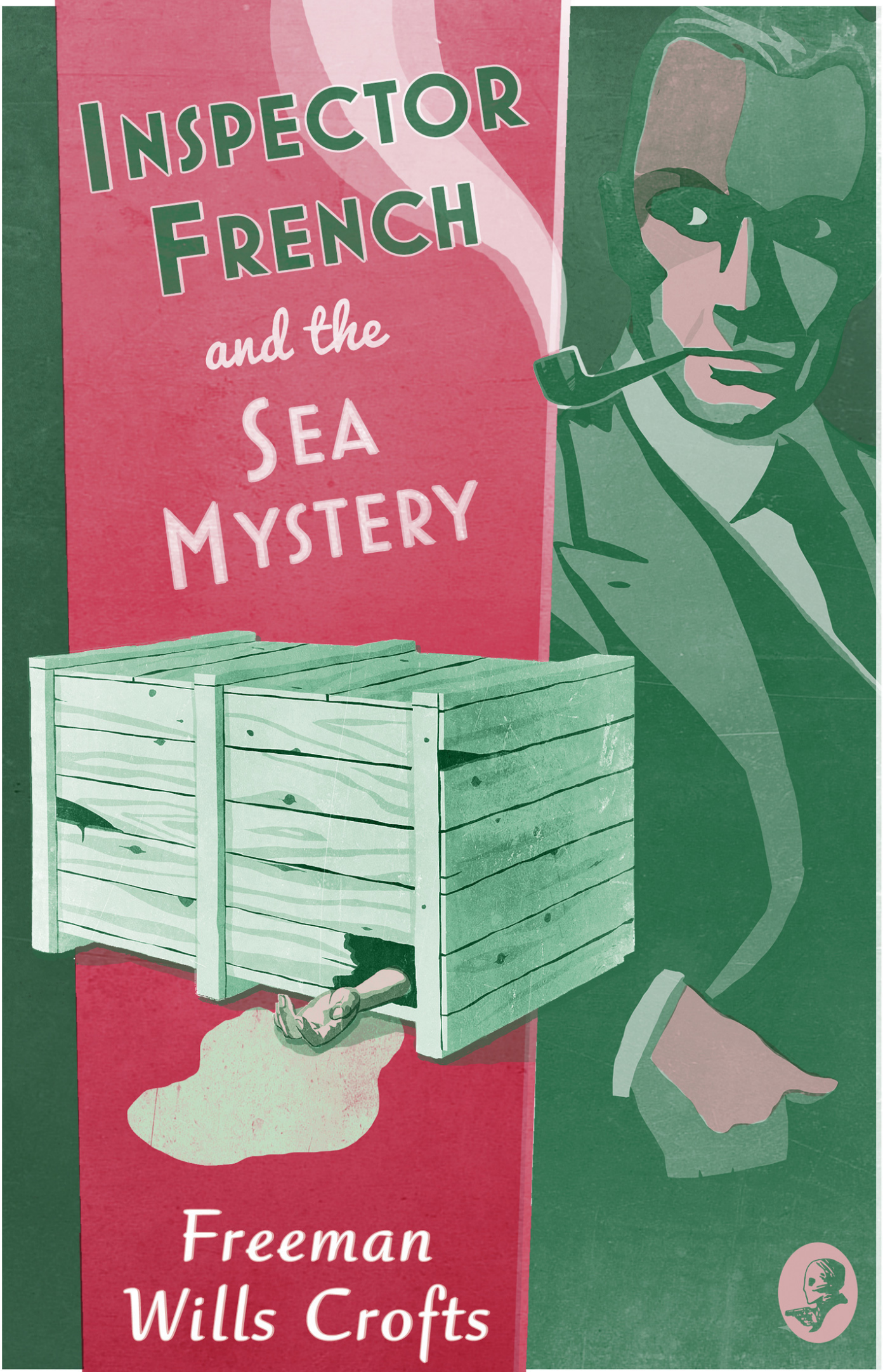
Inspector French and the Sea Mystery



Freeman Wills Crofts

Freeman Crofts

Inspector French and the Sea Mystery

«HarperCollins»

Crofts F. W.

Inspector French and the Sea Mystery / F. W. Crofts — «HarperCollins»,

From the Collins Crime Club archive, the fourth Inspector French novel by Freeman Wills Crofts, once dubbed ‘The King of Detective Story Writers’.THE BODY THAT CAME FROM NOWHEREOff the coast of Burry Port in south Wales, two fishermen discover a shipping crate and manage to haul it ashore. Inside is the decomposing body of a brutally murdered man. With nothing to indicate who he is or where it came from, the local police decide to call in Scotland Yard. Fortunately Inspector Joseph French does not believe in insoluble cases – there are always clues to be found if you know what to look for. Testing his theories with his accustomed thoroughness, French’s ingenuity sets him off on another investigation . . .

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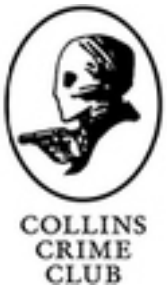
FREEMAN WILLS CROFTS

Inspector French and the Sea Mystery



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1
Mr Morgan Meets Tragedy

The Burry Inlet, on the south coast of Wales, looks its best from the sea. At least so thought Mr Morgan, as he sat in the sternsheets of his boat, a fishing line between his fingers, while his son, Evan, pulled lazily over the still water.

In truth the prospect on this pleasant autumn evening would have pleased a man less biased by pride of fatherland than Mr Morgan. The Inlet at full tide forms a wide sheet of water, penetrating in an easterly direction some ten miles into the land, with the county of Carmarthen to the north and the Gower Peninsula to the south. The shores are flat, but rounded hills rise inland which merge to form an undulating horizon of high ground. Here and there along the coast are sand-dunes, whose greys and yellows show up in contrast to the green of the grasslands and the woods beyond.

To the south-east, over by Salthouse Point and Penclawdd, Mr Morgan could see every detail of house and sand-dune, tree and meadow, lit up with a shining radiance, but the north-west hills behind Burry Port were black and solid against a setting sun. Immediately north lay Llanelly, with its dingy coloured buildings, its numberless chimneys, and the masts and funnels of the steamers in its harbour.

It was a perfect evening in late September, the close of a perfect day. Not a cloud appeared in the sky, and scarcely a ripple stirred the surface of the sea. The air was warm and balmy, and all nature seemed drowsing in languorous content. Save for the muffled noise of the Llanelly mills, borne over the water, and the slow, rhythmic creak of the oars, no sound disturbed the sleepy quiet.

Mr Morgan was a small, clean-shaven man in a worn and baggy Norfolk suit, which was the bane of Mrs Morgan's existence, but in which the soul of her lord and master delighted as an emblem of freedom from the servitude of the office. He leaned back in the sternsheets, gazing out dreamily on the broad sweep of the Inlet and the lengthening shadows ashore. At times his eyes and thoughts turned to his son, Evan, the fourteen-year-old boy who was rowing. A good boy, thought Mr Morgan, and big for his age. Though he had been away at school for nearly three years he was still his father's best pal. As Mr Morgan thought of the relations between some of his friends and their sons, he felt a wave of profound thankfulness sweep over him.

Presently the boy stopped rowing.

'Say, Dad, we've not had our usual luck today,' he remarked, glancing disgustedly at the two tiny mackerel which represented their afternoon's sport.

Mr Morgan roused himself.

'No, old man, those aren't much to boast about. And I'm afraid we shall have to go in now. The tide's beginning to run, and I expect we could both do with a bit of supper. Let's change places and you have a go at the lines while I pull in.'

To anyone attempting navigation in the Burry Inlet the tides are a factor of the first importance. With a rise and fall at top springs of something like twenty-five feet, the placid estuary of high water becomes a little later a place of fierce currents and swirling eddies. The Inlet is shallow also. At low tide by far the greater portion of its area is uncovered, and this, by confining the rushing waters to narrow channels, still further increases their speed. As the tide falls the great Llanrhidian Sands appear, stretching out northwards from the Gower Peninsula, while an estuary nearly four miles wide contracts to a river racing between mud banks five hundred yards apart.

Mr Morgan took the paddles, and heading the boat for the northern coast, began to pull slowly shorewards. He was the manager of a large tinplate works at Burry Port and lived on the outskirts of the little town. Usually a hard worker, he had taken advantage of a slack afternoon to make a last fishing excursion with his son before the latter's return to school. The two had left Burry Port on a flowing tide and had drifted up the Inlet to above Llanelly. Now the tide was ebbing, and they were

being carried swiftly down again. Mr Morgan reckoned that by the time they were opposite Burry Port they should be far enough inshore to make the harbour.

Gradually the long line of the Llanelly houses and chimneys slipped by. Evan had clambered aft and at intervals he felt with the hand of an expert the weighted lines which were trailing astern. He frowned as he glanced again at the two mackerel. He had had a good many fishing trips with his father during the holidays and never before had they had such a miserable catch. How he wished he could have a couple of good bites before they had to give up!

The thought had scarcely passed through his mind when the line he was holding tightened suddenly and began to run out through his fingers. At the same moment the next line, which was made fast round the after thwart, also grew taut, strained for a second, then with a jerk slackened and lay dead. Evan leaped to his feet and screamed out in excitement:

'Hold, Daddy, hold! Backwater, quick! I've got something big!'

The line continued to run out until Mr Morgan, by rowing against the tide, brought the boat relatively to a standstill. Then the line stopped as if anchored to something below, twitching indeed from the current, but not giving the thrilling chucks and snatches for which the boy was hoping.

'Oh, blow!' he cried disgustedly. 'It's not a fish. We've got a stone or some seaweed. See, this one caught it too.'

He dropped the line he was holding and pulled in the other. Its hooks were missing.

'See,' he repeated. 'What did I tell you? We shall probably lose the hooks of this one too. It's caught fast.'

'Steady, old man. Take the oars and let me feel it.'

Mr Morgan moved into the stern and pulled the resisting line, but without effect.

'Rather curious, this,' he said. 'All this stretch is sand. I once saw it uncovered at very low springs. Keep rowing till I feel round the thing with the grappling, and see if I can find out what it is.'

Evan passed the small three-pronged anchor aft and his father let it down beside the line. Soon it touched bottom.

'About three and a half fathoms: say twenty feet,' Mr Morgan remarked. 'Keep her steady while I feel about.'

He raised the grappling and, moving it a few inches to one side, lowered it again. Four times it went down to the same depth; on the fifth trial it stopped three feet short.

'By Jove!' he exclaimed, 'there's something there right enough.' He danced the grappling up and down. 'And it's certainly not seaweed. Treasure trove, Evan, eh?'

'Try round a bit and see how big it is,' Evan suggested, now thoroughly interested.

Mr Morgan 'tried round.' Had he been by himself he would have dismissed the incident with a muttered imprecation at the loss of his hooks. But for the sake of the boy he wished to make it as much of an adventure as possible.

'Curious,' he therefore commented again. 'I'm afraid we shall not be able to save our hooks. But let's take bearings so that we may be able to ask about it ashore.' He looked round. 'See, there's a good nor'-west bearing: that signal post on the railway is just in line with the west gable of the large white house on the hill. See it? Now for a cross bearing. Suppose we take that tall mill chimney; the tallest of that bunch. It's just in line with the pier head beacon. What about those?'

'Fine, I think. What can the thing be, Dad?'

'I don't know. Perhaps something drifted in from a wreck. We'll ask Coastguard Manners. Now I'll pull in the grappling and then the line, and if the hooks go I can't help it.'

The little anchor had been lying on the bottom while they talked. Mr Morgan now seized the rope and began to pull. But he had not drawn in more than two feet when it tightened and remained immovable.

'By Jove, the grappling's caught now,' he exclaimed. 'A nuisance, that. We don't want to lose our grappling.'

'Let's pull up. Perhaps it will come clear.'

Evan put down the oars and joined his father in the stern. Both pulled steadily with all their strength. For a time nothing happened, then suddenly the rope began to yield. It did not come away clear, but gave slowly, as if the object to which it was attached was lifting also.

'By Jove!' Mr Morgan exclaimed again. 'We shall get our hooks after all. The whole thing's coming up.'

Slowly the rope came in foot by foot. The object, whatever it was, was heavy, and it was all they could do to raise it. Mr Morgan pulled in sudden heaves, while Evan took a turn with the line round a thwart, so as to hold the weight while his father rested.

At last the end of the rope was reached and the shank of the grappling appeared. Then dimly beneath the surface Mr Morgan was able to see the object hooked. It was a large wooden packing case or crate.

Round the sides were cross pieces, holding the sheeting boards in place. Two of the sharp flukes of the grappling had caught beneath one of these, and, of course, the greater the pull on them, the more firmly they became fixed.

To raise the crate while submerged and displacing its own volume of water had been just possible. To lift it aboard was out of the question. For a time the two considered the problem of getting it ashore, then Mr Morgan said:

'I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll make the rope fast and row in with the crate hanging to our stern. Then we'll beach it on the lifeboat slip and when the tide falls it will be left high and dry. We can examine it then and get our hooks.'

Evan approving of the plan, they proceeded to carry it out. They made the rope fast round the after thwart, then taking the oars, pulled slowly in shore. As they drew nearer the current lessened, until off Burry Port they were in almost still water. Slowly they glided past a line of sandhills which presently gave place first to houses and works and then to a great deposit of copper slag like a stream of lava which had overflowed into the sea. Finally rounding the east mole, they entered Burry Port harbour.

Having manœuvred the boat over the lifeboat slip, they cast off the rope and the crate settled down in five feet of water. Then with a bight of the rope, they made the boat fast.

'Now for that supper,' Mr Morgan suggested. 'By the time we've had it our treasure trove will be high and dry, and we can come down and see what it is.'

An hour later father and son were retracing their steps to the harbour. Mr Morgan looked business-like with a hammer, a cold chisel, and a large electric torch. It was still a lovely evening, but in a few minutes it would be dark.

As Mr Morgan had foretold, the crate was high and dry, and they examined it with interest in the light of the torch. It was a strongly made wooden box about three feet by two by two. All round at top and bottom were strengthening cross pieces, and it was beneath the upper of these that the two flukes of the grappling had caught.

'Well and truly hooked,' Mr Morgan remarked. 'We must have drifted across the thing, and when we pulled up the grappling it slid up the side till it caught the cross piece. It's a good job for us, for now we shall get our grappling and our hooks as well.'

Evan fidgeted impatiently.

'Don't mind about them, Dad; we can unfasten them later. Open the box. I want to see what's in it.'

Mr Morgan put his cold chisel to the joint of the lid and began to hammer.

'Strictly speaking, we shouldn't do this,' he declared as he worked. 'We should have handed the thing over to Manners. It's a job for the coastguards. However, here goes!'

The crate was strongly made, and though Mr Morgan was a good amateur carpenter, it took him several minutes to open it. But at last one of the top boards was prized up. Instantly both became conscious of a heavy, nauseating smell.

'A case of South American meat or something gone west,' Mr Morgan commented. 'I don't know that I'm so keen on going on with this job. Perhaps we can see what it is without opening it up further.'

Holding his breath, he put his eye to the slit and shone in a beam from the electric torch. Then with a sharp intaking of the breath, he rose.

'It's a disgusting smell,' he said in rather shaky tones. 'Let's go round and ask Manners to finish the job.'

'Let me look in, Dad.'

'Right, old man. But come round with me first to see Manners.'

With some difficulty Mr Morgan drew his son away. He was feeling sick and shaken. For beneath that well-fitting lid and sticking up out of the water which still remained in the crate, was a gruesome and terrible object—the bent head and crouching body of a man dressed in under clothes only and in an advanced state of decomposition!

It was all Mr Morgan could do to crush down the horror which possessed him and to pretend to the boy that nothing was amiss. Evan must not be allowed to see that ghastly sight! It would haunt his young mind for weeks. Mr Morgan led the way round the harbour, across the dock gates and towards the road leading to the town.

'But aren't we going to Manners?' Evan queried, hanging back.

'Not tonight, if you don't mind, old chap. That smell has made me rather sick. We can go down in the morning. The tide should be right after breakfast.'

Evan demurred, suggesting that he alone should interview the coastguard. But he was what Mr Morgan called 'biddable,' and when his father showed that he was in earnest he allowed the subject to drop.

In due course they reached home. Discreet suggestion having resulted in Evan's settling down with his meccano, Mr Morgan felt himself at liberty. He explained casually that he wanted to drop into the club for an hour, and left the house. In ten minutes he was at the police station.

'I've made a discovery this evening, sergeant, which, I'm afraid, points to something pretty seriously wrong,' he explained, and he told the officer in charge about the hooking of the crate. 'I didn't want my son to see the body—he's rather young for that sort of thing—so we went home without my saying anything about it. But I've come back now to report to you. I suppose you, and not Manners, will deal with it?'

Sergeant Nield bore a good reputation in Burry Port as an efficient and obliging officer, as well as a man of some reading and culture. He listened to Mr Morgan's recital with close attention and quietly took charge.

'Manners would deal with it at first, Mr Morgan,' he answered, 'but he would hand over to us when he saw what the object was. I think we'll call for him on the way down, and that will put the thing in order. Can you come down now, sir?'

'Certainly, that's what I intended.'

'Then we'll get away at once. Just let me get my bicycle lamp.' He turned to a constable. 'Williams, you and Smith get another light and take the handcart down to the lifeboat slip. Watson, take charge in my absence. Now, Mr Morgan, if you are ready.'

It was quite dark as the two men turned towards the harbour. Later there would be a quarter moon, but it had not yet risen. The night was calm and fine, but a little sharpness was creeping into the air. Except for the occasional rush of a motor passing on the road and sounds of shunting from the docks, everything was very still.

'Just where did you say you found the crate, Mr Morgan?' the sergeant asked.

'Off Llanelly; off the sea end of the breakwater and on the far side of the channel.'

'The Gower side? Far from the channel?'

'The Gower side, yes. But not far from the channel; I should say just on the very edge.'

'You didn't mark the place?'

'Not with a buoy. I hadn't one, and if I had I should not have thought it worthwhile. But I took bearings. I could find the place within a few feet.'

'I suppose you've no idea as to how the crate might have got there?'

'Not the slightest. I have been wondering that ever since I learned what was in it. What do you think?'

'I don't know, sir, unless it has been dropped off a steamer or been washed into the Inlet from some wreck. We'll get it to the station and examine it, and maybe we shall find where it came from. If you wait here a second I'll get hold of Manners.'

They had reached the coastguard's house, and the sergeant ran up to the door. In a few seconds he returned with a stout, elderly man who gave Mr Morgan a civil good evening.

'It's your job, of course, Tom,' the sergeant was saying, 'but it'll be ours so soon that we may as well go down together. Perhaps, sir, you'll tell Manners about how you found the crate and brought it in?'

By the time Mr Morgan had finished his story for the second time they had reached the boatslip. The sergeant and Manners peeped into the crate in turn.

'Yes, sir, it's just what you said,' the former remarked. 'It's a man by the look of him and he's been dead some time. I think we'll have the whole affair up to the station before we open any more at it. What do you say, Tom?'

'Right you are, sergeant, I'll go with you. I shall 'ave to put in a report about the thing, but I can get my information at the station as well as 'ere. You'll be coming along, Mr Morgan?'

'If you please, sir,' the sergeant interjected, 'I have to get a statement from you too.'

'Of course I'll go,' Mr Morgan assured them. 'I'll see the thing through now.'

The constables having arrived with the handcart, it was wheeled down the slip, and all five men got round the crate and with some difficulty lifted it on.

'By Jove!' Mr Morgan exclaimed. 'That's some weight. Surely there must be something more than a body in it?'

'It's certainly heavy, but it's a very solid crate. We shall see when we get it to the station.'

With a good deal of pushing and shoving the handcart was got up the slip and the little party moved off along the mole and across the sidings to the town. On reaching the police station the crate was wheeled into a small courtyard in the rear and Nield invited the others into his office.

'On second thoughts, Mr Morgan,' he explained, 'I'll not unpack the crate until I have reported to the superintendent and get hold of a doctor. Meantime, sir, I'd be glad to get your statement in writing.'

For the third time Mr Morgan told his story. The sergeant took it down, read over what he had written, and got the other to sign it.

'That will do, sir, for tonight. You will, of course, be required at the inquest tomorrow or next day.'

'I'll be there all right.'

'Then about your son, sir? Has he anything to say that might be of use?'

Mr Morgan looked distressed.

'Nothing, sergeant, more than I can tell you myself. I hope you won't have to call the boy. He's going back to school tomorrow.'

'That's all right: he'll not be wanted. And now, sir, I shouldn't say more about the affair than you can help. Just keep the discovery of the body quiet and content yourself with the story of finding the crate.'

Mr Morgan promised, and the sergeant wished him goodnight.

His visitor gone, Sergeant Nield handed a carbon of the statement to Manners, promising to let him know how the affair progressed. The coastguard being got rid of in his turn, Nield telephoned the news to Superintendent Griffiths at Llanelly. The superintendent was suitably impressed and in his turn rang up Major Lloyd, the chief constable at Llandilo. Finally the latter gave instructions for Nield to arrange a meeting at the police station for nine o'clock on the following morning. Both the superintendent and the chief constable would motor over, and the local police doctor was to be in attendance. The body would then be removed from the crate and the necessary examination made. Meanwhile nothing was to be touched.

Glad to be relieved from the sole responsibility, the sergeant made his arrangements, and at the hour named a little group entered the courtyard of the police station. In addition to the chief constable and superintendent, the sergeant and two of the latter's men, there were present two doctors —Dr Crowth, the local police surgeon, and Dr Wilbraham, a friend of Major Lloyd's, whom the latter had brought with him.

After some preliminary remarks the terrible business of getting the remains from the crate was undertaken. Such work would have been distressing at all times, but in the present case two facts made it almost unbearable. In the first place the man had been dead for a considerable time, estimated by the doctors as from five to six weeks, and in the second his face had been appallingly maltreated. Indeed it might be said to be non-existent, so brutally had it been battered in. All the features were destroyed and only an awful pulp remained.

However, the work had to be done, and presently the body was lying on a table which had been placed for the purpose in an outhouse. It was dressed in underclothes only—shirt, vest, drawers, and socks. The suit, collar, tie, and shoes had been removed. An examination showed that none of the garments bore initials.

Nor were there any helpful marks on the crate. There were tacks where a label had been attached, but the label had been torn off. A round steel bar of three or four stones weight had also been put in, evidently to ensure the crate sinking.

The most careful examination revealed no clue to the man's identity. Who he was and why he had been murdered were as insoluble problems as how the crate came to be where it was found.

For over an hour the little party discussed the matter, and then the chief constable came to a decision.

'I don't believe it's a local case,' he announced. 'That crate must in some way have come from a ship: I don't see how it could have been got there from the shore. And if it's not a local case I think we'll consider it not our business. We'll call in Scotland Yard. Let them have the trouble of it. I'll ring up the Home Office now and we'll have a man here this evening. Tomorrow will be time enough for the inquest and the C.I.D. man will be here and can ask what questions he likes.'

Thus it came to pass that Inspector Joseph French on that same afternoon travelled westwards by the 1.55 p.m. luncheon car express from Paddington.

2
Inspector French Gets Busy

Dusk was already falling when a short, rather stout man with keen blue eyes from which a twinkle never seemed far removed, alighted from the London train at Burry Port and made his way to Sergeant Nield, who was standing near the exit, scrutinising the departing travellers.

'My name is French,' the stranger announced: 'Inspector French of the C.I.D. I think you are expecting me?'

'That's right, sir. We had a 'phone from headquarters that you were coming on this train. We've been having trouble, as you've heard.'

'I don't often take a trip like this without finding trouble at the end of it. We're like yourself, sergeant; we have to go out to look for it. But we don't often have to look for it in such fine country as this. I've enjoyed my journey.'

'The country's right enough if you're fond of coal,' Nield rejoined with some bitterness. 'But now, Mr French, what would you like to do? I expect you'd rather get fixed up at an hotel and have some dinner before anything else? I think the Bush Arms is the most comfortable.'

'I had tea a little while ago. If it's the same to you, sergeant, I'd rather see what I can before the light goes. I'll give my bag to the porter, and he can fix me up a room. Then I hope you'll come back and dine with me and we can have a talk over our common trouble.'

The sergeant accepted with alacrity. He had felt somewhat aggrieved at the calling in of a stranger from London, believing it to be a reflection on his own ability to handle the case. But this cheery, good-humoured-looking man was very different from the type of person he was expecting. This inspector did not at all appear to have come down to put the local men in their places and show them what fools they were. Rather he seemed to consider Nield an honoured colleague in a difficult job.

But though the sergeant did not know it, this was French's way. He was an enthusiastic believer in the theory that with ninety-nine persons out of a hundred you can lead better than you can drive. He therefore made it an essential of his method to be pleasant and friendly to those with whom he came in contact, and many a time he had found that it had brought the very hint that he required from persons who at first had given him only glum looks and tight lips.

'I should like to see the body and the crate, and if possible have a walk round the place,' French went on. 'Then I shall understand more clearly what you have to tell me. Is the inquest over?'

'No, it is fixed for eleven o'clock tomorrow. The chief constable thought you would like to be present.'

'Very kind of him: I should. I gathered that the man had been dead for some time?'

'Between five and six weeks, the doctors said. Two doctors saw the body, our local man, Dr Crowth, and a friend of the chief constable's, Dr Wilbraham. They were agreed about the time.'

'Did they say the cause of death?'

'No, they didn't, but there can't be much doubt about that. The whole face and head is battered in. It's not a nice sight, I can tell you.'

'I don't expect so. Your report said that the crate was found by a fisherman?'

'An amateur fisherman, yes,' and Nield repeated Mr Morgan's story.

'That's just the lucky way things happen, isn't it!' French exclaimed. 'A man commits a crime and he takes all kinds of precautions to hide it, and then some utterly unexpected coincidence happens —who could have foreseen a fisherman hooking the crate—and he is down and out. Lucky for us and for society too. But I've seen it again and again. I've seen things happen that a writer couldn't put

into a book, because nobody would believe them possible, and I'm sure so have you. There's nothing in this world stranger than the truth.'

The sergeant agreed, but without enthusiasm. In his experience it was the ordinary and obvious thing that happened. He didn't believe in coincidences. After all it wasn't such a coincidence that a fisherman who lowered a line on the site of the crate should catch his hooks in it. The crate was in the area over which this man fished. There was nothing wonderful about it.

But a further discussion of the point was prevented by their arrival at the police station. They passed to the outhouse containing the body, and French forthwith began his examination.

The remains were those of a man slightly over medium height, of fairly strong build, and who had seemingly been in good health before death. The face had been terribly mishandled. It was battered in until the features were entirely obliterated. The ears even were torn and bruised and shapeless. The skull was evidently broken at the forehead, so, as the sergeant had said, there was here an injury amply sufficient to account for death. It was evident also that a post-mortem had been made. Altogether French had seldom seen so horrible a spectacle.

But his professional instincts were gratified by a discovery which he hoped might assist in the identification of the remains. On the back of the left arm near the shoulder was a small birthmark of a distinctive triangular shape. Of this he made a dimensioned sketch, having first carefully examined it and assured himself it was genuine.

But beyond these general observations he did not spend much time over the body. Having noted that the fingers were too much decomposed to enable prints to be taken, he turned his attention to the clothes, believing that all the further available information as to the remains would be contained in the medical report.

Minutely he examined the underclothes, noting their size and quality and pattern, searching for laundry marks or initials, or for mendings or darns. But except that the toe of the left sock had been darned with wool of too light a shade, there was nothing to distinguish the garments from others of the same kind. Though he did not expect to get help from the clothes, French in his systematic way entered a detailed description of them in his note-book. Then he turned to the crate.

It measured two feet three inches by two feet four, and was three feet long. Made of spruce an inch thick, it was strongly put together and clamped with iron corner pieces. The boards were tongued and grooved, and French thought that under ordinary conditions it should be water-tight. He examined its whole surface, but here again he had no luck. Though there were a few bloodstains inside, no label or brand or identifying mark showed anywhere. Moreover, there was nothing in its shape or size to call for comment. The murderer might have obtained it from a hundred sources, and French did not see any way in which it could be traced.

That it had been labelled at one time was evident. The heads of eight tacks formed a parallelogram which clearly represented the position of a card. It also appeared to have borne attachments of some heavier type, as there were seven nail-holes of about an eighth of an inch in diameter at each of two opposite corners. Whatever these fittings were they had been removed and the nails withdrawn.

'How long would you say this had been in the water?' French asked, running his fingers over the sodden wood.

'I asked Manners, our coastguard, that question,' the sergeant answered. 'He said not very long. You see, there are no shells nor seaweed attaching to it. He thought about the time the doctors mentioned, say between five and six weeks.'

The bar was a bit of old two-inch shafting, some fourteen inches long, and was much rusted from its immersion. It had evidently been put in as a weight to ensure the sinking of the crate. Unfortunately it offered no better clue to the sender than the crate itself.

French added these points to his notes and again addressed the sergeant.

'Have you a good photographer in the town?'

'Why, yes, pretty good.'

'Then I wish you'd send for him. I want some photographs of the body, and they had better be done first thing in the morning.'

When the photographer had arrived and had received his instructions French went on: 'That, sergeant, seems to be all we can do now. It's too dark to walk round tonight. Suppose we get along to the hotel and see about that dinner?'

During a leisurely meal in the private room French had engaged they conversed on general topics, but later, over a couple of cigars, they resumed their discussion of the tragedy. The sergeant repeated in detail all that he knew of the matter, but he was able neither to suggest clues upon which to work, nor yet to form a theory as to what had really happened.

'It's only just nine o'clock,' French said, when the subject showed signs of exhaustion. 'I think I'll go round and have a word with this Mr Morgan, and then perhaps we could see the doctor—Crowth, you said his name was? Will you come along?'

Mr Morgan, evidently thrilled by his visitor's identity, repeated his story still another time. French had brought from London a large scale Ordnance map of the district, and on it he got Mr Morgan to mark the bearings he had taken, and so located the place the crate had lain. This was all the fresh information French could obtain, and soon he and Nield wished the manager goodnight and went on to the doctor's.

Dr Crowth was a bluff, middle-aged man with a hearty manner and a kindly expression. He was off-hand in his greeting, and plunged at once into his subject.

'Yes,' he said in answer to French's question, 'we held a post-mortem, Dr Wilbraham and I, and we found the cause of death. Those injuries to the face and forehead were all inflicted after death. They were sufficient to cause death, but they did not do so. The cause of death was a heavy blow on the back of the head with some soft, yielding instrument. The skull was fractured, but the skin, though contused, was unbroken. Something like a sandbag was probably used. The man was struck first and killed, and then his features were destroyed, with some heavy implement such as a hammer.'

'That's suggestive, isn't it?' French commented.

'You mean that the features were obliterated after death to conceal the man's identity?'

'No, I didn't mean that, though of course it is true. What I meant was that the man was murdered in some place where blood would have been noticed, had it fallen. He was killed, not with a sharp-edged instrument, though one was available, but with a blunt one, lest bleeding should have ensued. Then when death had occurred the sharp-edged instrument was used and the face disfigured. I am right about the bleeding, am I not?'

'Oh, yes. A dead body does not bleed, or at least not much. But I do not say that you could inflict all those injuries without leaving some bloodstains.'

'No doubt, but still I think my deduction holds. There were traces of blood in the crate, but only slight. What age was the man, do you think, doctor?'

'Impossible to say exactly, but probably middle-aged: thirty-five to fifty-five.'

'Any physical peculiarities?'

'I had better show you my report. It will give you all I know. In fact, you can keep this copy.'

French ran his eyes over the document, noting the points which might be valuable. The body was that of a middle-aged man five feet ten inches high, fairly broad and well built, and weighing thirteen stone. The injuries to the head and face, were such that recognition from the features would be impossible. There was only one physical peculiarity which might assist identification, a small triangular birthmark on the back of the left arm.

The report then gave technical details of the injuries and the condition the body was in when found, with the conclusion that death had probably occurred some thirty-five to forty days earlier. French smiled ruefully when he had finished reading.

'There's not overmuch to go on, is there?' he remarked. 'I suppose nothing further is likely to come out at the inquest?'

'Unless someone that we don't know of comes forward with information, nothing,' the sergeant answered. 'We have made all the inquiries, that we could think of.'

'As far as I am concerned,' Dr Crowth declared, 'I don't see that you have anything to go on at all. I shouldn't care for your job, Inspector. How on earth will you start trying to clear up this puzzle? To me it seems absolutely insoluble.'

'Cases do seem so at first,' French returned, 'but it's wonderful how light gradually comes. It is almost impossible to commit a murder without leaving a clue, and if you think it over long enough you usually get it. But this, I admit, is a pretty tough proposition.'

'Have you ever heard of anything like it before?'

'So far it rather reminds me of a case investigated several years ago by my old friend Inspector Burnley—he's retired now. A cask was sent from France to London which was found to contain the body of a young married Frenchwoman, and it turned out that her unfaithful husband had murdered her. He had in his study at the time a cask in which a group of statuary which he had just purchased had arrived, and he disposed of the body by packing it in the cask and sending it to England. It might well be that the same thing had happened in this case: that the murderer had purchased something which had arrived in this crate and that he had used the latter to get rid of the body. And, as you can see, doctor, that at once suggests a line of inquiry. What firm uses crates of this kind to despatch their goods and to whom were such crates sent recently? This is the sort of inquiry which gets us our results.'

'That is very interesting. All the same, I'm glad it's your job and not mine. I remember reading of that case you mention. The papers were absolutely full of it at the time. I thought it an extraordinary affair, almost like a novel.'

'No doubt, but there is this difference between a novel and real life. In a novel the episodes are selected and the reader is told those which are interesting and which get results. In real life we try perhaps ten or twenty lines which lead nowhere before we strike the lucky one. And in each line we make perhaps hundreds of inquiries, whereas the novel describes one. It's like any other job, you get results by pegging away. But it is interesting on the whole, and it has its compensations. Well, doctor, I mustn't keep you talking all night. I shall see you at the inquest tomorrow.'

French's gloomy prognostications were justified next day when the proceedings in the little courthouse came to an end. Nothing that was not already known came out, and the coroner adjourned the inquiry for three weeks to enable the police to conclude their investigations.

What those investigations were to consist of was the problem which confronted French when after lunch he sat down in the deserted smoking-room of the little hotel to think matters out.

In the first place there was the body. What lines of inquiry did the body suggest?

One obviously. Some five or six weeks previously a fairly tall, well-built man of middle-age had disappeared. He might merely have vanished without explanation, or more probably, circumstances had been arranged to account for his absence. In the first case information should be easily obtainable. But the second alternative was a different proposition. If the disappearance had been cleverly screened it might prove exceedingly difficult to locate. At all events, inquiries on the matter must represent the first step.

It was clearly impossible to trace any of the clothes, with the possible exception of the sock. But even from the sock French did not think he would learn anything. It was of a standard pattern, and the darning of socks with wool of not quite the right shade was too common to be remembered. At the same time he noted it as a possible line of research.

Next he turned his attention to the crate, and at once two points struck him.

Could he trace the firm who had made the crate? Of this he was doubtful: it was not sufficiently distinctive. There must be thousands of similar packing cases in existence, and to check up all of them

would be out of the question. Besides, it might not have been supplied by a firm. The murderer might have had it specially made, or even have made it himself. Here again, however, French could but try.

The second point was: How had the crate got to the bottom of the Burry Inlet? This was a question that he must solve, and he turned all his energies towards it.

There were here two possibilities. Either the crate had been thrown into the water and had sunk at the place where it was found, or it had gone in elsewhere and been driven forward by the action of the sea. He considered these ideas in turn.

To have sunk at the place it was thrown in postulated a ship or boat passing over the site. From the map, steamers approaching or leaving Llanelly must go close to the place, and might cross it. But French saw that there were grave difficulties in the theory that the crate had been dropped overboard from a steamer. It was evident that the whole object of the crate was to dispose of the body secretly. The crate, however, could not have been secretly thrown from a steamer. Whether it were let go by hand or by a winch, several men would know about it. Indeed news of so unusual an operation would almost certainly spread to the whole crew, and if the crate were afterwards found, someone of the hands would be sure to give the thing away. Further, if the crate were being got rid of from a steamer it would have been done far out in deep water and not at the entrance to a port.

For these reasons French thought that the ship might be ruled out, and he turned his attention to the idea of a row-boat.

But here a similar objection presented itself. The crate was too big and heavy to be dropped from a small boat. French tried to visualise the operation. The crate could only be placed across the stern: in any other position it would capsize the boat. Then it would have to be pushed off. This could not be done by one man: he doubted whether it could be done by two. But even if it could, these two added to the weight of the crate would certainly cause disaster. He did not believe the operation possible without a large boat and at least three men, and he felt sure the secret would not have been entrusted to so many.

It seemed to him then that the crate could not have been thrown in where it was found. How else could it have got there?

He thought of Mr Morgan's suggestion of a wreck from which it might have been washed up into the Inlet, but according to the sergeant, there had been no wreck. Besides, the crate was undamaged outside, and it was impossible that it could have been torn out through the broken side of a ship or washed overboard without leaving some traces.

French lit a fresh pipe and began to pace the deserted smoking room. He was exasperated because he saw that his reasoning must be faulty. All that he had done was to prove that the crate could not have reached the place where it was found.

For some minutes he couldn't see the snag, then it occurred to him that he had been assuming too much. He had taken it for granted that the crate had sunk immediately on falling into the water. The weights of the crate itself, the body, and the bar of steel had made him think so. But was he correct? Would the air the crate contained not give it buoyancy for a time, until at least some water had leaked in?

If so, the fact would have a considerable bearing on his problem. If the crate had been floated to the place he was halfway to a solution.

Suddenly the possible significance of the fourteen holes occurred to him. He had supposed they were nail-holes, but now he began to think differently. Suppose they were placed there to admit the water—slowly, so that the crate should float for a time and then sink? Their position was suggestive; they were at diagonally opposite corners of the crate. That meant that at least one set must be under water, no matter in what position the crate was floating. It also meant that the other set provided a vent for the escape of the displaced air.

The more French thought over the idea, the more probable it seemed. The crate had been thrown into the sea, most likely from the shore and when the tide was ebbing, and it had floated

out into the Inlet. By the time it had reached the position in which it was found, enough water had leaked in to sink it.

He wondered if any confirmatory evidence of the theory were available. Then an idea struck him, and walking to the police station, he asked for Sergeant Nield.

'I want you, sergeant, to give me a bit of help,' he began. 'First, I want the weights of the crate and the bar of iron. Can you get them for me?'

'Certainly. We've nothing here that would weigh them, but I'll send them to the railway station. You'll have the weights in half an hour.'

'Good man! Now there is one other thing. Can you borrow a Molesworth for me?'

'A Molesworth?'

'A *Molesworth's Pocket Book of Engineering Formulæ*. You'll get it from any engineer or architect.'

'Yes, I think I can manage that. Anything else?'

'No, sergeant, that's all, except that before you send away the crate I want to measure those nail holes.'

French took a pencil from his pocket and sharpened it to a long thin evenly rounded point. This he pushed into the nail holes, marking how far it went in. Then with a pocket rule he measured the diameter of the pencil, the length of the sharpened portion, and the distance the latter had entered. From these dimensions a simple calculation told him that the holes were all slightly under one-sixth of an inch in diameter.

The sergeant was an energetic man, and before the half hour was up he had produced the required weights and the engineer's pocket book. French, returning to the hotel, sat down with the Molesworth and a few sheets of paper, and began with some misgivings to bury himself in engineering calculations.

First he added the weights of the crate, the body and the steel bar: they came to 29 stone or 406 lbs. Then he found that the volume of the crate was just a trifle over 15 cubic feet. This latter multiplied by the weight of a cubic foot of sea-water—64 lbs.—gave a total of 985 lbs. as the weight of water the crate would displace if completely submerged. But if the weight of the crate was 406 lbs., and the weight of the water it displaced was 985 lbs., it followed that not only would it float, but it would float with a very considerable buoyancy, represented by the difference between these two, or 579 lbs. The first part of his theory was therefore tenable.

But the moment the crate was thrown into the sea, water would begin to run in through the lower holes. French wondered if he could calculate how long it would take to sink.

He was himself rather out of his depth among the unfamiliar figures and formulæ given on the subject. The problem was, how long would it take 579 lbs. of water to run through seven one-sixth inch holes? This, he found, depended on the head, which he could only guess at approximately one foot. He worked for a considerable time, and at last came to the conclusion that it would take slightly over an hour. But that his calculations were correct he would not like to have sworn.

At all events these results were extremely promising, and gave him at least a tentative working theory.

But if the crate had floated from the coast to where it was found, the question immediately arose: At what point had it been thrown in?

Here was a question which could only be answered with the help of local knowledge. French thought that a discussion with the coastguard might suggest ideas. Accordingly he left the hotel and turned towards the harbour with the intention of looking up Manners.

3
Experimental Detection

Tom Manners was hoeing in his little garden when French hailed him. He was not a native, but the course of a long career had led him from Shoreditch, via the Royal Navy, to Burry Port. In person he was small, stout, and elderly, but his movements were still alert and his eyes shone with intelligence.

'I want to have another chat with you about this affair,' said French, who had already heard the other's statement. 'Just walk down to the end of the pier with me while we talk.'

They strolled down past the stumpy lighthouse to where they could get a view of the Inlet.

Again it was a perfect afternoon. The sun, pouring down through a slight haze, put as much warmth as was possible into the somewhat drab colours of the landscape, the steel of the water, the varying browns of the mud and sand, the dingy greys and slate of the town, the greens of the grass and trees on the hills beyond. Some four miles away to the right was the long line of Llanelly, with its chimneys sticking up irregularly like the teeth of a rather badly damaged comb. Fifty-three chimneys, French counted, and he was sure he had not seen anything like all the town contained. Beyond Llanelly the coastline showed as a blur in the haze, but opposite, across the Inlet, lay the great yellow stretch of the Llanrhidian Sands, rising through grey-green dunes to the high ground of the Gower Peninsula.

'Let us sit down,' French suggested, when he had assimilated the view. 'I have come to the conclusion that the crate must have been thrown into the sea at some point along the shore and floated out to where it was found. It would float, I estimate, for about an hour, when enough water would have got in to sink it. Now what I want to know is, where, along the coast, might the crate have been thrown in, so as to reach in an hour the place at which it was found?'

Manners nodded, but did not reply. French unrolled his map and went on: 'Here is a map of the district, and this is the point at which the crate was found. Let us take the places in turn. If it had been thrown in here at Burry Port, would it have got there in time?'

'It ain't just so easy to say,' Manners declared slowly. 'It might, if the tide was flowing, and then again it mightn't. It might 'ave started 'ere or from Pembrey—that's 'alf a mile over there to the west.'

This was not encouraging, but French tried again.

'Very well,' he said. 'Now what about Llanelly?'

Llanelly, it appeared, was also a doubtful proposition.

'It's like this 'ere, Mr French,' Manners explained. 'It's all according to 'ow the tide 'appens to be running. If the tide was flowing and that there crate was dropped in at Llanelly, it would go farther up the Inlet than wot you show on the chart. An' if the tide was ebbing it would go farther down. But if the tide was on the turn it might go up or down and then come back to the place. You see wot I mean?'

French saw it and he sighed as he saw also that it meant that there was practically no part of the adjacent shores from which the crate might not have come. Then it occurred to him that both his question and Manners' reply had been based on a misconception.

The murderer's object was to get rid of the crate. Would he, therefore, choose a rising or half tide which might drift it back inshore? Surely not; he would select one which would take it as far as possible out to sea. French felt that only ebb tides need be considered. He turned again to Manners.

'I suppose a good ebb develops some strong currents in these channels?'

'You may say so, Mr French. An average of five knots you may reckon on. A deal faster than you could walk.'

'Five knots an hour?'

'No, sir; five knots. It's like this 'ere. A knot ain't a distance: it's a speed. If I say five knots I means five sea miles an hour.'

'A sea mile is longer than an ordinary one?'

'That's right. It varies in different places, but you may take it as 6080 feet 'ere.'

French made a short calculation.

'That is about five and three-quarter English miles per hour,' he remarked, as he scaled this distance up the Inlet from the position of the crate. And then his interest quickened suddenly.

A little over five miles from the point at which the crate had sunk the estuary narrowed to less than a quarter of a mile in width. At this point it was crossed by two bridges, carrying respectively the main road and the railway between Swansea and Llanelly. Had the crate been thrown from one of these?

French saw at once that no more suitable place for the purpose could be found. Objects pushed in from the bank would tend to hug the shore and to be caught in backwaters or eddies. Moreover, even if they escaped such traps they would not travel at anything like the maximum speed of the current. But from a bridge they could be dropped into the middle of the stream, where the flow was quickest.

'What about the bridge up at Loughor?' he asked. 'If the crate was dropped off that on an ebb tide, do you think it would get down all right?'

Manners was impressed by the suggestion. Given a good ebb, about an hour should carry the crate to where it was found. French rose with sudden energy.

'Let's go and see the place. How soon can we get there?'

By a stroke of luck a train was approaching as they entered the station, and twenty minutes later they reached their destination.

Loughor proved to be a straggling village situated on the left bank of the estuary where the latter made a right-angled bend towards the north. The two bridges ran side by side, and a couple of hundred yards apart. That carrying the road was a fine wide structure of ferro-concrete, fairly new and leading directly into the village. The railway bridge was lower down stream, considerably older and supported on timber piles. Both were about three hundred yards long, and built with short spans and many piers. The tide was out, and the usual wide mud banks were exposed on either shore.

Directly French saw the spot he felt that here indeed was what he sought. On a dark night it would have been easy to drop the crate from the road bridge in absolute secrecy. Nor, as far as he could see from the map, was there any other place from which it could have been done.

He had assumed that the criminal would select an ebb tide for his attempt in order to ensure the crate being carried as far as possible out to sea. For the same reason French believed he would choose the time of its most rapid run. That time must also be in the dead of night to minimise the risk of discovery from passing road traffic. From 2 to 4 a.m. would probably best meet the conditions, as the chances were a thousand to one that the road would then be deserted.

French wondered if he could get anything from these considerations. He turned to Manners.

'I suppose it takes a bit of time to get up a good run in an estuary like this? How soon after high water would you say the current was running at full speed under the bridge?'

'From one to two hours, more or less.'

One to two hours previous to the period 2 to 4 a.m. meant between midnight and 3 a.m.

'Now, Mr Manners, can you tell me whether high water fell between twelve and three on any night about five or six weeks ago?'

Manners once more produced his tide table.

'Five or six weeks ago,' he repeated slowly. 'That would be between the 16th and the 23rd of August.' He ran his stubby finger up the pages, then read out: "'21st, Sunday, 0.5—" that's five minutes past midnight, you understand. "22nd, Monday, 1.23 a.m.; 23rd, Tuesday, 2.55. a.m." 'Ow would that suit you, sir?'

'All right, I think,' French answered, as he noted the three dates. 'Any of those top springs?'

'No, sir, you don't get 'igh water of springs at night. 'Bout six or seven o'clock it runs. Those dates wot I gave you are about dead neaps.'

'But there is still a strong flow at neaps?'

'Oh, bless you, yes. Not so strong as at springs o' course, but plenty strong enough.'

All this seemed satisfactory to French, and he felt a growing conviction that the small hours of the 21st, 22nd, or 23rd of August had witnessed the launch of the crate. But this was mere theory, and theory is popularly admitted to be worth only one-sixteenth of the value of practice. Could he not arrive at something more definite?

Suddenly he thought he saw his way.

'You say it was neap tides on those three dates in August? What rise and fall does that represent?'

"Bout eighteen feet.'

'How soon shall we have that again?'

'Not for nearly a week we shan't. Say next Monday.'

'I can't wait for that. What's the rise tomorrow?'

'Twenty-one foot eleven.'

'And what hour is high water?'

'Eight o'clock in the morning.'

'That'll have to do. Look, here is a bus labelled "Llanelly." Let us get aboard.'

At the police station they found not only the superintendent, but Chief Constable Lloyd.

'Glad to see you together, gentlemen,' French greeted them. 'I've been going into the matter of tides and currents in the Inlet with Mr Manners here, and now I want your help in trying an experiment. Manners informs me that about six weeks ago, the time at which the doctors believe our man was murdered, it was high water in the dead period of the night. Tomorrow, Thursday, it will be high water at 8. a.m. The maximum run out to sea, Manners says, will begin between one and two hours later, say at 9.30 a.m. Now, gentlemen, I want to load the crate with a weight equal to that of the body and throw it into the estuary from the Loughor bridge at 9.30 tomorrow morning. Will you help me?'

While French had been speaking the three men had stared uncomprehendingly, but as he reached his peroration something like admiration showed on their faces.

'Well, I'm blessed,' the superintendent said slowly, while Major Lloyd gave the suggestion his instant approval.

'Glad you agree, gentlemen,' said French. 'Now, if we're to be ready, we shall want a few things arranged. First we'll have to put stones in the crate to equal the weight of the body. Then we'll want a carpenter to repair the top where Mr Morgan broke it. He'll have to make it water-tight with pitch or putty or something. I don't want it to take any water through the cracks. A lorry will also be needed to carry the crate to the bridge, and three or four men to lift it over the parapet.'

'Very good,' the chief constable answered. 'Nield can arrange all that. Advise him, will you, Superintendent. But you'd better see him yourself, Inspector, and make sure he forgets nothing. Anything else?'

'Yes, sir. We don't want to lose the crate. We shall want a rope round it and a boat in attendance.'

'You can fix that up, Manners, can't you?'

'Certainly, sir. I'll see to it.'

'Good. I'll come down to watch the experiment. Shall we say 9.30 a.m. at the bridge?'

At nine o'clock next morning two vehicles left the Burry Port police station. The first was a lorry and on it stood the crate, repaired and loaded with the necessary weight of shingle, due allowance having been made for the fact that the wood was now waterlogged. Behind followed a car containing French, Nield, and three constables in plain clothes.

The weather was ideal for their purpose. The fine spell had lasted and the sun shone with a summery warmth and brilliance. Not a breath of wind dulled the shining surface of the Inlet, now calm and placid at the turn of the tide. Inland the hills showed sharp against the clear blue of the sky. Out beyond the Gower Peninsula was a steamer going up to Swansea or Cardiff.

The chief constable and Superintendent Griffiths were waiting for them at Loughor. Already the tide was running swiftly, swirling and eddying round the piles of the bridge. Moored to the bank at the east end was a broad-beamed boat with Manners in the sternsheets and two oarsmen amidships.

'Good heavens, they'll never row against that current!' French exclaimed, aghast at the rushing flood.

'They're not going to try,' Nield declared. 'This is what I've arranged with Manners. He has an extra long painter fixed to his boat. We'll get the end up on the bridge and tie it to the Crate. Then we'll throw crate and rope over together, and Manners can pull the slack of the rope into the boat and float down beside the crate.'

'Right. Let me get into the boat first and then carry on.'

French scrambled down the stone pitching of the bank and with some difficulty got aboard. The rope had been passed up to the bridge and was now worked across till the boat was nearly in mid-stream. Even with the help of the oarsmen it was all those above could do to hold on. Then the crate appeared rising slowly on to the parapet. Presently it turned over and fell, the rope being thrown clear at the same time.

The crate entered the water with a mighty splash, drenching the boat with spray and disappearing momentarily beneath the surface. Then it came up again, and bobbing about like some ungainly animal, began to move quickly downstream. The boatmen rowed after it, while Manners hurriedly pulled in the slack of the rope.

After the first few plunges the crate settled down on what might be called an even keel, floating placidly down the estuary. They were rapidly approaching the railway bridge, the roar of the water through the piles being already audible. The passage was not without danger, and the oarsmen worked hard to keep the boat clear of the piles and to ensure its passing through the same opening as the crate. Then with a rush they were through and floating in the calm water beyond.

French enjoyed that unconventional trip down the Inlet. Apart from the interest of the quest, the glorious weather and the charming scenery made it a delightful excursion. Borne on by the current they first hugged the salt marshes of the northern shore, then heading out towards mid-channel, they passed the post on Careg-ddu and rounded the point at the Llanelly rifle range. They kept inside the long training bank or breakwater, and passing the entrance to Llanelly harbour, stood out towards the open sea. From the water the high lands north and south looked rugged and picturesque, and even the dingy buildings of the town became idealised and seemed to fit their setting. French took frequent bearings so as to be able to plot their course on the map.

The crate had been settling down steadily, and now only about two inches of freeboard showed, every tiny wavelet washing over it. The rope had been carefully coiled so as to run out easily when the time came. Presently the crate was entirely awash, and the air escaping through the upper holes bubbled as the little surges covered them. Then it was below the surface, showing like a phantom under the waves. At last, just one hour and seven minutes after they had left the bridge, it slowly vanished from sight, and the rope began to run out.

'That will do,' French said as soon as he had taken bearings. 'That's all I want. We may haul it up and get ashore.'

They followed the example set by Mr Morgan, and pulling up the crate until the top was showing beneath the surface, made the rope fast to the after thwart and pulled for the Burry Port harbour. There they beached their burden, the sergeant undertaking to salve it when the tide fell.

French, delighted with the result of his experiment, hurried to the hotel and plotted their course on his map. And then he was more delighted still. The crate had passed within fifty yards of its previous resting place.

It was true it had gone nearly half a mile farther, but that was to be expected and was attributable to the greater fall of the tide.

That the crate had been thrown from the Loughor bridge on the night of the 21st, 22nd, or 23rd of August French had now no doubt. The first problem of the investigation had therefore been solved, and he congratulated himself on having made so brilliant a start in his new case.

But as was usual in criminal investigations, the solution of one problem merely led to another: how had the crate been transported to the bridge?

There were three possibilities: by means of a handcart, a horse cart, or a motor lorry. All, however, had the serious objection that it would take at least three men to lift the crate over the parapet. Murders, of course, were sometimes the work of gangs, but much more frequently they were carried out by individuals, and French would have preferred a theory which involved only one man. However, there was nothing for it but to follow the theory which he had.

As far as he could see the only factor differentiating between the three vehicles was that of radius of operation. If a handcart had been used the body must have been brought from Loughor, Bynea, or some other place in the immediate vicinity. The same remarks applied to a horse vehicle, though to a lesser extent. With a motor the distance travelled might have been almost anything.

French did not believe that the body could have come from anywhere near by. Had anyone disappeared or left the neighbourhood under suspicious circumstances the police would have known about it. The motor lorry was therefore the more likely of the three.

He began to see the outlines of an inquiry stretching out before him. Had anyone seen a motor, loaded with something which might have been the crate, in any part of the surrounding country on the night of the 21st, 22nd, or 23rd of August?

Going to the police station, French rang up the chief constable, reported the result of the experiment, and asked him to see that his question was circulated, not only among the Carmarthenshire police, but also among those of adjoining counties. Then, thinking he had not done so badly for one day, he returned to the hotel for lunch.

A good deal of the afternoon he employed in speculating as to what he should do if there were no answer to his circular, but next morning he was delighted to find that his labour had not been in vain. Sergeant Nield appeared to say that there had just been a message from the police at Neath, saying that a lorry answering to the description had been seen on the evening of Monday, 22nd August. It was fitted with a breakdown crane and carried a large package covered with a tarpaulin which might easily have been the crate. A constable had seen it about eight at night standing in a lane some two miles north of the town. The driver was working at the engine, which he said had been giving trouble.

'That's a bit of good news, sergeant,' French said heartily. 'How can I get to this Neath quickest?'

'Direct train via Swansea. It's on the main line to London.'

'Right. Look up the trains, will you, while I get ready.'

French had little doubt that he was on a hot scent. He had not thought of a portable crane, but now he saw that nothing more suitable for the purpose could be obtained. There were, he knew, cranes—auto-cranes, he believed they were called—which were fixed on lorries and used for towing disabled cars. In certain types the jibs could be raised or lowered under load. With the jib down a load could be picked up from the ground behind the lorry. The jib could then be raised to its highest position and if the load was right up at the pulley it would clear the tail end of the lorry. When the load was lowered it would come down on the lorry. And all this could be done by one man.

As French closed his eyes he seemed to see the reverse process being carried out; a crane-lorry arriving on the Loughor bridge, stopping, backing at right angles to the road until its tail was up against the parapet—the road was wide enough to allow of it; the driver getting down, taking a tarpaulin off a crate, swinging the crate up to the pulley of his crane, lowering the jib until the crate swung suspended over the rushing flood beneath, then striking out some type of slip shackle which allowed the crate to fall clear. It was all not only possible but easy, and French had not the slightest doubt that it had been done.

A couple of hours later he was seated in the police station at Neath, listening to Constable David Jenkins's story.

It seemed that about eight o'clock on the night of Monday, the 22nd of August, Jenkins was walking along a lane leading through a small spinney some two miles north of the town when he came on a lorry drawn in close to one side. It was fitted with a crane such as is used for motor breakdowns, and behind the crane was an object covered with a tarpaulin. This object was rectangular shaped and about the size of the crate. There had been engine trouble which the driver was trying to make good. Jenkins paused and wished the man goodnight and they talked for a few minutes. The man was slightly over middle height and rather stout, and was dressed as a lorryman—a working man evidently. He had reddish hair, a high colour, and glasses, and Jenkins felt sure he would know him again. The man explained that he was going from Swansea to Merthyr Tydfil, and had got out of his way in trying to take a short cut. Then his engine had broken down and he was thus kept very late. But he had now found the defect and would be able to get on in a few minutes. Jenkins had stayed chatting, and in five minutes the man had said: 'There, that's got it,' and had closed up the bonnet and moved off.

'Coming from Swansea, was he?' French said. 'Does that lane lead from Swansea?'

'Oh, yes, it leads from Swansea all right, but it doesn't lead to Merthyr Tydfil.'

'Where does it lead to?'

'More like to Pontardawe.'

That was all right. French was delighted with the way news was coming in. That the constable had seen his man he did not doubt.

At the time, Jenkins went on, it had struck him as curious that a breakdown lorry should be used for transporting goods. But on reading French's circular he had seen that here was a plant which would lift the goods over the parapet of a bridge. And when he remembered that the tarpaulin covered object was about the size given, he felt he ought to report the occurrence.

'Quite right, constable,' French said heartily. 'I am sure your superiors will not overlook your action.'

French's next step was clear. A crane-lorry should not be difficult to trace. He would go back to Swansea and put the necessary inquiries in train.

4
A Change of Venue

On reaching Swansea, French looked up Superintendent Howells at the police station.

'Glad to see you, Mr French,' the superintendent greeted him. 'I've known your name for a considerable time, and since I heard you were down over this job I've been hoping we should meet. That Neath report any good to you?'

'I think so,' French answered. 'It sounds promising at all events. On the strength of it I've come in to ask for your help.'

'That's all right. What do you want us to do?'

'I want to trace the lorry your man saw out at Neath. I've got his description of it, and I must say that seeing he suspected nothing at the time he observed it pretty closely. A smart man, superintendent.'

'I'm glad you think so, Inspector. Right, I'll put through a call to all stations immediately.'

'Splendid. And can you ask Superintendent Griffiths at Llanelly to advise the Carmarthen men also?'

The necessary circular, drafted, the two chatted for some minutes until French excused himself on the ground that since he was at Swansea he might as well have a look round the town.

'There's not much to see in it, Mr French,' Howells rejoined, 'but Mumbles is worth visiting I should advise you to take a bus there and walk round the Head and back by Langland. If you're fond of a bit of good coast you'll enjoy it. You'll have plenty of time before we get any replies. Sorry I can't go with you, but I'm full up here.'

French went out, and after a stroll through some of the principal streets got on board a bus for Mumbles. There he took the walk Superintendent Howells had recommended. He enjoyed every minute of it. As he left the houses behind and the road began to rise up the side of the cliff he felt he was having one of the compensations of a country case. He walked up through the long rock cutting until at the top the wide expanse of the Bristol Channel came into view with the islands and lighthouse off the Head in the foreground. There was some wind and the deep blue of the sea was flecked with white. He stood and watched three outward-bound steamers pitching gently in the swell, the smoke from their stacks trailing away east. Then he took the footpath round the cliffs, rising high round Rams Tor and dropping again to Langland Bay, from which another road led across the neck of the peninsula back into Mumbles. It was getting on towards five when he returned to the police station.

'You've come at the right time, Inspector,' Superintendent Howells greeted him. 'I've just had two pieces of news. Your lorry was seen twice. About five o'clock on Monday evening, 22nd August, the evening in question, it was seen by one of our men passing through Morriston. Morriston is a town some two miles north of Swansea; indeed it is really a suburb. The lorry came from the Swansea direction and turned east at Morriston towards Neath. It was then carrying the tarpaulin covered object.'

'Then it started from Swansea?'

'Looks like it. And it looks as if it finished up at Swansea also. It was seen again on the following morning. About ten o'clock a patrol saw a breakdown lorry coming towards Swansea along the Pontardulais road. It corresponded with the description in every respect except that it was carrying the tarpaulin only.'

'By Jove! Superintendent, that's good. It won't be long till we run it to earth. I take it there are not many breakdown lorries in Swansea.'

'Give you a list in half an hour.' He touched a bell. 'Here, Thomas, start in and ring up all the local garages and find out how many have repair lorries—you know what I mean, fitted with

cranes. And see here. You needn't worry about any with fixed jibs: only those that can be raised and lowered. Got that?'

The constable saluted smartly and withdrew. Howells turned to French and was beginning a remark when his desk telephone rang.

'Yes. Superintendent Howells speaking … Yes … Gorseinon … Yes … What time was that?… Very good, I've got you.' He rang off. 'There's another, Mr French. I think you're all right this time. At half-past twelve that same Monday night a patrol found your lorry in another lane, also hidden by trees. It was a mile or so east of a little place called Gorseinon: that's about five miles north-east of Loughor. It was standing in the lane and the driver was working at his engine. Our men stopped and spoke, and the driver said he had been on a job out beyond Llandilo and was returning to Swansea. The description matches and the crate was then on the lorry.'

'Fine!' French exclaimed. 'That settles it. He was evidently going round killing time until it was late enough to throw in the crate. Could we fix his course from all those places you mentioned?'

'Pretty nearly, I think. Here is a map of the district. He seems to have just made a circle from Swansea to Loughor via Morriston, Neath, Pontardaw, and Gorseinon: say twenty-five miles altogether. Goodness knows how he returned, but it may have been through Bynea and Pontardulais. We may take it he made another detour anyhow.'

'He made a blunder going with the lorry in that open way,' French said grimly.

'I don't see what else he could have done. But I bet he wasn't worrying much about being seen. He was banking on the crate not being found.'

'You're right, and on odds he was justified. It was by a pretty thin chance that it was discovered. I was saying that to Nield: how the one unlikely chance that a man overlooks or discounts is the one that gets him.'

'That's a fact, Inspector, and it's lucky for us it is so. I remember once when—'

But French was not destined to hear the superintendent's reminiscence. The telephone bell once again rang stridently.

'Got it in one,' Howells observed, after listening to the message. 'There is only one lorry in Swansea fitted with a movable crane, and it is owned by Messrs Llewellyn of Fisher Street. Moreover, it was hired about four o'clock on the afternoon of that Monday, 22nd August, and returned next morning. Will you see them now? If so I'll come along and show you the place.'

They soon reached Fisher Street, where there was a large garage bearing the name: 'The Stepney Motor Car Co.' The superintendent, entering, asked for Mr Llewellyn.

The proprietor looked thrilled when he learned French's business.

'By Jove! you don't say that that crate was carried on my lorry!' he exclaimed. 'I read about its discovery and a dam' good tale it made. How did you find out so much?'

'I've not proved anything,' French replied. 'The whole thing is pure suspicion. But you may lead me to certainty. I'd be obliged if you would tell me what took place.'

'Surely; I'll tell you all I can, but it won't be much.' He opened a day-book and ran down the items. 'The 22nd of August,' he went on. 'Yes, here it is. We hired out the lorry on that date. But it was ordered beforehand. We got a letter several days before from London from one of the big hotels, signed Stewart, asking if we had a breakdown lorry for hire, and if so, at what rate. It particularised one with a movable jib which would pick up a load from the ground and set it on the lorry table. The machine would be wanted on the afternoon of the 22nd for one day only. If we agreed, the writer's man would call for it about four on that afternoon and would return it before midday on the 23rd. As the writer was a stranger he would be willing to deposit whatever sum we thought fair as a guarantee. The lorry was wanted to pick up a special machine which the writer was expecting by sea from London, and carry it to his place in Brecknock, where it was to be lowered on to a foundation. As it was part of an invention he was perfecting, he didn't want any strangers about. He made it a condition therefore that his man would drive.

'It wasn't a very usual request, but it seemed reasonable enough, and of course it was none of my business what he wanted the machine for. At first I wasn't very keen on letting it go, but I thought if he would pay a deposit of £300 and £5 for the hire, I should be safely covered. It was only a Ford ton truck with the crane added. I wrote him the conditions and he replied agreeing to the figure and asking that the lorry should be ready at the hour mentioned.

'At the time stated a man came in and said he had been sent for the machine by his employer, Mr Stewart. He produced the three hundred pounds, and I gave him a receipt. Then he drove away.

'Next day, about ten-thirty, he came back and said he had got done earlier than he expected. I had the lorry examined, and when I found it was all right I paid him back £295. He returned me my receipt, and went out, and that was all about it.'

'It's a pleasure to get a clear statement like that, Mr Llewellyn,' French said, with his friendly smile, 'and it's surprising how seldom one does get it. There are just one or two further points I should like information on. Have you got those letters from the London hotel?'

'No, I'm afraid they're destroyed. They were kept until the transaction was finished and then burned.'

'But you have the address?'

'Mr John F. Stewart, St Pancras Hotel, London.'

'You might give me the dates of the correspondence.'

This also the owner was able to do, and French added them to his notes.

'Can you describe the hand they were written in?'

'They were typewritten.'

'Purple or black ribbon?'

Mr Llwellyn hesitated.

'Black, I think, but I couldn't be sure.'

'Now about the driver. Could you describe him?'

'He was a middling tall man, middling stout also. His hair was red and his complexion fresh, and he wore glasses.'

'His dress?'

'I could hardly describe it. He was dressed like a well-to-do labourer or a small jobbing contractor or something of that sort. He was untidy, and I remember thinking that he wanted a shave pretty badly. I took him for a gardener or general man about a country place.'

'You couldn't guess where he had come from by his accent?'

'No, I couldn't tell. He wasn't a local, but that's all I could say.'

'The same man came back next day?'

'Yes.'

'Had you any conversation with him on either occasion?'

'No, except that he explained about lowering the machine on to the foundation, same as in the letter.'

This seemed to French to be all he could get and after some further talk he and the superintendent took their leave.

'He's loaded up the crate here in Swansea at all events,' French observed when they were in the street. 'That seems to postulate docks and stations. I wonder if I can trespass still further on your good nature, Superintendent?'

'Of course, I'll send men round first thing tomorrow. It's too late tonight; all the places would be shut.'

'Thanks. Then I'll turn up early in the morning.'

At the nearest telegraph office French sent a message to the Yard to have inquiries made at the St Pancras Hotel as to the mysterious Mr John F. Stewart. Then, tired from his exertions, he returned to his hotel at Burry Port.

Early next morning he was back in Swansea. It was decided that with a constable who knew the docks, he, French, was to apply at the various steamship offices, while other men were to try the railway stations and road transport agencies. If these failed, the local firms and manufacturers who usually sent out their products in crates were to be called on. French did not believe that the search would be protracted.

This view speedily proved correct. He, had visited only three offices when a constable arrived with a message. News of the crate had been obtained at the Morriston Road Goods Station.

Fifteen minutes later French reached the place. He was met at the gate by Sergeant Jefferies, who had made the discovery.

'I asked in the goods office first, sir,' the sergeant explained, 'but they didn't remember anything there. Then I came out to the yard and began inquiring from the porters. At the fifth shot I found a man who remembered loading the crate. I didn't question him further, but sent you word.'

'That was right, sergeant. We shall soon get what we want. This the man?'

'Yes, sir.'

French turned to a thick-set man in the uniform of a goods porter who was standing expectantly by.

'Good day,' he said pleasantly. 'I want to know what you can tell me about that crate that was loaded up on a crane lorry about six weeks ago.'

'I can't tell you nothing about it except that I helped for to get it loaded up,' the porter answered. 'I was trucking here when Mr Evans came up: he's one, o' the clerks, you understand. Well, he came up and handed me a weighbill and sez: "Get out that crate," he sez, "an' get it loaded up on this lorry," he sez. So I calls two or three o' the boys to give me a hand and we gets it loaded up. An' that's all I knows about it.'

'That's all right. Now just take me along to Mr Evans, will you?'

The man led the way across the yard to the office. Mr Evans was only a junior, but this fact did not prevent French from treating him with his usual courtesy. He explained that the youth had it in his power to give him valuable help for which he would be very grateful. The result was that Evans instantly became his eager ally, willing to take any trouble to find out what was required.

The youth remembered the details of the case. It appeared that shortly after four o'clock one afternoon, some five or six weeks previously, a man called for a crate. He was of rather above medium height and build, with reddish hair and a high colour and wore glasses. He sounded to Evans like a Londoner: at all events he was not a native. Evans had looked up the waybills and had found that a package had been invoiced to someone of the name given. The crate answered the man's description and was carriage paid and addressed 'To be called for.' Evans had therefore no hesitation in letting him have it. Unfortunately he could not remember the stranger's name, but he would search for it through the old waybills.

He vanished for a few minutes, then returned with a bulky volume which he set down triumphantly before French.

'There you are,' he exclaimed, pointing to an item. "'Mr James S. Stephenson, Great Western Railway Goods Station, Morriston Road, Swansea. To be called for." "Stephenson" was the name. I remember it now.'

This was good enough as far as it went, but Evans' next answer was the one that really mattered.

'Who was the sender?' French asked, with thinly veiled eagerness.

"'The Vida Office Equipment Manufacturing Co., Ltd., Ashburton, South Devon,'" read Evans.

The name seemed dimly familiar to French, but he could not remember where he had heard it. Evans went on to say that the crate was invoiced from Ashburton on Tuesday, 16th August, and had reached Swansea on Saturday, 20th. Carriage had been paid by the Vida Company, and the whole transaction had been conducted in a perfectly ordinary and regular way.

French left the goods office, and at the nearest telephone call office rang up the police station in Ashburton. After a considerable delay he got through. Would the sergeant inquire for him whether the Vida Company had sent out a crate on the 16th August last, addressed to the Morriston Road Goods Station, Swansea, to be called for, and if so, what was in this crate and who had ordered it.

For nearly three hours he hung about the police station before being recalled to the telephone. The Ashburton sergeant reported that he had been to the Vida Works and that the manager confirmed the sending out of the crate. It contained a large duplicator, a speciality of the firm's. The machine had been ordered by letter from the Euston Hotel by a Mr James S. Stephenson. He enclosed the money, £62 10s., stating that they were to send it to the Morriston Road Goods Station in Swansea, labelled 'To be kept till called for.' It was to be there not later than on the 20th August, and he would call for it when the ship by which he intended to despatch it was ready to sail.

The news did not seem very hopeful to French, as over a belated lunch he discussed it with Howells.

'This opens a second line of inquiry at Ashburton,' he began, 'but I do not think somehow that we shall get much from it. I believe the real scent lies here.'

'Why so? I should have said it depended on what was in the crate when it reached Swansea. And that's just what we don't know.'

'I agree. But to me that sergeant's report sounds as if things at Ashburton were O.K. If so, it follows that the body was put in some time during that lorry run from Swansea to Loughor. But that doesn't rule out inquiries at Ashburton. Even if I am right, something may be learned from the order for the machine.'

'Quite. Both ends will have to be worked. And how do you propose to do it?'

'Can't you guess?' French said blandly. 'Surely there can be but one answer. I couldn't hope to do it without the able and distinguished help of Superintendent Howells.'

The other laughed.

'I thought it was shaping to that. Well, what do you want me to do?'

'Trace the run, Superintendent. You can do it in a way I couldn't attempt. I would suggest that with a map we work out the area which could have been visited during that night, allowing time for unpacking the duplicating machine and putting the body in its place. Then I think this area should be combed. If murder has taken place you'll hear of it.'

'And you?'

'I shall go to Ashburton, learn what I can from the order, and if it seems worthwhile, follow it up in London. Then I'll come back here and join forces with you. Of course we shall have to get Superintendent Griffiths on the job also.'

After some further discussion this programme was agreed to. French, with the superintendent's help, was to estimate the area to be covered and to organise the search. Tomorrow was Sunday, and if by Monday evening nothing had come of it he was to leave Howells to carry on while he paid his visits to Ashburton and, if necessary, to London.

The longest unknown period of the lorry's operations being from 8.30 p.m. to 12.30 a.m. at night, this was taken as being the ruling factor in the case. During these four hours the machine had travelled from Neath to Gorseinon, a distance of about twenty-five miles. About two hours would be accounted for by the journey and the changing of the contents of the crate, leaving two more hours for additional running—an hour out and an hour back. This meant a radius of about twenty-five miles. The problem therefore was to make an intensive search of the country within, say, thirty miles of Swansea.

This was a large area, and the work involved the co-operation of a good many men. However, with Superintendent Howells's help it was arranged and by that evening operations were everywhere in progress.

During the whole of the next two days French remained on the job, working out possible routes for the lorry and making special inquiries along them. But no further information was obtained, and when Monday evening came, without result, he decided that unless he heard something next morning he would start for Ashburton.

But next morning news had come in which made a visit there essential. It appeared that about 9.30 on the evening in question the lorry had been seen standing in the same lane at Gorseinon in which three hours later the police patrol had found it. A labourer reported that he had passed it on his way home. As he approached the driver was sitting on the step, but on seeing him the man had jumped up and busied himself with the engine. The labourer had passed on out of sight, but his way taking him along a path at right angles to the lane, he had looked back across country and noticed the driver again seated on the step and lighting a cigarette. The position of the lorry was the same then as three hours later, and the conclusion that it had not moved during the whole period seemed irresistible.

But if so, it made it much less likely that the body had been put into the crate during the motor drive. The time available would have been so short that the area in which the change could have been made would have been very small indeed. The chances of a disappearance remaining unknown to the police would therefore have been correspondingly reduced. For the first time French began to consider seriously the possibility that the body had come from Devonshire.

While, therefore, Superintendent Howells in no way relaxed his efforts, French took an early train south. He was in a thoughtful mood as they pulled out of the station. This, it was evident, was going to be one of those troublesome cases in which an ingenious criminal had enveloped his evil deeds in a network of false clues and irrelevant circumstances to mislead the unfortunate detective officer to whom an investigation into them might afterwards be assigned. Confound it all! It was not long since he had got rid of that terribly involved affair at Starvel in Yorkshire, and here was another that bade fair to be as bad. However, such was life, and worrying wouldn't alter it. He was starting on an interesting journey, and he might as well forget his case and make the most of the scenery.

5
Messrs Berlyn and Pyke

Shortly before six o'clock that evening French stepped out of the train at the little terminus of Ashburton.

He had enjoyed his run, particularly the latter portion through the charming South Devonshire scenery, along the coast under the red cliffs of Dawlish and Teignmouth, and then inland through the well-wooded hills of Newton Abbot and Totnes. He was pleased, too, with the appearance of Ashburton, a town T-shaped in plan and squeezed down into the narrow Valleys between three hills. He admired its old-world air and its pleasant situation as he walked up the street to the Silver Tiger, the hotel to which he had been recommended.

After a leisurely dinner he went out for a stroll, ending up shortly after dark at the police station. Sergeant Daw had gone home, but a constable was despatched for him and presently he turned up.

'I went to the works at once, sir,' he explained in answer to French's question. 'They're out at the end of North Street. A big place for so small a town. They employ a hundred or more men, and a lot of women and girls. A great benefit to the town, sir.'

'And whom did you see?'

'I saw Mr Fogden, the manager. He turned up the information without delay. The duplicator was ordered from London and he showed me the letter. You can see it if you go up tomorrow. There was nothing out of the way about the transaction. They packed the machine and sent it off, and that was all they could tell me.'

Suspiciously like a wild-goose-chase, thought French, as he chatted pleasantly to the sergeant. Like his *confrère* at Burry Port, the man seemed more intelligent and better educated than most rural policemen. They discussed the weather and the country for some time, and then French said:

'By the way, Sergeant, the name of this Vida Works seemed vaguely familiar when you telephoned it. Has it been in the papers lately, or can you explain how I should know it?'

'No doubt, sir, you read of the sad accident we had here about six weeks ago—a tragedy, if I may put it so. Two of the gentlemen belonging to the works—Mr Berlyn, the junior partner, and Mr Pyke, the travelling representative—lost their lives on the moor. Perhaps you remember it, sir?'

Of course! The affair now came back to French. So far as he could recall the circumstances, the two men had been driving across Dartmoor at night, and while still several miles from home their car had broken down. They had attempted to reach the house of a friend by crossing a bit of the moor, but in the dark they had missed their way, and getting into one of the soft 'mires,' had been sucked down and lost.

'I read of it, yes. Very sad thing. Unusual too, was it not?'

'Yes, sir, for those who live about here know the danger and they don't go near these doubtful places at night. But animals sometimes get caught. I've seen a pony go down myself, and I can tell you, sir, I don't wish to see another. It was a slow business, and the worse the creature struggled the tighter it got held. But when it comes to human beings it's a thing you don't like to think about.'

'That's a fact, Sergeant. By the way, it's like a dream to me that I once met those two gentlemen. I wish you'd describe them.'

'They were not unlike, so far as figure and build were concerned; about five feet nine or five feet ten in height, I should say, though Mr Berlyn was slightly the bigger man. But their colouring was different. Mr Berlyn had a high colour and blue eyes and reddish hair, while Mr Pyke was sallow with brown eyes and hair.'

'Did Mr Berlyn wear glasses?' French asked, with difficulty keeping the eagerness out of his voice.

'No, sir. Neither of them did that.'

'I don't think they can be the men I met. Well, I'll go up and see this Mr Fogden in the morning. Goodnight, Sergeant.'

'Goodnight, sir. If there's anything I can do I take it you'll let me know.'

But French next morning did not go to the office equipment works. Instead he took an early bus to Torquay, and calling at the local office of the *Western Morning News,* asked to see their recent files. These he looked over, finally buying all the papers which contained any reference to the tragic deaths of Messrs Berlyn and Pyke.

He had no suspicions in the matter except that here was a disappearance of two persons about the time of the murder, one of whom answered to the description of the man who had called for the crate. No one appeared to doubt their death on the moor, but—their bodies had not been found. French wished to know what was to be known about the affair before going to the works, simply to be on the safe side.

He retired to the smoking room of the nearest hotel and began to read up his papers. At once he discovered a fact which he thought deeply significant. The tragedy had taken place on the night of Monday, the 15th August. And it was on the following day, Tuesday, the 16th, that the crate had been despatched from Ashburton.

The case was exhaustively reported, and after half an hour's reading French knew all that the reporters had gleaned. Briefly the circumstances were as follow:

Charles Berlyn, as has been said, was junior partner of the firm. He was a man of about forty and he looked after the commercial side of the undertaking. Stanley Pyke was an engineer who acted as technical travelling representative, a younger man, not more than five-and-thirty. Each had a high reputation for character and business efficiency.

It happened that for some time previous to the date in question the Urban District Council of Tavistock had been in communication with the Vida Works relative to the purchase of filing cabinets and other office appliances for their clerk. There had been a hitch in the negotiations, and Mr Berlyn had arranged to attend the next meeting of the council in the hope of settling the matter. As some of the council members were farmers, busy during that season in the daytime, the meeting was held in the evening. Mr Berlyn arranged to motor over, Mr Pyke accompanying him.

The two men left the works at half-past five, their usual hour. Each dined early, and they set out in Mr Berlyn's car about seven. They expected to reach Tavistock at eight, at which hour the meeting was to begin. After their business was finished they intended to call on a mill-owner just outside Tavistock in connection with a set of loose-leaf forms he had ordered. The mill-owner was a personal friend of Mr Berlyn, and they intended to spend the evening with him, leaving about eleven and reaching home about midnight.

This programme they carried out faithfully, at least in its earlier stages. They reached Tavistock just as the meeting of the Urban Council was beginning, and settled the business of the office appliances. Then they went on to the mill-owner's, arranged about the loose leaf forms, and sat chatting over, cigars and drinks until shortly before eleven. At precisely ten-fifty they set off on their return journey, everything connected with them being perfectly normal and in order.

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