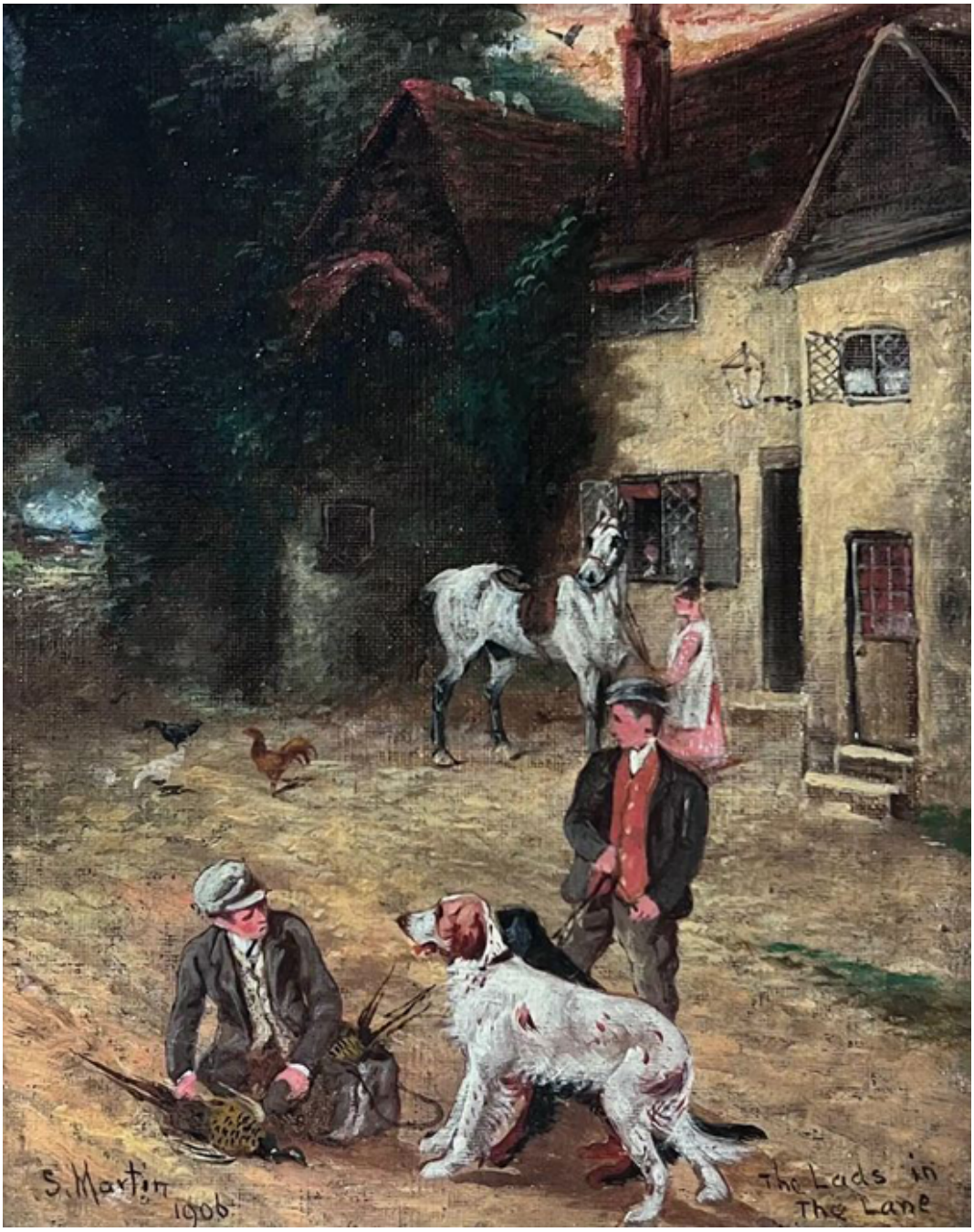
Fingers of Fate, Part III

Part III of V — Read all available Parts here

by Janet Charlesworth (November 2024)



Lads in the Lane (Sylvester Martin, 1906)

Fourteen

On the evening of her visit to the church on the hill, Jess asked the receptionist at the hotel where she was staying about Cudworth and Nether Hall. The receptionist, a friendly local girl, said no one ever went to Cudworth unless they had family there; it was known to be a desolate windswept sort of place. The Hall though was now a conference centre, and doing well by all accounts; some of the locals had found employment at the Hall and talked of how busy it was. The Hall`s patrons were hardly ever seen in the Village. The Hall had its own guest accommodation, bars and restaurant, a swimming pool and exercise room, and there were extensive grounds for its guests to explore.

All the farms in the valley, and heritage properties such as manor houses, halls, and expensive hotels, as well as most of the village, were on long leases from the Estate. It was well known locally that the Estate went from one male heir to the next. As the Squire's son and his two grandsons had died with the plague, the only surviving male heir that the executors had been able to identify in 1870 had been the Squire's younger brother. He had had no appetite for a career in the Church, or the Army—occupations which the second sons of the landed gentry were traditionally encouraged to pursue. Instead, he had left England to make his fortune in California. He had become a very wealthy man in his own right, and had married and had children, and built his life in America. When the executors for the Estate contacted him to advise of his inheritance, he had satisfied the will's requirements that he live at the Hall by having it designated as his home in England. He had then appointed a firm of solicitors to manage the Estate's business, making only rare visits himself to check that all was well. Apart from his occasional visits, and the occasional visits of his successors, the Hall had stood empty for a very long time. It was assumed by the locals that it had only been out of concerns for the tax implications if the Estate had been sold off, that his great great grandson had taken an interest in

his English heritage, and had used the resources from the Estate to renovate the old Hall and establish the conference centre.

It was easy to get to, and the following morning, Jess made her way to Nether Hall. She stopped briefly at the top of a hill to take in the view of the Hall and its grounds in the valley below. It was an imposing stone building, four-sided with a central courtyard which, she was somehow sure, was accessed from its east side. Its south side, which she had a clear view of, faced down the valley. There was a large lake, stands of oak, beech and alder, clumps of rhododendrons and, in the distance, the open countryside. There was a wide stone flagged terrace running along the south side, steps from which led down to the area below and its extensive manicured lawns on either side of a central path, a water fountain and a lily pond. The lawns were surrounded by lush borders filled to overflowing with varieties of delphiniums, stocks, dahlias, geraniums, and roses. The building's stone was the colour of sand and had probably been cleaned recently. Situated about ten feet apart on the south side, there were eight sets of tall and wide glassed double doors, opening out onto the terrace. The window frames were of light oak, and the glass gleamed and glinted in the sunlight.

Jess drove down into the valley and through the imposing gates which marked the beginning of a long and winding drive through pastures and treed countryside before eventually arriving at Nether Hall. The car park, as she had expected, was on the east side of the building. Jess parked her car and made her way to the main entrance and the reception area. She wasn't at all sure what she would do but she knew she wanted to look around the Hall. This was where the lady in the rocking chair had spent her childhood. She wanted to see as much of it as possible.

The entrance from the car park led into a passage which passed through the outer perimeter of the building to the inner

courtyard. On the right, still in the entrance passage, there were signs directing visitors to a large waiting room. It was very comfortably furnished with armchairs, couches, and upright chairs grouped around tables displaying leaflets about the Hall and local attractions. An opening in the wall on the right as one went into the waiting room looked into an office. A young woman stood at her desk as Jess entered, and greeting her with a smile and a bright expression as she moved toward the opening in the wall, asked Jess if she could be of any help. Jess was taken by surprise. She hadn't thought of what she would say. She had just wanted to look around. She then remembered the current use for the Hall, and her wits returned.

"I, well, I wondered," smiling at the young woman warmly, "just what would be involved in holding a conference here; do you have any information you can give me?"

The receptionist was all sweetness and light.

"Of course, Madam," she smiled, "let me give you our sales package" and, without a glimmer of suspicion, she handed Jess a large manilla envelope filled with brochures and price lists.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?" inquired the young woman.

"Well, would it be possible for me to look around a little? The Hall looks so beautiful, I would love to see some of the rooms. Is it convenient?"

"Oh, I think we can arrange that," said the young woman, brisk and efficient now, "there is a conference going on at present, so you won't be able to look into all the rooms, but I can get one of the porters to show you something of the rest."

"Thank you" said Jess, "I would appreciate that. And" Jess inquired, as if in afterthought, "is it possible to stay at

the Hall if one isn’t attending a conference?”

“Sometimes” said the receptionist, her manner cooling, “it depends really on what our other bookings are. We’re not generally available as a hotel. The best thing to do is to call us when you need accommodation, and we can see what our situation is at that time.” The receptionist then invited Jess to take a seat until the porter arrived, and went back to her desk, and her work.

Jess had the distinct impression that she had been down-graded from a potentially valuable customer to a possible nuisance.

A porter was duly found and Jess was led back into the entrance way, and then into the inner courtyard, and then into the main entrance hall. It was superb.

Jess had fallen in love with the Hall when she had first seen it from the brow of the hill; now she felt she was home. Emotion welled up inside her and filled the entrance hall with echoes of belonging, of being here before, of knowing this place. She knew, without looking, that the grand staircase went to a landing on the back wall at the first-floor level, and that one short stair went to the east, and one short stair went to the west, which short stairs accessed passages that ran through and around the building. Stairs to the second and third floors were accessed from the west and east side passages at each corner of the building. The entrance hall was two floors high. A huge chandelier was suspended from the ceiling on a heavy gold chain. The exposed floors were a polished light oak; the carpets were of thick wool, light beige in colour, with streaks of palest pink anemone and green leaf running down the side. Wing chairs covered in a muddy cream coloured fabric with a white silky stripe stood along the walls on either side of exquisitely elegant side tables on which stood beautiful ceramic lamps. The walls were smooth plaster with a pale pink marble finish, given depth and substance with decorative paneling and moldings.

The entrance hall, though two floors high, felt comfortable, warm, and welcoming. Jess sighed in complete satisfaction with what she saw, and had to fight to control herself as she turned to the porter in response to his inquiry as to whether or not she would follow him up the stairs.

As she followed the porter up the wide shallow stepped staircase, she had a sudden vision of children laughing as they ran down the stairs and slid down the banisters. They were dressed oddly. She shook her head and, in an effort to keep focused on where she was now, she gazed intently at the porter's back as they made their way to the floor above.

At the top of the stairs, she turned to look at the window on the first-floor level above the entrance doors. It was an impressive eight paned affair crowned with a circular portion split into four equal pieces. In the centre of the circle was a round piece of pale blue glass, about the size of a tennis ball. The light oak frame and the faint pink marbled walls were a superb setting for the window's design.

The porter took the passageway to the east side of the building to show Jess some of the guest rooms. Everything was exquisitely done. Clearly a great deal of money had been spent. The ground floor on the south side was where the main conference rooms, library, bar and restaurant were located, along with the kitchens. The first floor on all four sides of the Hall housed the guest bedrooms. The second floor was used for staff accommodation, and overflow guest rooms.

The upper third floor, which would have been the nursery at one time, was currently used for storage but would no doubt be converted to a profitable use as the conference centre business grew.

The stables had been converted into private accommodation for the Squire.

They made their way back down to the ground floor, and she was

escorted to the spa area which was housed in an extension to the building accessed through a passage from the back of the main entrance hall. There was a fully equipped gym, saunas, hot tubs, and a large swimming pool which was sheltered under a glassed-in ornate wrought iron frame.

It was nearing lunchtime, and the porter was clearly anxious to keep Jess away from the south side of the building, though she would have been very interested to see the conference rooms, bar, library and restaurant. However, as the current conference attendees would be breaking for lunch and were not to be disturbed, she was shown back to her car.

On her way back to her hotel, Jess stopped her car on the brow of the hill again to take another look at the Hall. Odd to feel so much at home in the place, she thought, very odd. And who were those children she had seen in her mind's eye? And that window, what a superb window; it had instilled in her such a sense of completeness and peace.

She sat with her back to a tree, looking down on the Hall, and thinking over her experience for some time. It was with some reluctance that she eventually roused herself to head back to the George Hotel in Highgate in search of her own lunch.

F**ifteen**

Later in the afternoon, Jess visited the Highgate Parish offices. They were housed in a building reminiscent of her old infant school and, she was sure, were painted in the same dreary cream and green colours. There was a musty, dry smell about the place, promising dusty corners and cobwebs. The rooms had high ceilings, with windows set from around shoulder height to high up in the walls. A gloomy light penetrated through the dust and dirt on the windows into the dingy waiting room. There was a bench for sitting fixed to the wall on the far side, and a bell to ring for attention on the

counter. Some very old posters about being careful to do this and that, which seemed to Jess to have likely been there since the War years, were stuck to a partition located behind the counter which separated those waiting from those who might respond to their needs. She could hear the odd cough, and a phone ringing. She rang the bell and waited. Eventually, and just before she was about to ring the bell again, perhaps with a little more force than before, she could hear feet shuffling along, and then an old bent figure appeared from behind the partition. He had hardly any hair on his narrow head, and a pair of spectacles precariously balanced on his almost bald pate. He glared at her from the other side of the counter.

“What d’yer want?” was his hostile and discouraging inquiry.

“I do apologise for disturbing you,” she said brightly, “I’m a stranger in the area but I do believe that some of my distant relatives lived here once. I wondered if you could help me locate the records of marriages, births and deaths for the local area?”

“Umph. Well maybe I can and maybe I can’t. What’s t’name o’these ere relatives?”

“Cudworth,” she said.

He looked up quickly, his eyes alert now, curious, shining.

“Oh aye. Cudworth is it. And where did you say you were from?”

“I didn’t. But I presently live in Canada.”

“Oh aye, one of the colonies is it? Well, let me think now.”

The old man shuffled away and disappeared behind the partition. She could hear low voices, some thumping and banging, a few curses, and then he reappeared, blowing dust off a large ledger which balanced precariously on the top of several others he held in his arms.

He was huffing and puffing, and grumbling beneath his breath, but not so quietly that Jess didn't hear some references to "bloody foreigners."

"You'll haff to come inta one'ot rooms here. And ye canna take these away wi ye. They 'as to stay here."

His voice was almost shrill as he tapped the ledgers vigorously. The discouragement that Jess was feeling at the sight of so many books must have shown on her face for he seemed to soften slightly.

"Yer can copy owt you want, like, but ye canna take 'em away wi ye."

"I understand," she said.

He indicated she could come behind the counter, and then led her down a passage into a small room which had the same high windows as the rest of the building. A naked bulb, suspended from the centre of the high ceiling, illuminated a small square metal table at which was placed one hard backed metal chair. The ledgers were dropped onto the table, and he moved to the door. As he turned he caught another glimpse of Jess's expression of dismay as she looked at the pile of ledgers.

"Do yer want some tea?" he asked, sounding irritated that he had asked her, "I expect you'll be awhile."

"Thank you, thank you. You're very kind. I would appreciate a cup of tea."

"Right then. I'll be back," and the old man disappeared.

Jess tried to sort the ledgers into chronological order. They appeared to cover a period from around 1800 to the early 1900s.

The old man brought the tea, and spilled some of it into the saucer as he placed it on the table. Then he stood, arms

crossed, and looked at her closely. He had thawed a little from his first frigid response to what he had felt was an unconscionable and unwarranted interruption to what he had planned for his afternoon. The mention of the Cudworth name had sparked his interest; Cudworth was a big name thereabouts.

“So how are you related to ’em then?” he asked, “the Cudworths?”

“Oh, it seems an aunt of my maternal great grandmother was of that family. But she lived in Cubdale with a niece as far as I know. I don’t know why she didn’t live at Nether Hall.”

“Married was she then?”

“Actually, no, at least as far as I know, she didn’t have a husband. She was a bit of a recluse I understand.”

“First name Lilly?” he asked.

“Yes,” startled, Jess turned to look more fully at this garrulous old man, “do you know of her?”

“Maybe I do, maybe I don’t,” he said, sniffing, and lifting his rather large beak of a nose toward the ceiling.

“Well, do you or don’t you?” demanded Jess, irritated by his self-important, all-knowing manner, “what, what do you know? Tell me, I don’t know much of her at all really, but I want to know.”

The old man relented. “Well,” he said, “rumour has it that Lilly’s mother got kicked out of that there Hall. T’old squire threw her out; made her leave her bairns. He was hankering after another maid.”

Jess sat very still, taking in this new information. She felt overwhelmed, bewildered, and flooded with thoughts of her own experience and its aftermath. Slowly she calmed down, and slowly she began to allow herself to accept that there was a

reason why she had been involved in all of this. No wonder it had been that strange woman who had come to her in the spiritualist church, no wonder.

She continued to sit, hand on her chest, waiting for her heart to stop pounding.

The old man watched her reaction with interest, and concern, and with a sudden rush of compassion, said “that were beginnin on end of ’em if yer ask me,” he said, confidently, “you mark my words, it were that that did em in. And serve um right,” he declared. He pointed to one of the ledgers, “this is about where you should start to look” he said, and hauled out the ledger for around 1830. And, then, more kindly, “I expect tha knows it weren’t required to register nowt until around 1875. Nobs tho registered stuff. An they say its best to work backards like.”

“The ledgers appear to stop in the early 1900s. Do you not have any since then?” asked Jess.

“Aye, I do” he said, “I figured though that tha had enough on tha plate for now lookin at them lot,” pointing to the pile of books, and then, with a sudden return to his usual unhelpful and taciturn manner, “and we’re not open for thee to look at this stuff all the day long tha knows.” And then he disappeared.

It didn’t take long for Jess to locate Lilly Cudworth in the births and deaths register, and to find that Lilly’s mother had been called Patricia. Lilly was born in 1835, and was the daughter of Patricia and the then squire of Nether Hall, Charles Ian Cudworth. From a further search, it appeared Lilly had a younger brother called Frank, and a younger sister, Martha.

Martha had died of pneumonia when she was 15. Frank had married when he was 22. There were two boys from the marriage. Frank, his wife, his two sons and the old squire had all died

in 1870. Cause of death was given as “plague.”

Lilly Cudworth then was the only surviving child of Charles Ian Cudworth and his wife Patricia. Why then did she live at Cubdale and not at Nether Hall?

None of this made any sense to Jess. If her maternal great grandmother was a niece of Lilly Cudworth, then she must have been the daughter of either Lilly’s brother, Frank Cudworth or Lilly’s sister Martha. But Martha had died, unmarried, at 15, and Frank Cudworth didn’t have any daughters, he had two sons, neither of whom had the chance to marry before they died of the plague.

The old man had come back into the room. He was tapping his watch.

“Ha ye got no home to go to?” he asked “its time to shut shop.”

“Oh, thank you,” said Jess. “thank you for all your help, and the cup of tea. You’ve been very kind.”

“Aye,” he said. “I expect we may see thee agin afore too long.”

Jess laughed. “Yup, I expect so.”

“Aye,” he said.

“Bye then.” Jess stumbled into the sunshine in a daze, her mind in turmoil, her heart racing. She had to find somewhere to sit quietly, to digest all she had learned, to ponder on its meaning. She made her way back to her hotel room and its window seat, ordered some tea, and settled down with her journal.

It was clear that something was amiss. Her great grandmother was the key. She had to find out more about her great grandmother.

Her grandmother had died some 20 years ago. She had been buried at Whetstone. Why Whetstone? Maybe there was more to learn about her grandmother and her great grandmother there.

Jess decided she needed to make a trip to Whetstone to see what she could dig up from the records there.

S**ixteen**

Symes was nervous. He was sitting at one of the tables in a now deserted restaurant downing his customary lunchtime glasses of wine. He generally drank two bottles of wine at lunchtime, and he was damned if the impending arrival of Shaw was going to interfere with his routine. But he felt uncomfortable about it. There was a nagging small inner knowing somewhere in the furthest pushed away recesses of his mind that he would have been wiser to stay off the wine until the interview was over.

Symes knew he must be the prime suspect. He knew how the villagers gossiped about him, and he knew that his wife had made friends among the villagers, and among the customers in the pub, and had not been discreet about their marital difficulties. Everyone knew he had affairs, and that his relationship with his wife was often violent. He knew that Louise's accounts of his behavior were a source of entertainment for a lot of the regulars at the bar. He didn't care. If anything, he would encourage her; her tales sustained his image of independence and derision of social norms and his general defiance of political correctness. He also knew that those customers went back to their dreary homes and congratulated themselves on their marriages being nowhere near as bad as his was. Be damned to them all he thought. The police had nothing on him but that kind of gossip, and he was going to get through this. He laughed out loud when he thought of all the insurance money from Louise's death, and how he was

going to be on easy street when the dust had settled. He could sell up, move to the south, or Europe, and retire. He lit another cigarette, inhaling deeply, fleetingly remembering the surgeon's warning about the return of his cancer if he didn't amend his ways. Be damned to that too, he thought, as far as I know, I only get to live once, and why give up something I enjoy for a few more years sitting around in a miserable nursing home waiting to die, no way.

The restaurant bookings for lunch and dinner on the Sunday Louise's body had been found in the bar had been cancelled, and the restaurant was still closed. The Sunday closure had impacted his cash flow, and though he expected the bank would understand, he knew it exposed the underlying precarious viability of his business. Hey ho, he thought, feeling some amusement, maybe, in time, when the news got around of Louise's death, it would encourage some extra bar business from the more salacious types. Meanwhile, the police car outside the front door would likely put off any casual customers. He briefly wondered if he could sue the police for loss of trade.

Shaw's car pulled into the car park. A black Jaguar. The sight of the black Jaguar irritated and intimidated Symes, made him feel more nervous and more hostile. He viciously stubbed out his cigarette, swilled back the remains of his glass of wine, and stood to receive the Chief Inspector.

Shaw was not looking forward to the interview with Symes. All he had heard about him, his nature, his attitude toward his customers, his attitude toward women, was antithetical to Shaw's own approach to life. He was prepared for the necessity of keeping a tight hold of himself, and to stay objective, and to not react to what he could expect in talk and behavior from Symes that he would not tolerate for a moment outside the confines imposed by his job.

In his work, he was constantly exposed to the consequences of

failed adaptations to the demands of life, to the fruits of the sins of the fathers, passed on down through to the fourth generation, and perhaps beyond. No doubt Symes had his own heritage to contend with. However, for Shaw, most people tried to overcome what they had been burdened with, and though through his job he mostly knew of those who had failed, he had a great deal more sympathy for them than the type that it seemed to him Symes represented; the type that was full of defiance and brash bravado, resentment, contempt, and disdain; the type that took a kind of boastful pride in their heritage, and assumed it gave them a license to make as many other people as miserable as possible.

Shaw reminded himself that he was forming a judgment of Symes out of hearsay, and that he needed to put that hearsay aside, and not let it influence his impressions of or his attitude toward Symes. He was well aware that everyone has a history, and that everyone has work to do as a result. Some do better than others. He also knew, from experience, that some of the worst offenders, people who had committed the most heinous crimes, had been well liked and respected in their community. That Symes was so thoroughly disliked locally did not make him guilty.

Shaw found Symes in the restaurant waiting to receive him, a half empty bottle of wine on the table, and assumed that Symes had been drinking. Symes had made no attempt to conceal the fact.

“Mornin,” said Shaw.

“Mornin,” rejoined Symes.

“Do you want to have our conversation here?” asked Shaw “or would it not be preferable if we moved into a more private room?”

“As you like,” said Symes, “though there’s no one here but us. There’s a small office we could use if you prefer.”

“Your preference.” said Shaw.

“Well then, we’ll be OK here,” said Symes. “If by some miracle a customer braves the police car at the door, we can move.” He then offered Shaw a glass of wine or a beer. Shaw declined saying he was on duty. Symes responded with a barely concealed sniff of contempt and derision, and a declaration that as he was not so constrained, he would indulge in some wine. He then reached for the bottle and poured more of its content into his glass, and lit a cigarette. He then turned to Shaw and asked “So, what can I do for you?”

“Your wife’s death is a bit strange,” said Shaw, “I need to ask you some questions about her, and about what you know about her death.”

“OK. Ask away,” said Symes.

“How did she seem to you on the day she died?” asked Shaw.

Symes ignored Shaw’s question and asked one of his own. “Do you know yet what killed her? Have you got the autopsy report? I’m assuming she died from a heart attack, she drank so much, but maybe you can confirm that?”

“I’m waiting for the final results of the autopsy,”said Shaw. “Initial findings are that she did have a very high alcohol content in her blood, which could have been a contributor to a heart attack. However, there is evidence of a blow to her head, likely from the fall against the fireplace, and there was bruising on her face, and other parts of her body, which could also have caused or contributed to a heart attack, and so to her death. I am told those injuries were likely caused at or around the time of death, and suggest she was violently assaulted.”

Symes turned away from looking at Shaw, and was silent for some time, directing his gaze out of the restaurant window, a window which looked out over the gardens which bordered the

river which flowed by his property. Watching the river flowing by, he had a sudden panicked feeling that his life had been taken along in that river's flow, and was out of his hands now. He turned from looking at the river, and looked down at the floor, his mind in overdrive. No way was he going to surrender his life to some river's flow. Surely the police would have seen by now that the cash register in the bar was open, and that there was no money in it. He was determined he wasn't going to say anything about the cash. His story was that he had gone into the bar with his son, and the cleaner, after his wife's body had been found, and before the doctor or the police had arrived, and he had not been in there alone at any time since then, and he would stick to that, come Hell or high water. There was nothing to link him with her death. Nothing. No one had known about her visit to the bar that night. No one had witnessed their argument.

"Could it have been an intruder?" asked Symes quietly, still looking away from Shaw. "I was in bed when all this happened."

"What are you suggesting?" asked Shaw.

Symes turned to look directly at Shaw. "Well, maybe there was an intruder, someone breaking in. It was late when I went to bed. The bar was cleared, but I don't always check the back door. It used to be that we didn't need to do that around here. I was a bit drunk, as usual, and I didn't check. It had been a long night. She and I have separate bedrooms, so I wouldn't know if she was in her bed and asleep or not. But when I went up, and went to bed, I assumed she was in her room. Maybe she heard a noise and came down to investigate and surprised an intruder."

"There was a knife under one of the chairs in the bar, with her fingerprints on it," said Shaw, looking more closely at Symes.

"Well then," said Symes, "could that be it? Maybe she got the

knife to defend herself, and the intruder beat her up."

"Why would she not have alerted you had she thought she heard an intruder?" queried Shaw.

"Waste of time," said Symes, followed by a short snort of a laugh, "I'm usually well out of it by the time I go to bed, and she knew that. It would take an atomic bomb to wake me, and there are times when that wouldn't do it either."

"Was there no one else that she could have alerted?" asked Shaw.

"Well, my son lives here when he's in the area, but he was out with his girlfriend on Saturday night, and he often stays at her place overnight on the weekends. If he came back here, it would have been late," said Symes.

"What sort of time is late?" asked Shaw.

Symes quickly thought through the events of the night when Louise had died, and remembered looking at the clock in the bar when she had first appeared. It had been after 1 am. He was sure he had not heard his son come home before he had gone up the stairs to his bed.

"Well, I don't really know," said Symes. "I don't wait up for him you know. He's a grown boy. Maybe you should ask him."

"Yes, I will be talking to your son," said Shaw. "Tell me, did your wife carry life insurance?"

"Oh yes," said Symes, "of course. We're in business, or were. We both had to carry life insurance; it's required for business loans and the like."

"And your son—is he involved in the business?"

"Gawd no," exclaimed Symes, laughing derisively. "No bloody way. He's from my first marriage. Louise is my third wife. My

son stays here when he's in the area, and he helps out a bit when he's here, but I bought this pub with Louise; its got nothing to do with him. He had no warm feelings for Louise, I can tell you." Symes had a spasm of regret as he realized he had just put his son into the frame for potential suspect, but he quickly shook it off.

"Well, thank you," said Shaw. "That's all for now. I expect I will need to talk to you again at some point."

"No problem," said Symes. "Any time."

"And your son?" asked Shaw, "when would be a good time for me to meet with him?"

"Well, he's not here right now," said Symes. "He's at work. You could come back early doors, he'll likely be here then, or I can give you his cell number?"

"Thank you," said Shaw. "I'll take the number and give him a call, and arrange a time to meet with him. In the interim, please don't leave the area without first contacting me."

"Oh, no worries there," said Symes. "I have no plans to go anywhere at the moment."

"Very well, I'll be in touch." Shaw rose from his chair and turned as if to leave, and then, turning back, asked "when do you check your cash take in the bar?"

Symes looked at Shaw quizzically and said, "well, I don't. I usually leave it for the wife to do that in the morning. I'm generally not in a fit state by the end of the evening to be counting cash. Why?"

"Oh, just a query for now."

Symes stood up. "You know," he said, "in all the circumstances, I had completely forgotten about that. I'd better go and check."

“No need,” said Shaw, “when I looked, there were no notes in the till, just a bit of loose change.”

“There, you see,” said Symes, triumphant, “I told you it was a bloody burglary!”

Shaw smiled. “I’ll be in touch,” he said, and made his way out.

Shaw reflected later that his meeting with Symes had not been as bad as he had expected. He was pleased that he had determined to keep an open mind. Symes had seemed quite helpful, and his suggestion of a late intruder was plausible. He would have to interview the son. If he came home when Louise was wandering around downstairs, perhaps looking for a potential intruder, and they got into a fight—well, maybe. And maybe there was more to Symes than meets the eye, maybe Symes was misjudged. Nevertheless, all argument and conjecture and possibilities considered, Shaw’s instinct, always reliable, was telling him quietly, and without doubt, that Symes was responsible for Louise’s death.

Seventeen

Shaw had called the number Symes had given him for his son. His call went into voice mail. He left a message, explaining who he was, reminding him that they had met on the Sunday, and that he needed to meet and talk with him further about Louise’s death.

He remembered how the son had been quiet, and yet very present, when Shaw had first visited the pub. The son had been the one to get the coffee and the food. He had done that without fuss, efficiently, quickly, and without seeming to expend any effort at all in producing what Shaw had enjoyed as one of the freshest croissants, richest coffees, and tastiest compotes he had had in a long while.

It was about 30 minutes later when he got the call back. The son, David, was still at work, but said he could be available to meet with Shaw at his office any time after around 5.30. Shaw suggested they could meet at the pub, but the son said he would prefer to meet at Shaw's office if that was convenient, and it was.

Shaw was curious as to why David had preferred to meet at the police Station, which was located in Foxhill, some distance from the pub. Most witnesses preferred to be interviewed on their homeground. For a witness to prefer to come to the police Station was surprising, and interesting.

David duly arrived. Shaw was looking out of his window at the time and saw him drive into the car park. A white MG Midget. Not new, but not that old either, and this time David was in a business suit. When Shaw had seen him last, he had been somewhat disheveled; sloppily dressed in a pair of loose track suit bottoms and a less than fresh T-shirt, and in need of a shave. David in a business suit was an impressive sight. He was over 6 feet tall, well built, with regular, if not handsome, features, a fair skin, fair hair, hazel eyes, and an erect, confident, and open posture. Shaw expected he would be successful at whatever he chose to do.

"Thank you for coming," said Shaw, showing David to a seat at the other side of his ample desk.

"Not a problem," said David. "How can I help?"

David was relaxed and open. He sat comfortably, legs crossed, and after brushing a speck of something from his trousers, sat back in the chair with arms on the arm rests, head back, and a slight smile on his face.

"I need to go over events with you again, if I may, your movements that night, anything you may have noticed that was unusual, any comments you might have, now that you have had some time to think about what happened."

“Well, to be honest, I can’t say I’ve thought about it much. I’ve been busy, earning my daily bread, and all of that.” David grimaced, took a deep breath, and said, “I don’t want to appear callous or uncaring, but she wasn’t my mother you know. I didn’t care for her much. She was Dad’s wife, current wife that is, he’s had a few, and his partner in the business, and she had to be tolerated. That’s all.”

“You didn’t get on with her then?” queried Shaw.

“I get on with everyone,” said David. “I make a point of doing so. It doesn’t mean I like ‘em. As I said, she had to be tolerated.”

“How does it affect you then, now that she’s dead?” asked Shaw.

“Well, it hardly affects me at all,” said David. “For Dad, it will likely be beneficial. Dad will collect the life insurance and pay off the bulk of the debts he’s run up at the pub. That will take the pressure off. He might be in a better mood for a bit, though I expect he will just run up a whole load of more debt if he stays in the place long enough. If he can find a buyer for the place, he might get out before he does that, with enough to retire on. He’s always wanted to live down south, or in Europe somewhere. It won’t matter to me. I don’t expect anything from him. I certainly don’t want to inherit the Red Lion with a whole load of debt. If he sells and retires on the proceeds, I expect he’ll burn through whatever there is in no time. By the time he dies, he could well be in even more debt, if past experience is anything to go on. I don’t want to be on the hook to his debtors, and I certainly don’t want to end up on the hook for looking after him. I stay at the pub right now, if you can call it staying, because its convenient for me as a drop-in place. I move around the country a lot in my job. I did have ambitions at one time of taking it over, running the place, making it profitable. I’m interested in the hospitality business. But any hopes of that

went pear shaped years ago. I've long since given up on the place, and am focused on my other business interests, which are selling upgrades to this and that, renovations generally, green energy, that sort of thing."

There was a pause. Shaw didn't say anything, choosing to wait patiently. David, after some reflection, took a deep breath, and continued.

"He's been a lousy father, but I still feel for him. Its odd. Its like I feel he needs someone to look out for him. I keep my room there, and its more or less my base, the place I can come back to. I try and keep an eye on him. But the only way Dad is ever going to get clear is if he sells the Red Lion, and that won't be easy. Who wants to shell out the kind of money he wants to buy a whole load of work? No one I know. So, no, Louise dying doesn't make much difference for me personally, but its overall bad that she's gone. She at least had some business sense, and tried to keep the place afloat, at least she did initially. Dad is useless at business. He just enjoys being the big man in the bar. He doesn't do any work. He hires staff for everything. It's as if he thinks he's the Squire or something. She at least had some idea about the necessity to balance expenditure with income."

"What was your role in the business then?" asked Shaw.

"Well, no official role. I have my own job. I helped out when I was around, that's all."

"Well that explains it somewhat. It is unusual for a son of your age to still be living with his father," said Shaw

"Yes," responded David. "I appreciate that. The Red Lion though is convenient for me. It's a convenient location, close to the friends I have, and it doesn't cost me anything. I do a bit of work when I'm there, but that's it. I'm not expected to be around that much; I travel a lot with my job. I'm not married yet so the arrangement works for me. It's easier for

me to have a room at the pub when I'm in the area than to have to buy a place, or pay rent for a place that I'll likely hardly ever use and won't be around to look after. And I'm not always at the pub when I'm around here anyway—if I have a girlfriend on the go, I'm generally staying with her at her place."

"Right," said Shaw, in the beginnings of readjusting his assessment of David to include the habits of the cuckoo, "so staying with your current girlfriend, where would that be?" asked Shaw.

"Well, here, in Foxhill," said David.

"So, on the night Louise died, you were out with your girlfriend from Foxhill?"

"Yes, that's right," responded David.

"And, for the record," said Shaw. "Your girlfriend is who?"

"Name's Sandy Martin," said David.

"Aah," said Shaw. So the girlfriend lived in Foxhill, hence David's preference for the location for the interview. "Thank you," said Shaw. "We'll have to be in touch with her of course, to confirm your alibi for that evening."

"That's OK," said David. "She'll be able to do that."

"So, tell me more about the relationship between your dad and your step-mother," said Shaw.

"I don't like the term step-mother," said David. "If you don't mind, I prefer to see her as Dad's business partner. She was never anything like a mother to me, step or otherwise. When I was growing up and still at school and living with them all the time, she always preferred her own kids from her previous marriage. Of course, they've up and left now." David seemed irritated and impatient.

“OK. Sorry about that,” said Shaw. “Business partner it is. So, what was the relationship between your dad and his business partner like?”

“Lousy I would say,” said David. “About as bad as it can get. You could cut the air with a knife when they were together. They seemed to hate each other. Always fighting. Picking at each other. Insulting each other. It was getting worse and worse. Very uncomfortable to be around. I was staying away more and more, and I’d actually been thinking about moving out altogether before this happened.”

“Umm. So, what was the problem there then? Why were they so much at loggerheads?” asked Shaw.

“Dad is useless,” said David. “He’s a philanderer of the worst kind. And he drinks and smokes all the profits I would say, or most of them. It’s not a great bar trade you know. There are some regulars on the weekends, but in the week it can be pretty dead. Same for the restaurant. The restaurant does make money, but most of the profits go on paying the staff. Dad’s lazy. He wants staff doing everything for him. The bed and breakfast is likely the best money maker. But there again, Dad has to have staff come in and clean, and do the laundry, and make the beds, and cook the breakfasts. He could have made more money if he had done some of the work himself. He wouldn’t do that though. And she was as bad in the end. She used to try in the beginning, but she gave up. She used to go on about Dad being lazy, and she saw no reason why she should work her fingers to the bone trying to make the place pay when all he did was sit around in the bar drinking the profits. Waste of time.”

“I’m surprised to hear that,” said Shaw. “The place looks so substantial, comfortable, established. I assumed it was a good business.”

“Assume away,” said David, “appearances, at least there, belie

the reality.”

“So, you’d been out with Sandy that night,” continued Shaw, “and you came home at what time?”

“It was about 12.30. I didn’t check my watch when I went into the pub, but it must have been around then. Sandy and I had been out to a movie, and then we went back to her place. We had a bit of a tiff though, and I ended up coming back to the Red Lion. It would have been about 12.30,” said David.

“And you didn’t look into the bar at all?” asked Shaw.

“Nope. I went in by the back door. Its usually open. Dad never locks it. He’s usually the last one up and is supposed to secure the place, but he’s never locked the back door in my memory. I do have a key for the front door if he ever does lock the back door but I’ve never had to use it. So, from the back door, which leads into a passage which goes by the kitchens, I went into the main entrance, and then up the back stairs to my room. I never went near the bar.”

“What time did your dad usually stay up until?” queried Shaw, “if he was usually the last one up, when would he have been closing up shop?”

“Oh, it varied,” said David. “On the weekends, it could be later than in the week. Because we did bed and breakfast, and anyone staying overnight could have a drink whenever they wanted, he didn’t worry about closing times. The regulars, on the weekend, expected to have a drink after closing time, and because the restaurant is open, and usually busy on the weekends, there are sometimes late customers from the restaurant who want to have a brandy or something in the bar after their meal. Dad would usually send the staff home around 11.30 and then see to drinks for those who wanted to stay. Sometimes, on the weekends especially, it could be as late as 2 or 3 in the morning, depending on the crowd.”

“So when you came home around 12.30, there could still have been people in the bar?” asked Shaw.

“I expect so,” said David. “But I had no wish to join them if there were. I went straight up to bed.”

“Did anything unusual happen at all in the few days before your dad’s business partner died?” asked Shaw.

David frowned, and for a few moments stared at a point on the floor in front of Shaw’s desk while he uncrossed his legs, then crossed them again, uncrossing his arms, and then crossing his arms at the same time. He then looked up and for a few moments squinted at Shaw out of a tight, tense, face. After a few moments of this visible discomfort, he then seemed to make a decision. He sat back in his chair, and with head raised now, and looking straight at Shaw, his arms now relaxed and resting on the sides of his chair, he said in a low but strong voice, “my mother came to the pub that afternoon.” There was a quiet acceptance of fact in his tone, “my birth mother that is.” He went on, “I don’t know her. She and my dad split up when I was a baby. But Dad said she had been to the pub. He gave me a photograph.”

David took out his wallet from his inner jacket pocket and extracted a photograph, which he passed to Shaw to look at.

Shaw studied the picture. The woman looked a little surprised, as if she hadn’t expected to be photographed. She was not smiling, she was looking at the person who had taken her image with a clear, direct expression, eyebrows slightly raised, registering more curiosity than objection. Her expression was calm. He was captivated by the picture.

“May I take a copy of this?” he asked.

“Sure,” said David, puzzled.

Shaw left the room and made a colour photocopy of the

photograph before reluctantly returned the original to David.

“She looks very striking, your birth mother,” said Shaw.

“Yes,” said David. “I didn’t get to meet her. And Dad, of course, has no idea where she is staying. He never thought to ask her. He says he did say to her that she should come back sometime. But that was it. Typical of him.”

David looked at the photograph for a few seconds, and then carefully put it back in his wallet. For a moment, he and Shaw fell into silence. David again looked at the floor for a second or two, and then raised his head to ask, “Do you have any more questions for me? I need to get on to meet Sandy. We’re to go for a meal at her parents’ place this evening, and I don’t want to be late.”

Shaw, feeling the need to probe further asked “Do you have any idea why your dad and your birth mother split up?” asked Shaw.

“No, not really,” said David. “He didn’t talk about it beyond saying that she left us. I can tell you though that he seems angry at women generally. He says they are all whores.”

“Well,” said Shaw. “The woman in that photograph you have there doesn’t look like a whore to me.”

“No,” said David, “she doesn’t, but maybe she’s like the pub. Maybe her looks belie her reality.”

“And how do you feel about women, generally?” asked Shaw.

“Well, I’m not like Dad, at least I don’t think I am.” David laughed. “But you can’t expect me to think much of her,” pointing to his wallet pocket, “for leaving me and my sister when we were babies.”

“Oh, you have a sister?” inquired Shaw. “I didn’t know that. She doesn’t live at the pub then?”

“No,” said David, “she lives in London. She works for a hedge fund, does very well as far as I know. I rarely see her.”

“And her name?” inquired Shaw, “I may need to speak to her.”

“Elizabeth, Elizabeth Hawes, she’s married. I have her address.” David again opened his wallet and read out the address to Shaw for him to write down.

“I suggest you keep an open mind about your mother,” advised Shaw, “there’s stuff goes on in marriages that we don’t hear about, and your dad was no saint from what I’ve heard.”

“True enough,” rejoined David, clearly not convinced. “Will that be all for now, I really do need to get off.”

“OK, that’s fine for now,” said Shaw. “I have your cell number. I’ll call you if I have any more questions. Thank you for dropping by.”

“No problem,” said David, standing up and turning to leave, “any time. I’ll be going then.”

“Goodnight then, for now,” said Shaw.

After David had gone, Shaw studied the copy of the photograph of the woman. What could drive a woman to leave her children; how did she survive after that? Would she have a motive for murder? If so, wouldn’t it be Symes she would want to murder? Or perhaps the second wife, the one who took her place? Why would she murder the third wife? Perhaps he should find out what happened to the second wife. Perhaps she had been among the late crowd that night. Perhaps she had got into a fight with the third wife. The woman in the photograph didn’t look like the type that would get into a cat fight. And the son could have killed his step-mother. Symes could have been up in his bed and the son could have found Louise in the bar when he returned, and got into a fight with her.

He needed the pathology report.He ne

He made his way home, still with the image of the woman in his mind.

Eighteen

The next day, Jess made her way to Whetstone. It was about a two hour drive from her hotel in Highgate. She had decided to take the longer route that wound its way around the edge of the Peak Park, and across the moors, thus avoiding any contact with the neighbouring city.

It was a dismal day, cold and raining. The English climate was never that great, and it was clear that what had passed for a summer was coming to its close.

The route took her through the countryside of her ancestors, and her own childhood, and passed by Cubdale.

The scenery was magnificent. The open moors, barren, bleak to some, rich sweeping landscapes to others, revealed their wild savagery more clearly in the wind and cloud swept sky and rain.

Stone walls edged the road in, keeping it, and its traffic, away from the open countryside, and often denying the view unless one parked the vehicle and took to climbing up onto a gate to look around. If one did trouble to do that, the reward was a view of the moors, farms and fields, and reservoirs in the valleys below.

The road narrowed at several places to leave room for only one vehicle as it made its way around the bottom of dangerous switchbacks, which crossed streams, or other pitfalls. Then the road would widen as it crested the ravines, and once again gained its foothold on the top of the open moor.

Jess had avoided this area heretofore. The memories that flooded back as she drove the familiar road were of her roots, her family, her ancestors, and of the many who were now dead, and who she remembered with love, and a feeling of irredeemable loss. She had happy memories of church, brass bands and male voice choirs, cricket matches, and family gatherings. Good days long gone.

She felt gratitude for the down to earth approach of her ancestors. Her family had been working folk. Their lives had been hard. Her immediate ancestors had lived through two world wars, and experienced the loss of sons, husbands, and fathers, near starvation, and financial hardship. They stood no nonsense as a result. But her ancestors had then been required to tolerate the destruction of their community and their culture and traditions in the name of globalization, multiculturalism, climate change, and the demands of membership in a European Union. The steel works, a major employer, was sold to a foreign company which then closed half of it down, laying off hundreds, and requiring many men and their families to leave the community to find work elsewhere. And then the coal mine had been shut down under net zero requirements, and more men and their families had left to find employment elsewhere. And when, in later years, county and city boundaries were redrawn, and the community fell under the jurisdiction of a neighbouring city, folks from that city began moving into the cheaper housing they found in the remains of the old community. The newcomers were assessed by long-time residents still in place as being too big for their boots, arrogant, disrespectful, and lawless; and there was no doubt that they were. Crime rates rose exponentially. The invasion, for that was what it was, and the consequent vandalism and destruction that followed, was relentless. Those who had managed to stay in place found they were powerless to defend what was left of their community and its way of life.

The sale of the steel works, and the closing of the coal mine,

and strangers moving into the community, eventually put an end to the old community and its culture, its church, Brass band, male voice choir, and cricket matches. Particularly poignant for Jess was a song that the male voice choir used to sing—she couldn`t remember all of it, but some of the words came back to her as she drove over the familiar lane which crossed the moors:

Oft in the stilly night,
Ere Slumber`s chain has bound me,
Fond Memory brings the light,
Of other days around me.
The smiles, the tears,
of boyhood’s years,
The words of love then spoken.
The eyes that shone,
Now dimmed and gone.
The cheerful hearts now broken!
Thus, in the stilly night,
Ere Slumber’s chain has bound me,
Sad Memory brings the light
Of other days around me.

When I remember all
the friends so linked together,
Who around me fall,
like leaves in winter weather,
I feel like one,
Who treads alone,
some banquet-hall deserted

Whose lights are fled,
Whose garlands dead,
And all but he departed!

Thus, in the stilly night,
Ere Slumber’s chain has bound me,
Sad Memory brings the light
Of other days around me.

It seemed to Jess that the elites responsible for imposing multiculturalism, globalization, and policies of diversity, equity and inclusion—not to mention critical race theory—were demanding that grounded folk reject and distance themselves from their roots, their heritage, their families, and their inherent identity, and feel only shame for the goodness they had once had—all on grounds that they were racist and that their ancestors were cruel colonizers. She felt the people pushing these ideas were out to destroy the West and all it stood for. In the pursuit of profits, communities were being destroyed, cultures and histories trashed, and folks were being pressured into investing their identity into how much they could acquire (assuming they had a job and an income) of the products big corporations incessantly bombarded them with through advertisements, and the internet, telling them what to think, what to buy, and what to value.

Those that signed up for this way of being were motivated by hopes of achieving tenuous and ever out of reach ratings of approval, containment, and belonging in their adherence to the current winds of opinion, and political correctness. In Jess’ view, they were lost souls, beings of the air, without depth or substance.

As for climate change alarmism justifying all kinds of opportunities for the unscrupulous to make millions on the backs of the taxpayer they had so assiduously terrified, Jess had her own thoughts, and had learned to keep them to herself.

As she approached the turn-off that would take her to

Whetstone, the light began to change. The clouds lifted, and the rain stopped. The ominous sky gave way as streaks of the sun’s rays started to break through the remaining cloud cover. Her spirits lifted.

Nineteen

Whetstone was arranged in a classical style. The church, once the centre of village life, was on the hill, and visible from just about anywhere in the village. All the larger homes were positioned close to the church, and the further away from the church one got, the smaller and poorer the homes became. The message was clear. If you were close to the church, and lived an upright, righteous life, you would prosper. If you lived in penury, it was your own fault for you must have offended God. That God’s son, who the church upheld as the Saviour of the World, had lived in poverty, with nowhere to lay his head, and had died, crucified on a cross, didn’t appear to disturb the arrangement.

Jess made her way to a pub that she knew of from years ago. She ordered a ploughman’s lunch and a half beer. A chat with the locals in the pub revealed the location of the parish records office. The office was not far from the pub, and the landlord was happy to have her leave her car in his car park while she made her inquiries. She had a good lunch, and with the intention of returning for coffee and desert, she walked the short distance to the parish council office.

She only knew that her grandmother’s maiden name had been Holmesley. Her grandmother had been proud of her family of origin. The Holmesleys had been wealthy and well-respected farmers in the Whetstone area. She had often talked to Jess, with a chuckle, about her father warning her about “going down t’bottom” as the locals called the neighbouring community, and “not finding owt worth having in them there parts.” Her

grandmother's marriage had been a "come down" for her in status, and economically, but she had been happy.

Her grandmother had married in Whetstone, and Jess hoped to be able to track down her great grandmother's maiden name from the records. And there it was. The records revealed her maternal great grandmother had married George Holmesley in 1890, and her maiden name had been Cudworth—registered as the daughter of Sarah Ellen Cudworth, father "unknown," and of the Parish of Cubdale. Somewhat feverishly, Jess searched further back in the Whetstone records but was unable to find any more Cudworth names; lots of Holmesleys, but no more Cudworths. Damn, she thought, where on earth would she find a record of her great grandmother's birth?

The clerk for the Whetstone office appeared.

"Any luck?" he asked.

"Well, some," she responded, "but I've hit a dead end," then realizing what she had just said, she smiled, "sorry, just feeling a bit frustrated." Then she asked, "are there other places where I could find records for the local area, for Cubdale, for example?" she asked hopefully.

"Oh aye," he said. "England was littered with parishes not so long ago, and they all kept their own records. There's maybe still some records for Cubdale somewhere. When they closed the church there, it would have been adopted, so to speak, by one of the neighbouring parishes, and that parish would have assumed custody of the records."

"So, who do I contact to find out, do you know?" she asked.

"Hang on a sec," he said. "I'll look at the register, there should be a name and address listed."

He disappeared. Jess, growing in excitement, paced the room until he returned bearing a piece of paper with a name and

address written on it, and, lo and behold, a telephone number. “Thank you so much,” she said.

Outside, using her cell phone, which worked on the tops of Whetstone, she called the number on the paper. A woman answered. She explained who she was, and the nature of her inquiry, and asked if it would be convenient for her to come that afternoon to look at the old parish records for Cudworth. The woman was hesitant, and went off the line for a few minutes. When she returned, she said that it would be okay for Jess to come to the house at 3.30 that afternoon.

Jess made her way back to the pub. Over her coffee and desert, and in conversation with the locals in the bar, she found out where the house was exactly. Not too far from Whetstone as it turned out, and easy to locate.

At 3.30, she presented herself at the home of the rector of the parish that had subsumed Cubdale. A long drive had led up to the portico embellished front door, and a somewhat imposing façade of a double fronted 3 storied stone-built property which was clearly in need of some tender loving care. The church spire could be seen over the top of an adjoining high wall. The rector was a surprisingly young man. Tall, very thin, with an unfortunate pasty complexion. He needs some fresh air, thought Jess, a few visits to the gym, and some good red wine and a steak or two. Jess wasn’t sure why, but she had imagined that he would be ancient, doddering, and a bit hard of hearing.

The Anglican Church in England was still independently funded from its vast land ownings, and was not reliant on tithes from parishioners to survive, hence the handsome parsonages which still dotted the country, though the congregation for the attached church might reach the mighty number of 8 on a good Sunday. Perhaps it was the policy of those in control of such matters that a young minister could cut his teeth in a remote country parish, without doing too much harm, before tackling a

more challenging inner city parish.

If I was him, thought Jess, I'd stay right here.

They introduced themselves. He was businesslike, hurried, and instilled in Jess a feeling that she was being an utter nuisance, and needed to hurry up and get done what she wanted to get done. His head jerked from side to side, he used rapid hand movements; he moved quickly, back and forth, and from side to side, and would periodically stand to the side, and with a sweep of his arm would encourage Jess to keep up with him as he made his way to the back of the house and a small, musty room, with a tiny window for daylight and a naked bulb for artificial light. What is it about these rooms for looking through ledgers, thought Jess, do they always have to have a naked bulk suspended from a ceiling, in a dismal space, as if it was some kind of prison cell?

"Can you tell me roughly which years you need to look at?" he asked.

Jess thought aloud. "Well, my maternal great grandmother was married in 1890. I expect she would have been around 18 or 20 then, so a period covering say 1800 to 1890 would likely work," said Jess.

"Very well," he said. "Let's take a look and see what we can find."

After some heaving, puffing, and a few accidents of ledgers falling to the floor, the rector presented Jess with one ledger.

"This is likely going to cover it," he said. "I'll leave you here to look through it. You can use the table there. I will leave the light on, of course. I'll have my wife bring you a cup of tea. Good luck." And then, with a wave, he disappeared.

Jess started at the beginning of the ledger. She remembered

the old man in Highgate telling her to work backwards from a known date, but she followed her instinct this time, and started at the beginning. And there it was. Her maternal great grandmother was born in 1873 at Cubdale. Her mother was Sarah Ellen Cudworth, and the father was registered as “unknown.” There was no record of Sarah Ellen Cudworth’s birth or parentage.

Again, Jess asked herself, why did a Cudworth live at Cubdale? Why was Sarah Ellen Cudworth not living at Nether Hall?

Jess reviewed what she had found out so far. The old squire and his only son, Frank, and Frank’s two sons, had all died in 1880 from the plague. The old squire’s daughter, Martha, had died of pneumonia when she was 15. Lilly, the surviving daughter of the old squire, had lived out her life at Cubdale, and must have been there at the time the plague struck at Nether Hall. A Sara Ellen Cudworth had a child born at Cubdale in 1873, father unknown, which was before the old squire and the rest of Lilly’s family had all died. Jess began to wonder if Lilly had been banished to Cubdale, being pregnant out of wedlock perhaps, or something else equally unacceptable in the times, and maybe Sara Ellen had been her daughter. Maybe her great grandmother had not been a niece or great niece of Lilly. Maybe she had been Lilly’s grand-daughter.

Jess realized her head was beginning to ache. She closed the ledgers, and switching out the light, made her way back down the hall to where she could hear the rector and his wife talking in the drawing room. She thanked them for their courtesy, told them where she was staying, and that she may want to come back again at some point. They were very polite, nodding encouragement and sympathy, and mumbling something about it being very difficult to come to terms with the past, they ushered her through the front door and waved goodbye from the step.

Jess made her way back to her hotel.

She was feeling annoyed. She realized she was going to have to go back and tackle that feisty old man again. She needed to go even further back in those records he guarded so well. Surely there would be some clue in them to help her to fill in the gaps.

Hey ho, she thought, more cups of tea.

Twenty

The same old man appeared the next day when Jess again rang the bell at the parish offices.

“Oh aye,” he said, “You again.”

“Hello,” Jess said. “How are you?”

“I’m well enough Miss, well enough. What can I do fer yer?”

“Same thing,” Jess said. “I just need to go a bit further back.”

The old man tucked his chin down, and peered at her over the top of his glasses. He chuckled.

“Well, lass, tha knows where’t room is.”

Jess suffered his seeming mockery in silence.

“I’ll give thee a hint,” he said. “Tha mi want to check out the Dillthorpe’s anall”

“Oh, why?” asked Jess.

He chuckled. “That’s for me to know and for thee to find out,” he said, tapping the side of his nose with his right forefinger.

Jess was exasperated. “I need the period from around the date of the old squire’s birth,” she said. “That would be around 1800 I expect. Do you have records going back that far?”

“Sure we do,” he replied. “But a’s I tol ye afore, not all births and deaths were registered in them days.”

He disappeared into the back regions of the office, and Jess made her way down the passage to the familiar dismal room. Too bad the weather is relatively decent today, she thought, thinking of much healthier ways to be spending her time before the weather wound down into the fall, but she couldn’t rest until she’d checked those ledgers again.

The old man came back with a stack of books. “Books won’t prove nowt for them days,” he said to Jess, looking at her with an expression of knowing superiority. “Its following up on what locals know from what their folks told ‘em that’s gonna fill y’ere in on what rum goings on were going on.”

“What do you mean, what are you talking about?” Jess’ tone reflected her frustration with the whole process she found herself engaged in. She was getting annoyed. She was beginning to feel that she was on a wild goose chase, fueled by some fantasy generated by her experience of that woman in the rocking chair and being told she was psychic in that spiritualist church environment. She should never have gone anywhere near that place. She was beginning to feel that she was wasting her time, and had fallen prey to an indulgence in a romantic fantasy of great wealth lying around for her to find her attachment and entitlement to, no doubt stimulated by her reading of Jane Austen novels; a kind of fairy tale with a happy ever after ending. She should instead be out there in the countryside that she missed so much when she was away from it, walking, enjoying the view and the weather. She would be going back to Canada soon. It made no sense at all for her to be spending what was left of her holiday on this ridiculous enterprise.

“Why don’t you just tell me what you know,” said Jess shortly.

He looked at her steadily. “You’re not to repeat it,” he said. “I didna tell ya if anyone asks.”

“OK, OK,” said Jess, impatiently. “What—what is it?”

“I eard she was his mistress like, that’s what folks said. Such goings on in those fancy houses. There she was, maid to the old squire’s wife, and sleeping with t’old squire no less! Course, it wah not unusual in them days I reckon. Even’t royalty like used to have their bit on the side. Rum goings on I reckon, rum goings on.”

“Who, who was his mistress!” demanded Jess, now being short of patience or inclination to indulge this taciturn self-important tapping of his nose old man.

“Lass from that Dillthorpe lot I ‘eard,” he said. “T’old squire kicked his wife out, made her leave her bairns, so that he could have t’other lass in his bed. Mad he was, mad.”

“What happened to his wife?” asked Jess.

“You don’t ask much, do yer?” The old man was indignant, and was now feeling somewhat intimidated by Jess’ clear impatience of his efforts to present himself as the sole source of all the knowledge she was seeking.

“How ‘s am I supposed to know” he said, “I told yer, t’were only rumours. Folks like to gossip, or they used ta, when there were anywhere for folks to get together an ha’a good gossip. Yer can’t find a decent local pub these days. There all full of damn tourists and the like.”

He peered at her again over his glasses, and in a more conciliatory tone, said “Anyhows, here’s where you’ll find the Dillthorpes.” He put some books on the table. “They’re a local family. Most of em worked on’t Cudworth estate in its heyday.”

Jess thanked him and turned her attention to the records for 1800 and on. Charles Ian Cudworth had been born in 1812. He had a younger brother, born in 1814. In 1829, Charles Ian Cudworth, then squire of Nether Hall, had married Elizabeth Townley. Elizabeth Townley had died in 1830, in childbirth. The child, Edward, was registered in the births. There was no record of his death. In 1833, Charles Ian Cudworth had married Patricia Hallworth. This was the marriage Jess had first come across. The children of the marriage were Lilly, Martha and Frank. Martha had died of pneumonia in 1852. Frank and his wife and two sons, and the old squire, had all died from the plague in 1870. There was no record of the deaths of Patricia Hallworth or Lilly, and there was nothing about the younger brother, or Charles Ian Cudworth's first son, Edward, by his first marriage.

The last entry for a Dillthorpe was just 20 years prior. A son had been born to Emily and Edwin Dillthorpe. Jess returned the books, thanked the old man, and made her way back to her lodging. A quick look through the phone book located Emily and Edwin Dillthorpe, right there, in the village, and she telephoned them immediately. Emily was at home. Jess explained that she was trying to trace her family tree, and that she might be related to the Cudworths. She understood the Dillthorpes had worked on the Cudworth Estate, and she wondered if Emily and Edwin might be able to help her – would they be interested in joining her for dinner that evening, and spending some time talking about their family? Emily was surprisingly cooperative, and said she was sure she and her husband would be able to see her later that evening. Jess booked a table for dinner, and then went for a long walk during which she questioned her sanity.

Twenty-one

Emily and Edwin turned out to be down to earth, homespun sort

of folks. Jess liked them immediately. They were both around 50. Emily had the comfortably stout figure that often overtakes women in their middle years. Edwin was lean and muscular, and very tanned. He worked in a local market garden, and would have talked all night about his vegetables and how to look after them if he had felt his audience was sympathetic to his own passionate interest. He told Jess that the old man from the parish offices had called him, and warned him to expect a call from Jess, so they had not been surprised when they received her invitation.

“That old fella thinks he knows everything, you know, because he’s custodian of all those records,” said Edwin, laughing. “But he knows nowt. He never reads owt. He likes to hang out at what passes for a local pub these days, and play the big man. He gossips and taps his nose, saying he’s saying nowt, and the like. He likes to give everyone the impression he knows all the dirt in the district, and that he’s full of secrets, and none of us takes a blind bit of notice of him for the most part. But, when he called me to tell me you were here, and seriously looking at the ledgers like, me and the missus thought, well, you know, why not talk to her, she sounds like a bright and sensible lass. So here we are.”

Jess quickly put them at their ease and gently moved the conversation into the family history. She explained that she had thought she had some connection with the Cudworth family through an aunt, but was beginning to wonder if that was true. She said she had heard that one of the Dillthorpe family had worked at Nether Hall at the time this supposed aunt was living there, sometime way back around 1850.

“Oh well,” said Edwin. “Just about all the families around here worked for the Cudworths one way or another in them days. What was it she was doin like?”

“I believe she was a maid to the old squire’s wife,” said Jess.

“You don’t know her name, do you?” he asked.

“No, I’m sorry, I don’t. Its just something I heard from that old man at the parish offices.”

“Umm, now let me think,” said Edwin. “That’s a while ago, for sure.”

Edwin had looked quickly at his wife.

“1850,” mused Edwin, “by gum, that’s goin back, that’s goin back.”

After some humming and hawing to himself while he gazed out of the window and shuffled in his chair, he turned to Jess and his wife and suggested that “maybe she was from the Whetstone lot? Aye, Aye, could be why I don’t recall that. Some of the Dillthorpes moved, they didn’t all stay hereabouts. Course, them were the days when all a girl could do was go into service, like. It were either that, or a farm, or get married.”

“Into service?” inquired Jess.

“Yes, my dear,” said Emily. “Girls from working class families were put out to service. They would go and work on a farm, or in some nob’s place, sometimes just for their keep, but they sometimes did get a bit of pay, nothing to write home about of course, and no chance of any independence. Just one less mouth to feed at home.”

“A kind of slavery then?” said Jess.

“Aye, I guess that’s about the size on it,” said Edwin, nodding his head.

“So, if she was from this area originally, it wouldn’t be unlikely that she would go into service at Nether Hall, would it?” asked Jess.

“No, it’s possible,” acknowledged Emily. “It’s possible. I expect though that we would have known of it. Nether Hall were likely considered a good spot in them days. They used to have good days at Nether Hall, afore all that tragedy struck.”

“You mean the plague deaths?” asked Jess.

“Well, that were finish on’it,” said Emily, looking down at the floor.

“Anyhow,” said Edwin, cutting in nervously. “Maybe we should ask my old mum, see if she can remember ‘owt.”

“Would you?” said Jess. “I would be very grateful if you could help me with this.”

“Aye, I’d be happy to,” he said. “You’ve got me going wi’it now.” He laughed. “It’s kinda interestin in’it? All them years ago, and yet its not that long ago really. There are still people alive now who remember those days.” Edwin was clearly getting interested in the whole venture.

They spent the rest of the meal talking about the old days, and how things had changed, and not for the better in Edwin and Emily’s view. They remembered when the valley had been a nice quiet place, with decent folk, and now it was overrun with trucks going through with their noise and dirt, and city folk who bought up the property, pushing up prices so local folk couldn’t afford to buy, and then commuting every day to the city to work. The villages were gradually feeling empty and soulless, and a bit ghostly.

“The heart’s gone out of the place,” said Emily. “There’s some real queer folk living here now, when they are here that is.”

“Do you know anything about the landlord of the Red Lion?” asked Jess.

“Oh him,” said Emily, her face in a frown, “I have that, and the least said the better.”

She firmly closed and puckered her lips and looked away from Jess.

“He’s a rum one, and no mistake,” said Edwin. “He’s not from these parts you know. He came here from the city. But there’s them as likes his kind. Not many locals use his pub.”

The evening wore on pleasantly. Jess felt very comfortable with Edwin and Emily and pleased that she had been able to meet with them. Maybe her peculiar research wasn’t such a waste of time after all. They were straightforward people, traditional in their lifestyle and outlook. They had an engaging humility around their sense of the rightness of their values and views, which made conversation with them easy to navigate. They felt familiar and homely.

They agreed that Edwin would call his mother the next day and arrange for a time for Jess to visit with her. His mother lived up near the old church apparently. Jess didn’t say anything, but she wondered if she was going to again meet with the lady with the wraparound apron.

So that Edwin could be present, the following Sunday was decided on. That left Jess with three days of free time. She decided to take a break from the whole business, and get some sea air.

The next morning, she left for the North Yorkshire coast and Robin Hood’s Bay.

To Be Continued

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