had come out in the inquest, and that as he considered the matter was rather outside the local men's capacity he had applied to Scotland Yard for help in the investigation.

Mr Tarkington, honouring the spirit rather than the letter of the chief constable's communication, showed the note to Mr Oxley, and the two men sat over the former's study fire until late that night, discussing possible developments in the situation.

4

Inspector French Goes North

The stone which Messrs Tarkington and Oxley had thrown into the turbid waters of the British Police Administration produced ripples which, like other similar wave forms, spread slowly away from their point of disturbance. One of these ripples, penetrating into the grim fastness of the Criminal Investigation Department of New Scotland Yard, had the effect of ringing the bell of a telephone on the desk of Detective Inspector Joseph French and of causing that zealous and efficient officer, when he had duly applied his ear to the instrument, to leave his seat and proceed without loss of time to the room of his immediate superior.

‘Ah, French,’ Chief Inspector Mitchell remarked on his entry. ‘You should be about through with that Kensington case, I fancy?’

‘Just finished with it, sir,’ French answered. ‘I was putting the last of the papers in order when you rang.’

‘Well, you’ve had a lot of trouble with it and I should have liked to have given you a breather. But I’m afraid I can’t.’

‘Something come in, sir?’

‘A Yorkshire case. A place called Thirsby, up on the moors not far, I understand, from Hellifield. We’ve just had a request for a man and I can’t spare anyone else at present. So it’s you for it.’

‘What is the case, sir?’

‘Suspected murder, robbery and arson. The people there appear to know very little about it and the whole thing may turn out a mare’s nest. But they’re darned mysterious about it—say they don’t want it to be known that inquiries are being made and suggest our man might go to the Thirsdale Arms, the local hotel, in the guise of an angler or an artist. So, if you’re a fisherman, French, now’s your chance. You’re to call down at the police station after dark, when Sergeant Kent, who’s in charge, will give you the particulars.’

It was with mixed feelings that Inspector French received his instructions. He delighted in travelling and seeing new country, and the Yorkshire moors comprised a district which he had often heard spoken of enthusiastically, but had never visited. He was by no means averse, moreover, to getting away from town for a few days. It would be a welcome break in the monotony of the long winter. But on the other hand he loathed working away from headquarters, bereft of his trained staff and of the immediate backing of the huge machine of which he was a cog. Local men, he conceded, were ‘right enough,’ but they hadn’t the knowledge, the experience, the technique to be really helpful. And then the ‘Yard’ man in the country was usually up against jealousies and a more or less veiled obstruction, and to the worries of his case he had to add the effort always to be tactful and to carry his professed helpers with him.

However, none of these considerations affected his course of action. He had his orders and he must carry them out. He completed the filing of the papers in the Kensington murder case, handed over one or two other matters to his immediate subordinate, and taking the large despatch case of apparatus without which he never travelled, went home to inform his wife of his change of plans and pack a suitcase with his modest personal requirements. Then he drove to St Pancras and caught the 12.15 p.m. restaurant car express to the north.

He was neither an artist nor an angler, and in any case he considered the month of November was scarcely a propitious time for worthies of either type to be abroad. Therefore beyond dressing in a more countrified style than he would have effected in town, he attempted no disguise.

He changed at Hellifield and took the branch line which wound up in a north-easterly direction into the bleak hills and moors of western Yorkshire. Six o'clock had just struck when he reached the diminutive terminus of Thirsby.

A porter bearing the legend 'Thirsdale Arms' on his cap was at the station, and having surrendered his baggage, French followed the man on foot down the main street of the little town to a low, straggling, old-fashioned building with half-timbered gables and a real old swinging sign. Here a stout and cheery proprietor gave him a somewhat voluble welcome, and soon he was the temporary tenant of a low and dark, but otherwise comfortable bedroom, while an appetising odour of frying ham indicated that the *pièce de résistance* of his supper was in full preparation.

He smoked a contemplative pipe in the bar, then about half past eight took his hat, and passing the landlord at the door, gave him a cheerful goodnight and said he was going for a walk before bed.

While he did not intend to hide the fact of his visit to Sergeant Kent, he had no wish to draw attention thereto. He believed that in a small town such things invariably get out, and to shroud them in an air of mystery was only to invite publicity. He therefore did not ask for a direction, but instead strolled through the streets until he saw the police station, walking quietly but openly to the door, he knocked. Two minutes later he was shaking hands with the sergeant in the latter's room.

'I'm sure I'm grateful to you for giving me the chance of a change from London,' French began in his pleasant, cheery way as he took the chair the other pulled forward to the fire. 'Will you join me in a cigar, or do you object to smoking in the office?'

The sergeant dourly helped himself from French's case, and gruffly admitted he was not above the use of tobacco after office hours. French seemed in no hurry to come to business, but chatted on about his journey and his impressions of the country, drawing the other out and deferring to his views in a way that was nothing less than flattering. Before ten minutes Kent had forgotten that his visitor was an interloper sent to him over his head because his superiors imagined that he was not good enough for his own job, and was thinking that this stranger, for a Londoner and a Yard man, was not as bad as he might reasonably have been expected to be. Under the soothing influences of flattery and good tobacco he gradually mellowed until, when French at last decided the time had come, he was quite willing to assist in any way in his power.

At French's request he gave him a detailed account of the tragedy together with a copy of the depositions taken at the inquest, and then went on to describe the bomb which Mr Tarkington had dropped when he mentioned his theories to Major Valentine.

'Chief Constable, he told me to find out what kind of safe it was in the house,' the sergeant went on. 'I knew, for I had seen it at the time, but I went out again to make sure. It was made by Carter & Stephenson of Leeds, number—' he referred to a well-thumbed notebook—'12,473. I went down to Leeds, and saw the makers, and they said the safe was twenty years old, but it was the best fireproof safe of its day. I asked them would the notes have burned up in it, and they said they wouldn't scarcely be browned, no matter how fierce the fire might be.'

'And what exactly was in the safe?'

'Just paper ashes and sovereigns. No whole papers; all was burned to ashes.'

'Could I see those ashes? Are any of them left?'

'I think so. We took out the sovereigns and left the rest. The safe is lying in the rubbish where we found it.'

French nodded, and for some minutes sat silent, drawing slowly at his cigar while he turned over in his mind the details he had learned. As he did so the words of Chief Inspector Mitchell recurred to him: 'The people down there don't appear to know much about it, and the whole thing may turn out to be a mare's nest.' Now, having heard the story, he wondered if this was not going to be another of his chief's amazing intuitions. It certainly looked as like a mare's nest as anything he had ever handled. The only shred of evidence for foul play was the safe builder's statement that their safe would protect papers even in the fiercest fire, and that statement left him cold. What else could the builders say?

They had sold the thing as fireproof; how could they now admit they had made a false claim? And this Tarkington's theory of the twenty-pound note was even less convincing. There was no real reason to believe that Averill had not handed it to his servant or to a visitor or sent it away by post. In fact, the whole tale was the thinnest he had listened to for many a day, and he saw himself taking a return train to St Pancras before many hours had passed.

But he had been sent up to make an investigation, and make an investigation he would. He rapidly planned his line of action. The first thing to be done was to get rid of this sergeant. He might be right enough for his own job, but French felt that he would be no help in an affair of this kind. Left to himself, he would go out and examine the house and then interview Tarkington. By that time he should have learned enough at least to decide whether or not to go on with the case. He turned to Kent.

'Your statement, Sergeant, has been so very complete that I do not believe there is anything left for me to ask you. But I think I should understand the affair even better if I went and had a look at the house. I'll do that tomorrow. But, much as I should like your company, I cannot ask you to come with me. I entirely agree with and admire your wisdom in keeping the affair secret, and if we were seen together the cat would be out of the bag. I will give out that I am a representative from the insurance companies and I think no suspicion will be aroused. If now you will kindly tell me where the place lies, I think that's all we can do in the meantime.'

Five minutes later French turned from the main street into the door of the Thirsdale Arms. The landlord was standing in the hall and French stopped in a leisurely way, as if ready for a chat. They discussed the weather for some moments, and then French asked the other if he would join him in a drink.

It was not long before they were seated before a glowing fire in the private bar, when French proceeded to account for himself.

'I like your country,' he began, 'what I've seen of it. I've been a bit run down lately, and though it's not the time one would choose for a holiday, my doctor thought I should take a week or two's rest. So, as I had a bit of business here I thought I would kill two birds with one stone and do my business and take my holiday at the same time. And about that bit of business I thought that if you would be good enough you could maybe give me some help.'

The landlord, evidently curious, was anxious to do anything in his power, and French, following out his theory that where absolute truth is inadmissible, deviations therefrom should be as slight as possible, went on confidentially:

'It's about a place called Starvel where there was a big fire recently. You know all about it, of course.' The landlord nodded eagerly. 'Well, I may tell you strictly between ourselves that I am a detective. A fire unaccounted for is a very disturbing matter to insurance companies, and I have been sent down to try to find the cause of the outbreak. I've seen the police sergeant, and he has very kindly promised to show me his notes of the inquest, but I should like more general information than that. I wondered if you could, perhaps, tell me something about the affair; about the people who lived in Starvel, and so on?'

With this beginning, and the help of whiskies and sodas and two more of his cigars French was soon in possession of all the landlord knew and surmised about the Starvel Hollow tragedy. But he learned nothing helpful. The man's story agreed with that of Sergeant Kent, though it was obvious that the idea of foul play had never entered his mind.

One thing he remarked on which Kent had not mentioned—about which indeed, as French afterwards learned, Kent knew nothing—and that was the incipient affair between Ruth Averill and Pierce Whymper. When French learned later on how slight this affair had been he was filled with amazement, as he had been so many times before, at the range and exhaustiveness of local gossip.

'Nice young fellow, Mr Pierce Whymper,' the landlord went on. 'He's a son of Mr Stephen Whymper, the Leeds surgeon, and a junior assistant of Nixon and Arbuthnot's, the church architects. He's here as clerk of works of the renovation of the church—a fine old church, this of ours! I got

to know Mr Whymper a bit, for he stayed here for a few days when he came first, and before he got lodgings. Our terms are a bit high for him, you know, for a constancy. They don't overpay these young fellows that are just starting on their jobs.'

'It's a fact,' French admitted. 'And how is the affair with the young lady getting on?'

'No one rightly knows. It seemed to be going on thick enough before the fire and then, somehow, it seemed to be cooled off. I suppose one of these here lovers' quarrels,' and the landlord smiled tolerantly, as one man of the world to another.

But whether or not the landlord was a man of the world, there was no doubt whatever that he was a thoroughly accomplished and successful gossip. French soon found that by the mere interjection of an occasional phrase he could obtain a detailed description of the life, habits and character of any of the inhabitants of Thirsby that he cared to name. Very willingly, therefore, he suggested more whisky and proffered further cigars, while he sat registering in his memory the impressions of his neighbours which the other sketched with such evident relish.

He was a likeable old fellow, the landlord, or so French thought. Though a gossip first and always, he was something of a philosopher and his outlook was human and kindly. The people he spoke of were real people, and French could picture them living in the little town and going about their businesses, with their loves and hates, their ambitions and their weaknesses. Old Mr Averill—well, the landlord hadn't a great opinion of him. He was dead, and one didn't ought to say too much about the dead, but there was no denying that he was mean—a regular miser, he was. The way he had treated that niece of his—as nice a young lady as ever stepped—was just a fair scandal. A young lady just grown up, like Miss Ruth was, should have a bit of pleasure sometimes, and the poor girl hadn't even decent clothes to wear. Mean, the landlord called it. And what use, he asked, growing oratorical, was the old man's money to him now? That was what he said—and he waved his cigar to give point to his remark—that was what he said: What had the old man got for all his screwing and saving? It would have paid him better ...

French insinuated the idea of Roper.

Roper, the landlord did not know so much about, though he had to confess he had not particularly liked him. Roper had a squint, and if French took the landlord's advice, he would just keep his weather eye open when dealing with a man with a squint. Roper was quiet enough and civil spoken, and they said he was good enough at his job, but he was close—very close. Sly, the landlord would call it, though, mind you, he hadn't known anything wrong about the man. Mrs Roper? He had only met her once. He didn't know much about her, but she was well enough spoken of. Neither of them could have had much of a time out at Starvel, but they had served the old man well and made no complaint.

About Tarkington, the landlord waxed almost lyrical. Tarkington was a white man, straight as a die and no fool neither. He was more than a bank manager. He was, so French gathered, a sort of financial father confessor to the neighbourhood. Everyone trusted Tarkington, and took their difficulties to him for help and advice. And Tarkington gave both, in good measure pressed down and shaken together. He did not spare himself, and if he could help a lame dog over a stile, he did it. What Tarkington said went, as far as most things were concerned.

The landlord also approved of Oxley. Oxley would have his joke, if he was to be hung for it the next minute, but he was a very sound man and a good lawyer. If you had Oxley on your side he would make a keen fight for you, and for all his jokes and his breezy manner he wouldn't give nothing away. Oxley was well liked and he deserved it.

Of the medical profession in Thirsby the landlord was equally ready to impart information. Dr Emerson was a good doctor and well respected, but he was growing old. He hardly did any work now, but he had made plenty and he could afford to retire. Not that he had been a money-grubber—the landlord had known many a case where he had treated poor patients free—but until Dr Philpot had

come he had the whole of the practice, and he hadn't done badly with it. The landlord wished that hotel keeping was half as profitable. Well off, Dr Emerson was.

French next murmured Dr Philpot's name, but the landlord spoke with more reserve. He was a clever man, first rate at his job, the landlord believed, though he was thankful to say he hadn't ever needed to call him in. But he had made some good cures and people that had had him once wouldn't have anybody else. And he was pleasant spoken and likeable enough, and there was no reason why he shouldn't have done extra well at Thirsby, for there was an opening for just such a man on account of Dr Emerson's age. But—the landlord sank his voice and became more confidential than ever—the truth was he had made a muck of things, and no one would be surprised to see him take down his plate any day. He was all right in every way, but the one—he was a wild gambler. Fair ruining himself, he was. Horses mostly. It was a pity, because he was well liked otherwise. But there you were. The landlord had nothing to say about backing an occasional horse—he did it himself—but, systematic gambling! Well, you know, it could go too far.

French was interested to learn that Sergeant Kent was a fool. The landlord did not put it quite in those words, but he conveyed the idea extraordinarily well. Kent was bumptious and overbearing, and carried away by a sense of his own importance. French, the landlord was afraid, wouldn't get much help there.

The landlord showed signs of a willingness to go on talking all night, but by the time eleven-thirty had struck on the old grandfather's clock in the hall French thought he had all the information that was likely to be valuable. He therefore began insinuating the idea of bed, and this gradually penetrating to the other's consciousness, his flow of conversation diminished and presently they separated.

The next day was Sunday, and after a late breakfast and a leisurely pipe, French asked for some sandwiches, saying he was going out for a long tramp over the moor. Having thus explained himself he strolled off and presently, by a circuitous route, reached the lip of Starvel Hollow.

In spite of the fact that his professional and critical interests were aroused, French could not help feeling impressed by the isolation of the ruins and the morbid, not to say sinister atmosphere which seemed to brood over the entire place. Around him were the wild rolling spaces of the moor, forbidding and desolate, rising here into rounded hills, dropping there into shallow valleys. The colouring was drab, in the foreground the dull greens of rushes and sedgy grass, the browns of heather and at intervals a darker smudge where stone outcropped, on the horizon the hazy blues of distance. Scarcely a tree or a shrub was to be seen in the bare country, and the two or three widely separated cottages, crouching low as if for protection from the winds, seemed only to intensify the loneliness of the outlook.

At French's feet lay the Hollow, a curious, saucer-like depression in the moor, some quarter of a mile or more across. Its rim looked continuous, the valley through which it was drained being winding and not apparent at first sight. In the centre was the group of pines which had surrounded the old house, stunted, leaning one way from the prevailing wind, melancholy and depressing. Of the walls of the house from this point of view there was no sign.

French walked down toward the ruins, marvelling at the choice which would bring a man of means to such a locality. He could understand now why on that night some five weeks earlier a building of the size of this old house could be burned down without attracting more attention. The Hollow accounted for it. Even flames soaring up from such a conflagration would not surmount the lip of the saucer. Truly a place also, as Tarkington had pointed out, where burglars could work their will unseen and undisturbed.

French had seen the remains of many a fire, but as he gazed on the wreckage of Starvel he felt he had never seen anything quite so catastrophic and complete. He felt a growing awe as he began to examine the place in detail.

The walls were built of stone, and except these walls and the small outhouse at the opposite side of the yard, nothing remained standing. The house was two storied and 'L' shaped, with the remains of a single story porch in the angle of the two wings. French compared the ruins with the sketch plan given him by Kent and identified the places where the bodies had been found. Then after a general survey he stepped through the gaping hole that had evidently been the front door and ploughed his way across the debris to the safe.

It was red with fire and rust, but the maker's name and number, in raised letters on a cast iron plate, were still legible. The safe had been lifted upright and fixed on a roughly built pile of stones, as the town officer of Thirsby had deposed at the inquest. The doors were now shut, but with some difficulty owing to the rusty hinges French was able to swing them open. Inside, as he had been told, was a mass of paper ash.

Fortunately it was a calm day or the heap might have whirled away in dust. As it was, French sat down on a stone, and putting his head into the safe, began to examine the ash in detail.

The greater part had been ground to dust, doubtless by the fall of the safe from the second story, and the churning of the sovereigns, though there still remained a number of small flakes of burnt paper. These French began to turn over with a pair of forceps, examining them at the same time with a lens.

He was delighted to find that on nearly all he could distinguish marks of printing. But, as he turned over piece after piece he became conscious of growing astonishment. For this printing was not the printing of bank notes. Rather it seemed to him like newspaper type. Wrapping paper, he supposed. But why should the contents of the safe have been wrapped up in newspapers? More important still, why should portions of the newspapers rather than of the notes have been preserved?

His interest keenly aroused, he set to work in his careful, methodical way to check over all the fragments he could find. As he did so something very like excitement took possession of him. There were no fragments of notes! Every single piece that bore any marking was newspaper!

What, he asked himself, could this portend? What other than robbery? And if robbery, then murder! Murder and arson! Could Tarkington and the chief constable be right, after all? Certainly, after this discovery he couldn't drop the investigation until he had made sure.

He had brought with him a small case of apparatus, and from this he now took a bottle of gum and some thin cards. Painting over the cards with the gum, he laid on them such flakes of ash as bore legible words. From one piece in particular he thought he might be able to identify the newspaper of which it had been a part. It was a roundish scrap about the size of a shilling, along the top of which were the words: '—ing as we—' in small type, with below it in capitals, as if the headline of a small paragraph: 'RAT-CATCHER'S F—'

French secured the cards in a case specially designed to preserve specimens, and re-closed the safe. It certainly looked as if Tarkington's suggestions might be true, and as he put the case away in his pocket, he wondered if there was any further investigation he could make while he was on the ground.

Stepping outside the building, he considered how a hypothetical burglar might have forced an entrance. The window frames and doors were all gone; moreover, any marks which might have been made approaching them must long since have been defaced by time and the footprints of sightseers and workmen. French, nevertheless, walked all round the house and about the grounds, looking everywhere in the hope of coming on some clue, though he was scarcely disappointed when his search ended in failure.

He was anxious, if possible, to find out what newspaper had been burned. He did not think the point of vital importance, but on general principles the information should be obtained. There was no knowing what clue it might not furnish. On his way back to Thirsby, therefore, he turned aside to Mr Oxley's house and sent in his card.

In the privacy of the solicitor's study French introduced himself and in confidence declared his mission to the town. He apologised for troubling the other on Sunday, but said that at the moment he

wished only to ask one question: Could Mr Oxley tell him, or could he find out for him from Miss Averill, what daily paper the late Mr Averill had taken?

Mr Oxley did not know, and excused himself to interrogate Ruth. Presently he returned to say it was the *Leeds Mercury*.

Next morning French took the first train to Leeds, and going to the *Mercury* office, asked to see the files of the paper for the month of September. Commencing at the 15th, the day of the fire, he began working back through the papers, scrutinising each sheet for a paragraph headed 'RAT-CATCHER'S F—'

He found it sooner than he had expected. Tucked in among a number of small news items in the paper of Tuesday, 14th September, he read: 'RAT-CATCHER'S FATAL FALL.' And when he saw that the type was similar to that on the burnt scrap and the last line of the preceding paragraph was 'Mr Thomas is doing as well as can be expected,' with the '—ing as we—' in the correct position relative to the 'RAT-CATCHER'S F—' he knew he had really got what he wanted.

French was extraordinarily thorough. Long experience had taught him that everything in the nature of a clue should be followed up to the very end. He did not therefore desist when he had made his find. Instead he worked on to see if he could identify any of the other scraps he had found. And before he left he had found eight out of the eleven he had mounted, and proved that the burnt papers were those of the 13th, 14th, and 15th; the three days before the fire.

So far, then, the indications were at least for continuing the investigation. Leaving the *Mercury* office, French walked up the Briggate to Messrs Carter & Stephenson's, the makers of the safe. He asked for one of the principals, and was presently shown into Mr Stephenson's room. Introducing himself in the strictest confidence in his true guise, he propounded his question: Was the safe absolutely fireproof?

Mr Stephenson rose and went to a drawer from which he took a number of photographs.

'Look at those,' he invited, 'and tell me was the fire at Starvel any worse than those fires?'

The views were all of burnt-out buildings, most of them completely gutted and resembling the wreckage of Starvel. French assured him that the cases seemed on all fours.

'Very well, there were safes in all those fires—safes just the same as that at Starvel, and all those safes had papers in them, and there wasn't a single paper in anyone of them so much as browned.'

French took out his burnt fragments.

'Look at those, Mr Stephenson,' he invited in his turn. 'Suppose there were newspapers in that safe before the fire, could they have come out like that after it?'

'Not under any conceivable circumstances,' Mr Stephenson declared emphatically, 'that is, of course, unless the door had been left open. With the door shut it's absolutely impossible. And I'll be prepared to stand by that in any court of law if you should want me to.'

The man's manner was convincing, and French saw no reason to doubt his statement. But he saw also that its truth involved extremely serious consequences. If Mr Stephenson was right the newspapers had not been burnt during the Starvel fire. They could only have been burned while the safe door was open. But the door was locked during the fire; Kent had had to get an expert to open it. They must therefore have been burned before it was locked. A sinister fact truly, and terribly suggestive!

On his way back to Thirsby French sat smoking in the corner of a carriage; weighing in his mind the significance of his discoveries. He considered the points in order.

First. Old Averill was a miser who had filled up his safe with notes and gold. The notes had been seen on more than one occasion by Mr Tarkington's clerk, Bloxham, the last time being only a few days before the tragedy. Mr Tarkington estimated there must have been some £30,000 to £40,000 worth of notes in the safe, though this was probably only a guess. But it was at least certain that before the fire it contained a very large sum in notes.

Second. After the fire the gold was intact, or at least part of it was there, but there was no trace of the notes. It was perfectly true that a number of notes might have been burned and been crushed

to powder by the falling sovereigns. But it was straining the probabilities too far to believe that no single fragment of anyone note should remain. On the other hand fragments did remain—but these were all of newspapers.

Third. The newspapers, according to Mr Stephenson's evidence, were burned before the door of the safe had been closed.

Gradually French came to definite conclusions. As far as his information went the following facts seemed to be established:

First. That the safe was unlocked, and the notes were taken out before the fire.

Second. That three or four newspapers were put in to replace them.

Third. That the newspapers were set on fire and allowed to burn to ashes while the safe door was open.

Fourth. That after they were burned the safe was locked.

If these conclusions could be sustained it unquestionably meant that French was on to one of the most dastardly and terrible crimes of the century. He felt the sudden thrill of the hunter who comes across the fresh spoor of some dangerous wild beast. But he did not disclose his feelings. Instead he kept his own counsel, simply reporting to headquarters that the case seemed suspicious and that he was remaining on to make further inquiries.

5

French Picks Up a Clue

The more Inspector French pondered over the problems which his discoveries had raised, the more difficult these problems seemed to grow. There was so desperately little to go on. It was a common enough trouble in detective work certainly, but this business was worse than the average. He could not recall a case which offered fewer clues or 'leads.'

As he turned over in his mind all that he had learned it seemed to him indeed that there was but one channel to be explored, and that a channel which offered a very poor chance of success—the £20 bank note. If he were unable to trace the £20 bank note, and the odds were enormously against his doing so, he did not see what other line of inquiry he could follow up.

Of course, there was the usual police question: Who was seen in the vicinity of the crime at the time of its commission? But he had already put this inquiry to Kent and the answer had been: 'No one.'

If, as seemed likely, Tarkington's theory were true and this crime had been committed by the burglars who had already brought off so many *coups* in the district, French was up against a very able gang. For over six months the police had been searching for these men and they seemed no nearer finding them now than in the beginning.

The bank note, then, appeared to be the only chance, and French decided that he would begin operations by trying to trace the passer, trusting that if this line failed, some other would by that time have opened out.

The night was still young, and desiring to lose no time, French left his comfortable corner in the bar and went out to call on Mr Tarkington.

The bank manager was greatly interested when French revealed his calling and mission. He willingly repeated all he knew about old Simon Averill and his finances and explained his theories at length.

'The only other thing I wish to ask you,' French remarked when the other showed signs of coming to an end, 'is about previous sums sent out to Starvel. Your clerk kept a record of the numbers of all the twenty-pound notes sent in the last consignment, but have you a similar record of former consignments?'

Mr Tarkington nodded.

'I early appreciated that point and made inquiries,' he replied in his precise, measured tones. 'By my own instructions it has been the practice to keep such records of all notes over ten pounds in value, and this was done in the case of those sent to Starvel. The records, however, are not retained very long, and I did not hope to be able to lay my hands on those of earlier consignments. But by a piece of pure chance my clerk, Bloxham, found some earlier records in an old notebook, and I am able to give you the numbers of the notes of eleven; not consecutive consignments, but stretching at intervals over nearly five years. They cover £3860, all of which was sent to Starvel in twenties; that is 193 twenties. I have their numbers here.'

'That's a piece of luck for me,' French commented, as he pocketed the list which the other passed him. 'Curious that Mr Averill collected twenty-pound notes. Why not fifties or hundreds or tens?'

Mr Tarkington shook his head.

'Like most of us,' he said, a hint of human kindness showing beneath his rather dry manner, 'the poor old fellow had his weakness. Why he should prefer twenties to notes of other denominations I don't know. I can only record the fact that he did.'

The next morning French occupied in making the acquaintance of the obvious *dramatis personæ* in the case. He paid a long visit to Ruth Averill, hearing her story at first hand and questioning her on

various details which occurred to him. Oxley he saw at his office and the lugubrious Abel Hesketh, the town officer, he found at the toll room in the markets. He was waiting for Dr Emerson as the latter concluded his morning round, and he went to the trouble of an excursion over the moor to interview the red-haired farmer, George Mellowes, who had driven Roper home on the fatal night. Dr Philpot he also called on, to obtain his impressions of the Starvel household.

Lastly, he saw the bank clerk, Bloxham, who struck him at once as a man of character. Though seemingly not more than thirty, he had a strangely old face, sardonic and determined looking, almost sinister. He gave his testimony with a refreshing restraint of words, and seemed to have observed carefully and to know just what he had seen. He said that on three occasions when he was at Starvel Mr Averill had opened his safe and he had had a glimpse of its contents. From the size of the stacks of notes he would estimate that these contained possibly 1500 separate notes. If these were twenties that would mean £30,000. There was also a cardboard box of sovereigns. If he had not heard the number he would have estimated that it contained about two thousand.

To all of these people, except Oxley, who already knew the truth, French accounted for himself by the story of the detective employed to ascertain the cause of an unexplained fire. All seemed anxious to help him, but unfortunately none could tell him anything more than he already knew.

Having thus completed the obvious local inquiries he felt free to follow up the matter of the £20 note. He therefore left Thirsby by the afternoon train and late that night reached St Pancras. Next morning saw him at the headquarters of the Northern Shires Bank in Throgmorton Avenue. In five minutes he was closeted with the manager, who shook his head when he heard what was required of him.

‘I naturally imagined some such question might arise,’ the manager said, ‘and I questioned the clerk who had received the note. At first he was unable to give me even the slightest hint, but on thinking over the matter he said the balance of probability was in favour of its having been paid in by the messenger from Cook’s office in Regent Street. He explained that in Cook’s deposit, which was an unusually heavy one, there were no less than seventeen notes for twenty pounds, and he remarked to the messenger: “You’re strong in twenties today.” It was shortly afterwards that the clerk discovered he held one of the numbers sent in by Mr Tarkington. He had twenty-two twenties in hand when he made his discovery and he believed he had not parted with any since the Cook lodgment, therefore, the chances that the note came from Cook’s are as seventeen to five.’

‘There is no certainty about that,’ said French.

‘No certainty, but a good sporting chance,’ the manager returned with a smile as he bade his visitor good day.

The next step was obviously Cook’s office. Here again French asked for the manager, and here again that gentleman shook his head when French stated his business.

‘I should be only too glad to help you, Mr French,’ he declared, ‘but I fear it is quite impossible. In the first place we don’t know the numbers of any of the notes which passed through our hands, and we don’t, therefore, know if we had the one in which you are interested. Apparently you don’t even know it yourself. But even if we did know, we couldn’t possibly tell you who paid it in. So much money comes in over the counter that individual notes could not be traced. And then we have no idea of the date upon which we received this one, if we did receive it. You think we lodged it yesterday week. We might have done so and yet have received it weeks before. You see, we keep a fairly large sum in our safe in connection with our foreign exchange department.’

‘Do you give receipts for all monies received?’

‘For most transactions. But not all. If a man came in for a ticket to Harrogate, for example, we should hand him the ticket, and the ticket would be his receipt. Again, no note other than that of the actual sums passing is taken in our exchange department.’

French smiled ruefully.

‘It doesn’t seem to get any more hopeful as it goes on, does it?’ he remarked, continuing after a moment’s silence. ‘You see what I’m trying to get at, don’t you? If I could look over your receipts for some time prior to yesterday week I might find a name and address which would suggest a line of inquiry.’

‘I follow you,’ the manager returned. ‘It is just possible that you might get something that way, though I must warn you it’s most unlikely. You see, the balance of the payments in notes would not, in the nature of things, require receipts, and conversely most of the accounts requiring receipts are paid by cheque. However, if you wish to make a search, I am prepared to help you. How far back do you want to go?’

‘The note in question was known to be in the possession of the dead man on Friday, 10th September. It was discovered in the bank here on Monday, October 18th. That is,’ he took out his engagement book and rapidly counted, ‘thirty-three working days: a little over five weeks.’ He looked deprecatingly at the other, then added: ‘Rather a job to go through all that, I’m afraid.’

‘It’ll take time,’ the manager admitted. ‘But that’s your funeral. If you wish to see our books I shall be pleased to facilitate you in every way I can.’

French thanked him and a few minutes later was hard at work under the guidance of a clerk going through interminable lists of names and addresses. For two hours he kept on steadily, then suddenly surprised his companion by giving a muttered curse. He had come on a name which dashed all his hopes and showed him that his one clue was a wash out. The item read:

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

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