



The Other Devil's Name

E . X . F E R R A R S

Andrew Basnett #4



*to the West
of
the sea, for
the day you
are off -
see a paper or
the*

Chapter One

It was nine o'clock on a Wednesday morning in May, and Andrew Basnett, who had been out late the evening before and had overslept, was in his kitchen, dressed in pyjamas, his dressing gown and a pair of socks, and was making coffee for his breakfast when the doorbell rang.

Assuming that it was the postman, trying to deliver a package that would not go through the letter box, Andrew went to the door and opened it.

It was not the postman. It was Andrew's old friend and colleague Professor Constance Camm, F.R.S., whom it was very surprising to find at his door at that hour of the morning.

Now that she was retired, she lived with her sister in the village of Lindleham in Berkshire, and on the occasions when she wanted to meet Andrew, usually made careful arrangements by telephone several days beforehand. She would then probably invite him to lunch with her at her club, or after some persuasion might allow him to take her out to lunch at one of his favourite Soho restaurants. She had only rarely visited the flat in St. John's Wood, where he lived, and then never at such an early hour.

He felt embarrassed on seeing her, not only because she had caught him in pyjamas and dressing gown and still unshaven, but mostly because he was without slippers. When he was alone in his flat he usually padded about it in his socks, leaving his slippers wherever it had occurred to him to kick them off. Today they were on the rug in the middle of his sitting room, and the first thing that he did on bringing her into the flat was to dart to where he had left them and put them on.

After that he felt better.

“I’m sorry to turn up so early, Andrew,” she said. “I tried to get in touch with you yesterday evening, but I think you were out, and I’ve got to get home today as early as possible because I’ve left Mollie in rather a state.” Mollie was the sister with whom she was living in Lindleham. “We’ve both been feeling very upset and I thought that what we needed was some sound advice and that you were the best person to turn to. If you don’t feel you can face that, however, I’ll go away. Only I do think it’s rather urgent and that you might perhaps be of great help to us.”

It astonished Andrew to be asked for advice by Constance Camm. She was as independent a person as he had ever known. She had given him advice at many times in his life, particularly when he had first been appointed to the chair of botany in the London college where he had spent the last twenty years of his working life and in which she had held a research professorship since a few years before his arrival. They were about the same age, which was seventy-one, and had retired at the same time, Constance leaving London after a while to join her sister and apparently giving up all interest in science, while Andrew had remained in his St. John’s Wood flat and had devoted himself, in a slightly haphazard way, to writing the life of Robert Hooke, the noted seventeenth-century natural philosopher and architect.

Pursuing this work meant making frequent visits to the library of the Royal Society in Carlton House Terrace, which at least had the virtue of taking him out of his flat. Yet hard as it seemed to him that he worked at the book, it had a mysterious

way of appearing never to grow any longer. Perhaps this was because as he went along he kept tearing up most of what he had written a week or so before. If anyone asked him how the book was going he always replied that it was going splendidly, but at the back of his mind there lurked a suspicion that it might never be finished.

This did not disturb him very much. In an occasional mood of depression he might deplore the futility of what he was doing, but luckily such moods were infrequent with him.

"I was just going to make some coffee when you rang," he said. "I expect you'd like some too. So if you don't mind waiting while I get some clothes on, I'll make it and then you can ask me for that advice, which I don't suppose for a moment I'll be able to give you. Here's a copy of *The Times* you can look at while I'm doing it."

"Don't bother to get dressed on my account," Constance said. "You're perfectly decent as you are. But coffee would be nice."

She accepted the copy of *The Times* as she sat down in a chair near the electric fire, which had not been switched on because the May morning was sunny and warm, but she showed no sign of wanting to open the newspaper. It occurred to Andrew as he saw her lean back in the chair and give a quiet sigh that she was looking very tired, as if she had not slept much. She was a small woman, slender and neatly made, with straight grey hair cropped close to her small, well-shaped head, somewhat sharp-featured and eyes of an uncommonly brilliant blue.

They were also uncommonly intelligent eyes, and if her features were sharp they were also mobile and expressive. She was wearing a grey tweed suit, plain, not very expensive, but well-fitting. She had been a close friend of Nell, his wife, who had died of cancer ten years ago, and in her restrained, undemonstrative way was perhaps closer to Andrew than most of his other friends.

However, he felt that he would be more at ease with her if he got into some clothes, so he retired to his bedroom and pres-

ently emerged in trousers, a shirt and a pullover and, going to the kitchen, resumed the making of coffee. He was a tall, spare man who did not look as tall as he really was because he had allowed himself in recent times to get into the habit of stooping. He had rough grey hair and grey eyes under eyebrows that were still almost black. Making some toast, he put it with the coffee, cups, butter and marmalade on a tray and carried it into the sitting room.

But just before he did this he paused for a moment. Opening the refrigerator, he took out a slab of cheese, pared off a slice and ate it hastily. There was something faintly furtive about the way that he did this. He hated the idea that he might be thought a diet crank. He always asserted that he could eat anything that was put in front of him. But he did like to start the day with a small piece of cheese. At some time he had been convinced by something that he had been told, or perhaps had read, that it was important on getting up to eat some protein, and it was much less trouble to eat a little cheese than to boil an egg. Yet somehow he would not have liked to be caught doing this by someone as full of ruthless common sense as Constance Camm.

He found her still in the chair where he had left her, looking as if she had not moved.

She smiled as he handed her a cup of coffee and said, "Really I'm sorry to have come calling so early, but I tried telephoning you from my club two or three times yesterday evening; then when I couldn't get an answer I got the idea into my head that your phone might be out of order, so I came out here on the chance of finding you at home after all, and as that was no use, I thought I'd try just once more this morning. Please forgive me." She sipped some coffee. "This is just what I needed."

"I'm always delighted to see you at any time," Andrew said as he sat down with his own cup of coffee. "You know that. Only I can't imagine what I can do for you that can be worth your taking so much trouble."

"It's this." She opened her handbag and took out a letter. "I'd like to know what you make of it."

"You want me to read it?"

"Please."

He took it from her, glancing at the address on the envelope. It was typewritten.

*Mrs. Mollie Baird
Cherry Tree Cottage
Bell Lane
Lindleham
Maddingleigh
Berks.*

It was a plain white envelope with a Maddingleigh postmark and had been neatly slit along the top. Andrew took out the sheet of paper inside. It was quarto-size flimsy typing paper and had a few lines of typing about halfway down it.

"Don't forget I saw you bury him. I know where the body is. And it can stay there as long as you remember what I said about payments. Don't forget."

Andrew read it through two or three times, drank some coffee, then read the message yet again.

"This came in the post?" he said.

"Yes."

"When?"

"Yesterday morning."

"Mrs. Baird is, of course, your sister."

"Yes."

"Do you know what it means?"

"No. It seems to me a piece of sheer lunacy. But then again, perhaps it isn't. And that's why I brought it to you. I wanted to talk it over with someone—someone I trust."

He caught an odd note in her voice, and looking at her, he saw that she was watching him with unusual anxiety.

"I suppose neither of you has been burying any bodies recently," he said.

"No, Andrew, we haven't."

“Or anything else?”

“What do you mean?” She had an attractive voice, soft but incisive.

“I just wondered if it could be somehow metaphorical,” he said. “Both the body and the burying might stand, so to speak, for something else. Otherwise...”

“Yes?” she said as he paused.

“Well, otherwise I don’t understand why you aren’t satisfied with your own explanation that it’s lunacy. It sounds to me as if it’s been done by someone who’s trying to frighten you, and it sounds to me, too, more probable that it’s been done by someone who’s slightly mad than by anyone who’s got a real hope of blackmailing your sister. Have you any recognizable lunatics in your neighbourhood?”

She must have thought that there was some flippancy in his tone, for she said, “Andrew, I wish you’d take this seriously.”

“But I’m taking it very seriously,” he said. “Because you must be frightened or you wouldn’t have troubled to bring the thing to me. And you haven’t answered my question. Have you any neighbour who seems to you even mildly unbalanced? Lunatics can be astonishingly clever at hiding their madness, you know, as clever as criminals may be about hiding their crimes. And the medical profession cooperates with them nowadays. They want them kept in a so-called normal environment, rather than shut away out of sight. But I once knew a psychiatrist whom I really respected, a very gifted chap, who said that the well should be protected from the sick. I know that’s not a fashionable attitude nowadays, but I think there’s something in it. What I wanted to ask you, however, was whether or not you’ve been coming into contact recently with anyone who seems to you even a bit odd.”

She finished her coffee, gave another sigh, leant back in her chair and answered, “Most people seem to me very odd.”

“That’s only natural,” he said. “It’s difficult for you to understand why people should be less talented than you are yourself. But even you must admit there are different standards

of oddity. So tell me if there's anyone you suspect of having written this strange missive."

Her eyes, of the unusually brilliant blue that age had not affected, though the face out of which they shone had many wrinkles, dwelt on his face for a moment, but with a look of gazing beyond it, as if she were contemplating something much farther away. Then she shook her head.

"No."

"So what is it you're afraid of?"

"I'm not exactly afraid. But I'm puzzled. And I'm wondering if there's anything Mollie and I ought to do about it. That's why I came to you. I wanted to talk it over, as I said, with someone I trust. Someone who won't try to push us into doing something that may be harmful to someone else. You seemed to me the obvious person."

"Thank you," he said. "But go on."

"Well, does anything strike you about the way that letter's addressed?"

"Only that it's neatly typed and seems to be correct."

"Yet the letter inside doesn't seem to have been meant for Mollie at all."

Enlightenment dawned on him. "Oh, I see. I think I see. You think someone got confused, wrote a letter to someone else and put it in an envelope addressed to your sister, and no doubt wrote her a letter and put it in an envelope addressed to that other person."

"Yes, and you see what that could mean, don't you?"

He considered it for a moment. "I see one thing it could mean, but it seems rather fantastic."

"I believe we may be dealing with a very fantastic situation," she said.

"It could mean that the writer of this letter did see someone burying a body and has been blackmailing that person ever since."

As he said it he hoped that she would reject this suggestion as being indeed too fantastic, for it might mean, he was afraid, that he would shortly find himself becoming involved in a kind

of drama which did not appeal to him at all. It had happened to him before, and in his view it was not really the kind of thing that he was meant for. But he was not surprised when he saw her nod.

“Don’t you think that’s what must have happened?” she said.

He replied reluctantly, “I suppose it isn’t impossible.”

“But if that’s right,” she went on, “the question is, what ought we to do about it?”

“Give the letter to the police,” he answered immediately.

“No.”

“But of course that’s what you must do,” he said. “If there’s the slightest possibility that you’re right, you shouldn’t lose any time in giving it to them.”

“That’s just what I don’t want to do, Andrew.” Her gaze was sharply focussed on his face. “That’s why I came to you. I felt I wanted to talk the matter over with someone who wouldn’t try to make me do just that and whom I could trust not to go to them on his own with a story about this slightly strange occurrence. And of course you can see why, can’t you?”

He leant forward to refill their cups with coffee.

“I’m afraid you think I’m much wiser than I am,” he said. “The only reason I can think of is that the letter you think your blackmailer wrote to your sister but posted to the wrong person is something she or you couldn’t face letting the police find out about. But that’s nonsense.”

“Why is it nonsense?” she asked in her soft, precise voice.

He gulped some coffee which was almost too hot to swallow and made him choke for a moment.

“Of course that’s what it is,” he said when he could speak. “I’m certain neither of you has ever done anything in your lives for which anyone could blackmail you.”

“How do you know?”

“Well, you and I have known each other for a good many years, haven’t we?”

That was true, but as he said it he recognized inwardly that there were whole areas of Constance’s life of which he knew next to nothing. For instance, though he thought it probable

that she had had lovers, she had never spoken about them. But even supposing that she had had any number of them, that was not a thing about which she could be blackmailed nowadays. And he could not imagine that she had ever been engaged in any criminal activities. He was sure that she had never forged a cheque, stolen jewellery or valuables from anyone, or, say, run over someone with her car and failed to report it. She was a gifted, loyal, kindly woman of high integrity and any blackmailer who thought that he could extort money from her must be really in a very bad way. And he had no reason to think that her sister was very different from her.

She smiled slightly when he spoke and nodded and said, "Yes, you and I have been lucky in our way, haven't we? Suppose we'd hated one another, what hell we could have made for one another over the years. The academic world isn't famous for loving-kindness. But I don't want to take that letter to the police. I've got my reasons."

"What do you want, then?"

"Rather a lot. You've only to say no, you know, if you don't want to do what I'm going to ask you. I do realize it's a lot, and you may not have time for it, or may simply intensely dislike the idea of having anything to do with it. I was going to ask you if you would come to stay for a little while with Mollie and me in Lindleham and meet some of our neighbours and tell me... Well, you needn't tell me anything if you don't want to. That would be for you to judge. But I believe you've been involved in murder before, haven't you?"

"To my sorrow, yes."

"You see, Mollie and I have rather lost our heads about all this, and we do want help."

He could think of no one who looked less as if she had lost her head than Constance Camm did just then, but he knew her well enough to be aware that whatever turmoil was raging inside her, it would not show.

"So you really believe there's been a murder," he said, "and it was done by someone you know. And someone else you know

saw the body being buried and has turned blackmailer. And you're really scared of what may happen next."

"I won't go so far as to say I actually believe there's really been a murder," she answered, "but it's true I'm scared and I can't stop thinking about it. And Mollie's even worse about it than I am."

"And you think if I meet your neighbours I'll be capable of picking out the culprits. I'm very flattered, but, my dear, if you were to put their names in a hat and let me pick one out, I'd be just about as successful. But I'll come to Lindleham if you really want me to."

Her face brightened. "Today?"

"I suppose today is as good a day as any."



It did not take Andrew long to pack a suitcase and to write a note for the woman who came in to clean his flat twice a week to explain his sudden absence. He left it on the kitchen table, made his bed, washed up the breakfast things, left a note with an empty milk bottle at his door, cancelling deliveries till further notice, checked that he had enough money to last him for a few days and rejoined Constance in the sitting room, ready to leave.

While he had been doing these things he had been muttering, half aloud:

*Lars Porsena of Clusium
By the Nine Gods he swore
That the great house of Tarquin
Should suffer wrong no more...*

It annoyed him intensely that he could not stop himself doing this. It was one of the misfortunes of his life that in his childhood he had had an ability to memorize verse after only one or two readings, and that all of this, especially if it had a

strong, jingly rhythm and was about blood, slaughter and all kinds of violence, had remained in his memory ever since. And it had a way of taking possession of his mind whenever there was a threat that it might be filled with something else that he did not want to think about.

At the moment he did not want to think about murder and Macaulay's deplorable ballad helped somewhat in keeping thoughts of it at bay, as well as stopping him trying to decide if Constance Camm, whom he had always regarded as the most well-balanced of women, was beginning to show the first signs of mental deterioration in her old age or had sound reasons for her fears and suspicions.

Her car, a red Volkswagen, was in the street, and it took them about an hour and a half to reach Lindleham. It was only a hamlet, half a mile or so from the village of Clareham, which was about five miles from the old market town of Maddingleigh. The hamlet was built at a crossroads. A small but fine Georgian house was at the corner where the two roads met, and Bell Lane, in which there were several houses, some of them old thatched cottages, expensively modernized, and some of them recently built, branched off on the right.

Farther along the lane, a Victorian mansion, to the original owners of which all the land as far as the main road had once belonged, stood in a fair-sized but neglected garden. The lane wandered on past it through a chequerboard of open meadows and fields yellow with rape, where once there would have been tall hedgerows and the now vanished elms, small woods with a misty covering of bluebells under beech trees and meadowsweet along the ditches.

Visits to the country always aroused a sad nostalgia in Andrew. He had grown up in a village at the foot of the South Downs, but the countryside of his childhood was gone for ever. He attempted not to yield to regrets too easily, for change had to come and might in the end be for the best. If the conservationists had got to work only a few centuries earlier than they had, he and Constance might have met wolves and wild boars

on their journey down from London. In fact, apart from the traffic, all that they had met as they passed one of the cottages in Bell Lane was a brown dog that stood at the gate and barked at them ferociously.

Constance and Mollie lived in a small, modern house facing this cottage. There was a flowering cherry by the gate, which had given the little house its name. As Constance turned the Volkswagen in at the gate Mollie came out to greet them. She was a slightly younger, larger and in some way curiously blurred version of her sister. There was a considerable resemblance between them, yet everything that was neat, taut and sharply defined in Constance was rounded, sagging and vague in Mollie. She had a cloud of thin, curly grey hair which on even the stillest day managed to look windblown. Her eyes were blue, like her sister's, friendly and gentle but without any brilliance. Her clothes hung on her loosely, the hem of her skirt uneven, her shoes flat-heeled and heavy and her stockings wrinkled at the ankles.

She had been married briefly when she was young to a man called Martin Baird, who had been killed in the war, and after his death she had been a secretary, then the assistant manageress of a guesthouse, then had helped in a craft shop in Maddingleigh, and eventually had settled down to being the companion of the old woman who had lived in Lindleham House, the Victorian mansion farther along Bell Lane.

Mollie had stayed with her for about fifteen years and at last, about a year before, had been rewarded for her patience and good nature by a considerable legacy. She had then bought the house into which she now welcomed Andrew, having chosen it because after living there for so long she had wanted to remain in Lindleham, and Constance, who had lived in London until then, had joined her there. It had never seemed to Andrew that the two sisters had anything in common, yet he knew that they had a great deal of affection for one another.

They took him into the living room, a long, bright room with a window at each end, plenty of comfortable chairs covered

in flowered chintz, a few pieces of not very interesting reproduction furniture, a remarkable number of staring, blank-faced Staffordshire dogs, the collecting of which was a hobby of Mollie's, and on the walls some delicate old flower prints, which were Constance's contribution to the room. There were several vases of flowers in it, filled with boughs of flowering cherry, tulips and wallflowers.

"You'll have a drink, won't you, while I get us some lunch?" Mollie said. "Then I'll make your bed. I didn't get a room ready for you till I was sure you'd come. Connie said you would, but I wasn't certain. I was afraid you'd simply feel we were imposing on you. Connie said you weren't like that, but I rather thought myself it was what we were doing. It's so good of you to come and advise us. I suppose it's stupid of us not to be able to make up our own minds about what we ought to do. Of course, Connie's shown you the letter." She had a hasty, slightly incoherent way of talking.

Andrew said that he had seen the letter.

"And you don't think we're just being hysterical, worrying about it?"

During the drive down from London, Andrew had begun to think that possibly that was just what they were, but she was suddenly looking extremely anxious, and in any case, now that he was here, he could hardly say that he was inclined to think that she and Constance might be making a fuss about nothing.

"It can't do any harm to look into the matter," he said.

"Yes, yes, that's how I feel," Mollie said. "Now what will you have to drink?"

He chose sherry, and she poured it out for him, and a glass for Constance, then one for herself, which she carried out to the kitchen, her heavy shoes thumping on the polished floor as she went.

Constance was looking at him with a faint, sardonic smile.

"Of course, you've begun to think it's all nonsense, haven't you?" she said. "A practical joke or something. I noticed it about Pangbourne. You began to be very tactful with me. You'd begun

to wonder if I'm getting senile. Senile dementia. It's hit better people than me, and younger ones too."

"Perhaps I'm the one who's suffering from it," he said. "It's true I'm finding it difficult to take the matter seriously."

"Well, as you said, it can't do any harm to look into it. We'll talk it over properly after lunch. And if you think it's all too boring, I'll drive you home again. Meanwhile, like Mollie, I think it's very good of you to have come and I hope you'll stay at least until tomorrow."

He assured her that that would be a pleasure, and they had more sherry and a little later were called into the dining room by Mollie to eat cold chicken, salad and cheese, and if it had not been for an almost glazed look of worry that from time to time appeared in her mild blue eyes, it would have been easy to forget that it was a strange and surely nonsensical letter about the burying of a body that had brought him there.



But as soon as the meal was over and coffee, made by Constance, had been brought into the living room, the two sisters fell silent, looking at him in an expectant way that made him feel more than a little foolish. It did not altogether surprise him that Mollie, simple soul that she was, should assume that he would be able to help them with their problem, but that Constance should be hoping that he could do so puzzled and disturbed him.

"Now let me get things clear," he said as he accepted his coffee cup. "That letter came yesterday, it was posted in Maddingleigh, and for some reason you believe it was intended for someone you know. And that's the first thing that puzzles me. Suppose you're right that it was put into a wrong envelope and that the letter that was meant for you has gone to someone else, why shouldn't that person live, say, in London, or even abroad? What is there about it that makes you think it was sent to someone in this neighbourhood?"

"We don't, exactly," Constance answered. "That's to say, if it wasn't, then we don't much care where it went. If it went to someone who's never heard of us and can't identify us, then it really doesn't matter and we can forget the whole thing. But there's the address on the envelope, you see. Bell Lane, Lindleham. It seems to us that it would have been easier for this person, whoever he is, to muddle up the two letters if the addresses were fairly alike."

"I see," Andrew said. "I realize, of course, that you aren't going to tell me what you're afraid was in the letter that may have gone to one of your neighbours and told them something about you that you don't want me to know, so suppose we stick to murder for the moment. When there's been a death in the family, you can generally reckon there's a noticeable gap left behind. A lot of people will be aware of the fact that someone has dropped out of sight. They may have gone to the funeral themselves if it was all legitimate and aboveboard, or they may simply have seen a few lines about it in the deaths column of *The Times*, or they may just have heard about it by chance, in which case they can't be absolutely certain that it's happened. Well, have there been any unconfirmed deaths among your neighbours?"

The two sisters exchanged looks, then shook their heads.

"No deaths," Constance said.

"Disappearances, then," Andrew suggested.

"Disappearances, yes," she answered.

"Go on and tell me about them."

She gave a rueful smile. "The extraordinary thing is how many people have disappeared. It hadn't occurred to me till we started counting them up yesterday, thinking along the same lines as you, but when we did count them up we were really astonished."

"Yes, astonished," Mollie said. "One person after another and all of them seeming perfectly natural, except—except perhaps one."

"Start with that one, then," Andrew said.

“No, I think we’ll save him up for the end,” Constance replied. “Let’s begin with the Eckersalls. It happened first, for one thing, about three months ago. They’re two sisters, Jean and Kate, both in their sixties, I should say, and they live in that thatched cottage you may remember we passed in the car before we turned in here where the dog was in the gateway, barking at us. They’re crazy about dogs. And they’re crazy about gardening. They’ve a beautiful garden. You hardly ever pass it without seeing one or other of them at work in it. They’re very good neighbours. If one’s got a touch of flu they’ll always go shopping for one, and they bring one bulbs and seedlings for the garden, and they invite one in for enormous teas, where all the cakes are homemade and so good that if you aren’t accustomed to having tea at all, as I’m not, you’re completely put off eating anything else that day.”

“And which of them has disappeared?” Andrew asked.

“Oh, neither of them,” Constance answered. “It was their old father who vanished one day.”

“He must have been at least eighty-five,” Mollie said, “but according to what Jean told me one day, he suddenly took it into his head to go out to Australia to stay with his son Kenneth, who went out years ago and I think has a fruit farm near Adelaide. He’s been home once or twice, but not for some time now, and the old man made up his mind, Jean said, that he wanted to see him once more before he died. So off he went and naturally we didn’t give it a second thought till yesterday, when Connie and I began to wonder—well, we haven’t exactly been wondering, because of course that would be absurd if you knew Jean and Kate. All the same, we put him down on our list of people who’ve disappeared.”

“What’s he like?” Andrew asked. “Are they fond of him?”

“He’s a possessive, domineering, selfish old bastard,” Constance replied. “If he’d been my father I’d have been delighted to see him go off to the Antipodes and shouldn’t have grieved much if he hadn’t survived the journey.”

“Oh, come, Connie,” Mollie protested. “He wasn’t as bad as all that.”

"As bad or worse," Constance said. "But people like that, if only they're ruthless enough and insensitive enough, have a way of getting away with everything they want. I honestly believe his daughters, poor souls, are devoted to him."

"Do they ever talk about his coming back?"

The sisters looked uncertainly at one another. Constance frowned.

"I can't say I remember their ever having done so," she said. "But Mollie knows them much better than I do. Have they ever talked about it to you, Mollie?"

"I remember Jean saying they were going to redecorate his bedroom for him before he came back," Mollie said, "but that was some time ago and she didn't say anything about when it was likely to be. I got an impression he might be away for a fairly long time."

"So that's our first possible victim," Andrew said. "Unpleasant bully of an old father, murdered by two daughters who couldn't take it any longer. Who's next?"

Mollie gave an uneasy little titter. "It sounds dreadful, putting it like that," she said. "It makes it all sound quite unreal."

"That may be a good reason for doing it. Go on."

"Well, there's Mike Wakeham," Constance said.

"Who's he?"

"The Wakehams are our next-door neighbours. They're young and good-looking and I think moderately prosperous and they hate one another."

"That sounds more promising," Andrew said. "And he's vanished, has he?"

"Please," Mollie interrupted, "you mustn't take too much notice of what Connie says about people. She pretends to be much more censorious than she really is. She doesn't mean half of it."

Andrew was inclined to believe that she meant most of it. He had never thought of Constance as exactly an intolerant woman, but only as someone who from time to time enjoyed sharpening her wits at the expense of other people, and who certainly did not suffer fools gladly.

“He’s got rather a habit of vanishing,” she said. “He’s done it at least twice before, to my knowledge, and when he does it, Naomi, his wife, has a way of coming to see Mollie and weeping on her shoulder and saying she can’t stand it anymore, she’s simply got to divorce him. But it always ends with her taking him back.”

“Are there any children?”

“No.”

“So that isn’t the reason she sticks to him. You’re sure it’s because of women that he vanishes, are you?”

“It seems likely, doesn’t it, unless now and then he finds he’s simply got to have a rest off Naomi. She’s a very intense blonde who can’t get over the fact that she gave up a wonderful career on the stage to marry him. The career tends to get more wonderful as time goes on.”

“What does he do?”

“I’m not sure. He’s something in the City. I’ve an idea he’s in a firm of stockbrokers, but I’m not sure about it. Naomi drives him into Maddingleigh in the morning and he takes the train to London, and she picks him up again in the evening. Then about three weeks ago he simply didn’t come back and he hasn’t been seen since.”

“And his wife has no trace of him?”

“Not so far as we know.”

“Do you know if she’s reported it to the police?”

“Oh, she wouldn’t do that!” Mollie exclaimed. “If he’s simply gone off for a short time with another woman, she wouldn’t want to bring them in on it, would she? I mean, think of the humiliation. I don’t believe she’s told anyone about it but Connie and me and perhaps one or two other friends.”

In fact, a gossip, Andrew thought.

“What do his employers think about it?” he asked. “Hasn’t she been in touch with them?”

The sisters exchanged looks again, then shook their heads.

“We don’t know,” Constance said. “After all, there are certain things one doesn’t ask a person even when they’re

pouring their heart out to you. Or seem to be pouring out their heart. As a matter of fact, there's a complication in the present situation which has made us rather careful of what we say to her. We've a suspicion that Naomi's got an affair of her own going at the moment, and that that might even be the reason why Mike's stayed away. We may be quite wrong about it, but in a place like this that sort of thing gets around, and it's a fact that Nicholas Ryan is spending an unusual amount of time in the old house and a good deal of that time with Naomi."

"Ryan," Andrew said thoughtfully. "Why does that name sound familiar?"

"You've probably heard it from us," Constance answered. "It was old Mrs. Ryan whom Mollie worked for for all those years and who left her so much money. Well earned, one may say, but still, it was generous of her. Nicholas is her grand-nephew and all she left him is that Victorian monstrosity down the lane. It'll bring in a very handsome sum if he ever succeeds in selling it, but I don't think he's finding it easy to get rid of. Unless someone wants to turn it into an old people's home, or something like that, it may be very hard to sell. It's too big and inconvenient and ugly. Still, he doesn't seem to hold it against Mollie that his old aunt left most of her money to her. He's an easygoing, friendly young man with a casual sort of attitude towards money and possessions generally. I'm not sure what he does for a living. Sometimes I wonder if he's on the dole and just camps in the old house now and then when it suits him. But of course he may have inherited plenty of money from some other relative. Anyway, every time he talks to us about what he's doing, it's something different. I know he's been a courier for a travel firm, and he's worked in a company that was making some kind of very modern furniture, and in some kind of project—I think it was voluntary—which was sending food to starving Africans. And that may mean he has money of his own. I always find it very refreshing to talk to him, because you never know what may be coming next. And besides that, he's very good-looking."

“And definitely isn’t one of the people who’s disappeared,” Andrew said.

“No, as I told you,” Constance said, “he’s around the place rather more than usual.”

“Then are Mr. Eckersall and Mr. Wakeham the only ones who’ve really vanished?”

“Well, as a matter of fact, no,” she said.

“Go on then, who are the others?”

There was a slight pause, then Mollie asked, “Do you think a woman counts?”

He was puzzled. “The murder of a woman is generally thought to be as important as that of a man. I don’t think there’s ever been any inequality in the matter.”

“No, but what I mean is—” She hesitated, weaving her fingers together and looking as if she did not know how to set about explaining something. “In that letter that came to me, you see, it says, ‘Don’t forget I saw you bury *him*...’ That means the dead person, if there really is one, is a man, doesn’t it? So the fact that our doctor’s wife left him two or three weeks ago isn’t—What’s the word I want?” She looked helplessly at Constance.

“Relevant,” Constance said.

Mollie nodded vigorously. “That’s it. Relevant. The letter can’t have had anything to do with that, can it?”

“It doesn’t sound like it,” Andrew agreed. “All the same, tell me about it.”

“We don’t know much about it,” Mollie said, “but David Pegler’s been my doctor for years. And he looked after Mrs. Ryan too. He lives in that nice Georgian house at the cross-roads. His practice is mainly in Maddingleigh, but he and a partner hold a surgery twice a week in Clareham, and we used to see quite a lot of his wife, Carolyn. She’s a good deal younger than he is. I suppose he’s about fifty and she’s only thirty-five, but I always thought it was a happy marriage. And then one day apparently she just left him. He isn’t the kind of man who tells you much about himself and all he said to me in a sad sort of way was that she’d gone and he didn’t suppose she’d be coming

back, and I remember I gave him a cup of coffee and we went on and talked about cricket. He's secretary of the village cricket club and tremendously keen on it. He really keeps the club going. And I suppose Carolyn went off with some other man she'd fallen desperately in love with, or something like that, but I really don't know anything about it."

"And that's the lot?" Andrew asked.

"No," Constance said again.

"I was just thinking it wasn't a very promising bunch," Andrew said, "but you've been keeping something up your sleeve, haven't you?"

"We did say there was one disappearance that didn't seem altogether natural, didn't we?" She reached for the coffeepot and refilled their cups. "Actually I find it very hard to talk about it, even if it's got nothing to do with the letter, or with murder, because it's still a real tragedy. There's a young couple who live across the road in the cottage next to the Eckersalls'. Their name's Gleeson. Jim is Leslie's second husband. He's a quantity surveyor, working in Maddingleigh. And they've a son—they had—that's to say, Leslie had or has—oh dear, I'm afraid I'm getting confused. What I'm trying to say is that Colin, who's about eleven, if he's still alive, is Leslie's son by her first husband, who I believe was killed in a car crash, so Jim is Colin's stepfather, and the relationship between the two of them has never been good. Jim's a difficult sort of man, very touchy and suspicious, and Colin's a very self-assertive sort of child. But I don't know what he did to make Jim lose his head one day, because usually you could see he tried very hard to hold himself in when Colin was getting on his nerves. But something happened and Jim gave Colin a real beating up and after it Colin ran away and hasn't been heard of since. And Leslie's been absolutely devastated by it. Of course she hasn't forgiven Jim and I don't think he's forgiven himself, yet it seems to comfort them in some way to cling to one another, rather as if they feel they're both guilty for what happened. But if that letter has anything to do with Colin..."

“Yes?” Andrew said as she paused.

She drank some coffee and did not reply. A cloud had settled on her face.

There was a little silence, then Andrew said, “Presumably the police were brought in on this.”

“Oh yes, immediately!” Mollie broke in with a kind of eagerness, which seemed to have been brought on by her sister’s reluctance to say any more. “They’ve been here, asking endless questions, and every few days they come to the Gleesons and say they think they’ve found Colin, and then it turns out to have been a mistake and it makes poor Leslie feel worse than ever. I think she and Jim are really sure Colin’s dead. But of course it’s the not knowing that’s so terrible for them. I believe every time their telephone rings they expect news of some sort, and then it’s nothing.”

“How long ago did this happen?” Andrew asked.

“About a month ago,” Mollie answered.

“Well, you know what the story makes me feel,” Andrew said. “It seems to me there’s no question that Constance should take that letter to the police. If the child’s dead, whether he was killed by Gleeson or some chance passerby who picked him up when he was trying to run away, they ought to know that there’s someone hereabouts who saw it happen, or at least saw the body being disposed of. Constance, you know you’ve no choice about it, whatever secret of your own you may be afraid may come to light. You’ve got to go to the police.”

“No!” She stood up abruptly. “Now let’s go for a walk. Let’s forget I ever told you anything about the letter.”