

A SHADOWED LIVERY

Inspector James Given Mysteries

Book One

Charlie Garratt



Prologue

At precisely twelve o'clock on Thursday, 29th September 1938, Peter Bishop fell five feet ten inches to his carefully calculated demise. Beneath the hood, his blood vessels burst as the rope choked the murderous life out of him. His neck snapped.

There had been six of us in the small observation room. I'd arrested the man and was trying to push out of my mind the horror I imagined on his concealed face. The prison governor was scrutinising the hangman's preparations, the chaplain was leafing through his Bible and the newspaperman stared fixedly at Bishop, probably wondering how he might write this up for the late edition. Alongside us was the doctor, fidgeting all the while, repeatedly pulling his watch from his pocket as if he was late for the theatre. Our final companion was a young warder who had been given the job of recording the events for posterity. He stood apart from the rest and made copious notes on a pad. His scribbling and the doctor's shuffling feet were the only sounds to be heard above the ticking of the clock.

Bishop's knees had failed him briefly when the noose was put in place but his composure soon returned after Mr Markham made the final adjustments and whispered a few concluding words in his ear. The executioner knew Bishop's weight to the last ounce and the exact length of drop it would take to kill him quickly and with minimal suffering. But it wouldn't be painless.

One minute before noon, Mr Markham placed his hands on Bishop's shoulders a final time, stepped clear of the trapdoor and took hold of the metal lever which rose from the floor beside it. The condemned man stiffened. Governor Jackson lifted a telephone receiver, spoke a few short words then nodded to his colleague on the other side of the glass. In the remaining seconds as the clock moved to the appointed hour, I envisioned the same scene a hundred miles further north at Strangeways Prison, where the murderer's accomplice, Harold Stack, was facing an identical fate.

It might be ten minutes before Bishop's heart would stop beating, even though the life had already gone from him. This allowed sufficient time for the doctor, Governor Jackson, the note-taker and the hangman to descend to the silent chamber where Bishop's still-warm body now waited.

The prison chaplain, the editor of the *Birmingham Post*, and I tried to share a few words but we were all affected by what we'd witnessed. I believed the man had been treated justly, much more so than the poor shopkeeper he and his mate had kicked to death on the street. Even so, I couldn't help feeling some compassion. I'd seen death many times and in many forms over the years and I'd never get used to it. Perhaps I was in the wrong job.

After a short while the Governor and doctor returned, telling us that Bishop had been formally declared dead. Hands were shaken and the cheerless party took tea in Governor Jackson's private rooms; it was an awful affair. I was thankful when, after a decent interval had elapsed, I was able to leave. The young warder accompanied me through the dark corridors until I exited through the lodge gate into the daylight on Winson Green Road. I was never happier in my life to feel the sun on my face and the clean air in my lungs.

Superintendent Dyer's office was on the third floor of the squat red-brick building in Warwick which had been home to police headquarters in the county for the last half century. I'd been sitting in the canteen, drinking strong tea and playing a hand or two of crib, when a message arrived for me to go up to see him.

Henry Dyer rose from his seat as soon as I entered his room, stepped around his massive desk and offered me his hand. He was a great bear of a man, barrel-chested and six or seven inches taller than me. We looked like two different species. He was smiling, which was a relief. You only needed to be wary when the smile wasn't there.

'Come in, James, take a seat. You're well, I hope?'

I nodded, though I felt far from well. This case had been taking it out of me and the pointlessness of the hanging had made me feel sick, despite knowing Bishop would have carried on his vendetta if I hadn't caught him. Hopefully it would serve as some kind of deterrent to his pals, but I doubted it.

Dyer's office was as expansive as the man. The oak-panelled walls were decorated with certificates and photographs of him with local dignitaries and I wondered if he changed them around depending on who might be invited in. The desk-top held only a single file and a framed photograph of his wife and daughter. They both looked happy, but that was before the girl, Sarah, had been knocked down and killed by a drunken driver. Seventeen years of age and her whole life taken away. Dyer never talked about it yet, on occasions, I'd see the sadness cloud his eyes.

Our paths hadn't crossed much in my early days, when I was a lowly copper plodding the streets of Kenilworth. I'd worked hard and shown my aptitude for investigating beyond the obvious so made Detective Sergeant in a little over five years. Dyer and I then met more often as he preferred to be kept updated directly on cases which interested him, receiving information "from the horse's mouth" as he liked to put it. We got on well and I'm convinced it was on his insistence I was promoted to Inspector a couple of years ago.

'Thanks for coming over to see me. I'd have called in to Kenilworth but I've been up to my eyes in it here since you finished up with Bishop and Stack. How did it go?'

'Unpleasant, sir. I wouldn't want to see that too many times. The case itself was nasty enough and having to go to the hanging put the lid on it.'

'Something I've never had to do myself, I'm glad to say.'

'Unfortunately those two are only the tip of the iceberg, the foot-soldiers. There are some very nasty individuals tied up with that lot, and clever with it. Too clever to leave a trail from the likes of Peter Bishop and I think it's going to get worse. They hate Jews and, sadly, shopkeepers like Shapiro make it too easy for them. I don't know why he couldn't just try to fit in more, be less obvious.'

'Easier said than done, James, don't you think? They look different from us and most of them seem to have some kind of foreign accent. Even if they changed their names and dressed as we do, we'd be able to spot them a mile off.'

'It doesn't mean they should be beaten up by mindless thugs though, does it, sir?'

'No, of course not. Are you any nearer to finding who's behind it?'

I ran through the main possibilities with him but had to admit I was no closer to a breakthrough. Bishop and Stack hadn't revealed who was giving the orders and I doubted they even knew. A message would be passed down the line and the fools would willingly do as they were told. Dyer nodded and probed as I went through my explanation, but I could see he had something else on his mind.

'So how can I help you, sir?'

'Always to the point, James. How do you know I didn't invite you in for a cup of tea and a friendly chat?'

Now I was embarrassed. He was right though, why didn't I just wait for him to act out being a good boss?

'Sorry, sir. I thought you'd be busy and would want to be getting on.'

He leaned back in his chair, stretched and laughed, a terrifying, booming sound.

‘You’re right there. As you’ve guessed, I do have something I’d like you to take a look at. With any luck it won’t be as harrowing as what you’ve just been through.’

One

The taxi swung out of the avenue and I got my first view of Grovestock House, its blindingly white stucco frontage gleaming in the autumn sunlight. The drive curved gently round a neatly manicured lawn and our wheels crunched on the gravel as we pulled up outside the front door.

As I stood outside waiting for the doorbell to be answered, I wasn't sure if there would be anything challenging in this case.

'Just go through the motions,' Dyer had said to me. 'There needs to be the appearance of a complete investigation but we already know what happened. And remember, it's not me wanting another look at it, it's the Chief Constable. He's getting pressure from the press who think we should have investigated the deaths more thoroughly. They're suggesting the case wouldn't have been tied up quite so quickly if the family wasn't so well connected.'

Briefly we went through the file together. I recognised the outlines of the case from the newspaper coverage. "Warwickshire House of Death" had screamed one headline, followed by every grim detail of the tragedy. Lady Isabelle Barleigh had killed her wheelchair-bound son with a shotgun before turning the gun on herself. This had been quickly followed by the suicide of the young man's fiancée. What made the whole affair more chilling was that the couple were to have been married two days later. Instead, they were now sharing a graveyard. I'd felt ill reading the article but, on the face of it, the facts had looked clear. Nevertheless, I was hardly surprised when questions started to be asked about why the whole matter was despatched so quickly. The deaths had only occurred a few days earlier and, somehow, strings had been pulled to convene a quick inquest and then a funeral to replace the wedding celebrations.

Now I was wishing I'd argued more against being assigned to this one, especially as Dyer had taken me off the Jewish beatings investigation and passed it to that idiot Terry Gleeson. If what happened at Grovestock House was as clear-cut as the preliminary work suggested then why give it to me? I'd told him that there were plenty of other good coppers around who'd adequately tie up the loose ends. I think Dyer knew the Bishop and Stack case had given me a good deal of pain and he was

trying to do me a favour. Or perhaps his instincts told him that the initial enquiry had been a bit cursory and, perhaps, unreliable.

Anyway, I hadn't resisted much so I'd left, briefly calling in to my station in Kenilworth, then home to collect a few things, arriving at Grovestock House before lunch. On the way I'd re-read the file and acquainted myself with the facts as they'd been recorded so far. It was unfortunate that a few days had passed and allowed the trail to cool but it couldn't be avoided in the circumstances.

The local constable, Sawyer, had been pretty thorough in his approach. He'd been telephoned about the deaths around midday, cycled over as soon as he could, arriving an hour later. By then the body of the fiancée had been discovered; she had shot herself with the dead man's revolver. First thing he did was make sure the gates were guarded. Nothing to be done for Tom Barleigh, his mother or girlfriend, so he set about photographing the scenes and interviewing witnesses, several of whom told Sawyer that Lady Isabelle had been increasingly set against the marriage, though none knew why. He'd written his notes up swiftly and gone through them with Gleeson, who hadn't bothered to interview anyone himself. Just like him, idle bugger.

The local doctor decided there was no need for a post-mortem and Sawyer presented his evidence to the inquest, which made the same conclusions he had. It was starting to bother me that everything had been despatched so quickly, so neatly.

Grovestock House had been built sometime in the middle of the eighteenth century when Thomas Barleigh had wanted a new home to reflect his recently acquired status as a Privy Councillor to King George III. He'd been appointed following his generous support to the monarch in a series of conflicts with France, particularly in the Americas. Thomas was no soldier, though, he was one of the new breed of industrialists, building up a fortune manufacturing muskets and pistols. Items put to good use by George's army in its attempts to suppress uprisings across the empire.

Thomas's grandson, having become a regular drinking partner to the Prince Regent, was raised to a baronetcy when the prince ascended the throne in the early eighteenth century and the house had been refurbished and extended to celebrate. Shifts in political allegiance over the next two centuries meant Sir Arthur Barleigh, the present incumbent, no longer had the power and influence his ancestors enjoyed. Nevertheless, the family was still important in the social merry-go-round of the county, hence the newspapers' interest and the Chief Constable's newly-found desire to make sure the job was done thoroughly.

A man in his late forties swung open the door. He wore a dark jacket and pin-stripe trousers, and his hair was greying at the temples. He gave off the unmistakable smell of brilliantine as he looked at me enquiringly over the rim of his glasses. He was beyond question a butler and I remembered from Sawyer's report that his name was Jervis.

'Inspector James Given, Warwickshire Constabulary. I believe you've been expecting me.'

'We have, sir. Sir Arthur asked me to prepare a room for you so I'll take you up if you'll follow me.'

'There'll be no need, thank you, Mr Jervis, I won't be staying here tonight. I've already booked a room in the village. However, you can look after my overnight bag for now if it's not too much trouble.'

He took it and asked if there was anything else I needed. I told him I'd like to have a look at where the deaths took place.

'Very good, sir, would you like me to accompany you?'

'No thank you, that won't be necessary, just show me where Lady Isabelle and her son died.'

He pointed to the left of the house.

'The shootings took place down there, sir, on the side lawn.'

I let the butler go about his business, instructing him to tell everyone in the house I'd arrived and would be conducting interviews later in the day. I didn't think for a moment I'd get through many but it would do no harm to put them under a little pressure.

Before heading to the side of the house I turned on the step and surveyed the grounds. It wasn't a grand estate by any means and I suspected it had once been much grander. Perhaps a profligate ancestor had squandered too much of the family fortune on high living. It still remained a couple of hundred acres at least, judging by the distance from the gate to the main house. A lawn, directly in front of the main door, was circled by the drive and bordered by several dozen rose bushes, whose scent would have been breath-taking in the height of summer. At its centre stood a magnificent cedar, fully thirty feet across and towering well above the roof top. The whole garden was walled or hedged on the two sides, with openings to further gardens, woods or fields beyond. The entire landscape sloped down to a lake sculpted into the fields below.

When I turned again and stepped back, I was able to take in the full grandeur of the house. There were two enormous bays rising to the roof and there were roughly twenty windows, all in the Georgian style. Ruefully, I compared this with the single window on each floor of my own little cottage in Kenilworth. The gravel crunched beneath my feet as I walked to the side lawn and through the gate. High walls and hedges surrounded the area and it was obvious that whatever had taken place here wouldn't have been seen from anywhere in front of the building. Not unless someone was close enough to the gate. I noted there was no other access, or exit, other than a side door into the house. The side walls were of much plainer red-brick and of a much earlier period, the grand frontage being merely a façade. I wondered what else in this case might be not what it seemed on the surface.

‘Good afternoon, constable.’ I looked at my notes. ‘Sawyer, isn't it?’

‘Yes sir, John Sawyer.’

‘I've had a chance to have a look at your report but there are a few things I need to go over with you, to get them clear. Well done with the photographs, by the way, a very thorough touch.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

He'd joined me at Grovestock a few minutes after my inspection of the front gardens. He was tall even for a copper, towering over me when I stood to shake his hand. His blond hair and fresh features, accompanied by the flushed cheeks when I praised his work, gave the impression of an overgrown schoolboy in a policeman's uniform.

‘I had my Brownie with me, sir; I tend to put it in my saddlebag when I'm out in case I see anything interesting to photograph on the way. There's not usually much use for it in my work round here, though. Lost cats, neighbour disputes, that kind of thing. I'm lucky enough to have a darkroom at home so was able to develop them myself as well.’

Sawyer's boyish enthusiasm was naive, but clearly he was smart and not afraid of using his own initiative. I was certain it would have been the first murder he'd looked at so he'd done well to keep calm and record everything as fully as he had.

‘Why did you conclude Isabelle Barleigh had shot Tom and then herself?’

‘Well, it all looked very obvious on the day, sir. The two of them were lying on the ground with the weapon between them. He'd been shot in the chest from close range,

toppling him out of his wheelchair, and she'd shot herself under the chin, really the only way she could have done it with a shotgun.' Sawyer turned green as he remembered. 'Also, people from the house and the estate were there in minutes, so it seemed unlikely that anyone could have carried out a murder then disappeared down the road without being noticed.'

'Not likely or not possible?'

He now hung his head slightly at the thought he might have missed something.

'I suppose it might barely have been possible, sir, for someone who knew the place well enough.'

I asked him if there was anything else at the scene, anything at all which might suggest a different set of circumstances.

'Nothing really, sir. The only slightly odd thing was that Lady Isabelle had a scrap of paper clutched in her left hand.'

'Paper?'

'It appeared to be a bit of a letter, judging by the partial address in one corner. It turned out to be that of Miss Bamford's father, Gerald Bamford. I searched the garden thoroughly but didn't find any more of it and presumed the scrap was all she had.'

'And what about Jenny Bamford? You concluded she'd committed suicide as well. Did she leave a note?'

'There was no note, at least none that I found. When I was let into Tom's room by Jervis, Miss Bamford was lying on the bed with the revolver on the floor below her hand. It seems that the gun belonged to Tom Barleigh and everyone knew he kept it in a drawer in his bedroom. She had a single bullet hole to the side of her head and the pillow was covered with blood so it was clear she'd died where she lay.'

He looked queasy again so I let him settle before continuing.

'Did you interview everyone when you arrived?'

'I took statements from everyone there. You'll know from the file that Billy Sharp and Tom Barleigh's nurse, Trudi Collinge, disappeared before I could interview them. I would have liked to speak to Jenny's family as well, to see if she'd been unhappy and so on.'

'But you didn't manage it?'

'No, it wasn't possible. Parents are divorced, she's in Australia and remarried. We sent a telegram to the local police so they could let her know her daughter was dead. Her father showed up briefly at the funeral but then left part way through before I

could speak to him. I asked one of the other lads to call round to see him but apparently the house looks like it's been empty for a few days.'

'What about Sir Arthur? Did you get a full statement out of him?'

'That wasn't easy sir, but I did get something. I was told by the butler that Sir Arthur had some urgent business which he needed to attend to and it would be really helpful if I could interview one or two of the others first. It made no real difference to me so I just got on with seeing everyone else that I could. When I'd finished, Jervis came to fetch me to go to Sir Arthur's study. He seemed a bit surprised to see me still there but did agree to be interviewed. Apart from telling me where he was when each of the shootings happened he wasn't able to add anything to what everyone else had said.'

'Did he suggest any reason why his wife might have done such a thing?'

'He said he was at a complete loss about it. To be honest, he seemed ... overcome, if you understand me. Like he didn't really know what was happening. I thought I'd best leave it alone until I was told to do otherwise by someone more senior. I did telephone next day in case he was feeling any better but was told he'd been given sedatives and was sleeping.'

'Tell me about him. How is it that he's "Sir" Arthur?'

'He's a baronet and inherited the title. It's come down through about eight generations until he took it over when his father died at the end of the Great War. That was about the same time he married Lady Isabelle.'

'"Lady" Isabelle? She was a proper toff then, was she?'

'No, I don't think so. I'd be fairly sure she picked up the title from him. I don't know much about her but I've an idea she was just a local girl who got lucky.' Sawyer then came up with a question he must have been dying to ask since we met. 'Excuse me, Inspector, and I know it's perhaps none of my business, but why has it taken so long for someone to follow up the case? I mean, I know Inspector Gleeson went through the file but he didn't even come down to the house, just met me at the station. Said there was no need. But now you've turned up.'

'You're right, it would have been much better if I'd have been able to make it straight away but I wasn't available. On the day I was still tied up with the Peter Bishop hanging.'

'I read about that case. Didn't they kick a Jewish butcher to death in Birmingham?'

‘They did. Bishop and Stack scarpered but I got lucky when they were heard bragging about it in a pub. They were both members of a Blackshirt gang, followers of that idiot Mosley, and had been planning the attack for weeks. Anyway, by the time it was over you and Inspector Gleeson had finished the investigation.’

I told him Gleeson had forwarded the file to the Chief Constable with a recommendation for no further action.

‘If you hadn’t made such a convincing case for a murder and two suicides it might have been chased up sooner.’

‘I’m sorry, sir, it all seemed so clear cut.’

‘Don’t worry about it, you did a good job. I can think of half a dozen officers, with much more experience than you, who would have come to the same conclusion. It was only after the inquest, when the big boss started getting pressure from the newspapers, that he asked Superintendent Dyer to have another look.’

‘And you think there’s more to the case than meets the eye, sir?’

‘I don’t know, but it’s all a bit too neat and tidy for my liking. Let’s just sniff around a bit longer and see what turns up. If it’s nothing more than me being overly cautious, then you’ll gain more respect from your colleagues and I’ll have had a nice day or two in the Warwickshire countryside.’

Sawyer filled me in on the other interviews he’d carried out with the household staff and the gardeners. No-one had witnessed anything and all except the butler were able to account for where they were when the shootings happened. Sawyer had also spoken to a friend of Tom’s, Alan Haleson, who was staying at Grovestock House and would have been his best man at the forthcoming wedding. Haleson had reported his version of the events but was on his own when each of the shootings took place.

‘So what would you like me to do now, Inspector?’

‘It’s imperative we find the young gardener, Tom’s nurse, and Jenny Bamford’s father. And I’ve to get a full interview with Sir Arthur. You follow up the first three as best you can. I’m going to finish reading the file and then go back to the bereaved husband and a few of his staff. Let’s see how we get on and we’ll meet up again tomorrow.’

I found Jervis in his pantry, a small room between the kitchen and main part of the house. This was the nerve centre of his fiefdom. There was all the paraphernalia associated with ensuring the life of his master was well run and comfortable: the wine

coolers, ice buckets, silver trays, cutlery boxes and so on. The room also contained a small table and two chairs; an old one seemingly from the kitchen, and a slightly more welcoming one placed in the corner. Jervis had an open ledger on the table when I popped my head round the door. A number of others were neatly stacked on the shelf above him.

‘You look busy, Mr Jervis.’

‘Not really, Inspector, just catching up on some paperwork.’ He smiled sorrowfully as he got up to beckon me inside. ‘Much less to do now with fewer people in the house. We were expecting this to be such a happy time. How can I help you?’

The man looked upset and seemed to be putting on a brave face for the sake of the other servants. He must have felt the tragedy as heavily as everyone else.

‘I need to see Sir Arthur. Could you go up and tell him I’m here and want to interview him?’

‘I’m afraid I can’t, sir, he’s not here.’

‘Not here? A moment ago you said he was in his room most of the time. I thought I asked you to tell everyone I’d like to see them today.’

‘I’m sorry, sir, I should have said when you arrived. He decided this morning he needed to get out of the house so left quite early for a ride.’

‘Does he often do this?’

‘Before all of this happened he’d go out several times a week and could be away for hours. On more than one occasion he’d travel as far as Banbury and back in the day, a good three hours’ journey in each direction. I believe he thought you wouldn’t be here until the evening. I couldn’t say when he’ll come home but I’ll let him know you want to see him if you’re still here. He’s said we need to give the police as much assistance as we can and I should put the house at your disposal if you need somewhere to stay or work.’

I was annoyed at Sir Arthur’s absence but all I could do was interview the butler and hope his employer would return soon. I thanked Jervis for the offer of a room to work in, took a seat and checked some of the details from the file with him.

‘So where were you at the time of the first shootings, Mr Jervis?’

‘It’s as I told the Constable, sir. I’d just entered the lift upstairs and pressed the button to come down. I wouldn’t normally use it, of course, the servants aren’t really allowed. We’re supposed to use the side stairs, but I was bringing down a large basket of bed linen that needed to be aired for the guests due to arrive.’

‘Surely that isn’t your job?’

It’s usually one of the maid’s jobs to fetch the linen but there was so much it needed someone stronger. I thought the first bang was something to do with the lift machinery starting up. Then, when I’d travelled a few more feet, I heard the second bang and was certain it was a gunshot fairly close by, much closer to the house than would be usual. I got out as soon as the lift arrived on the ground floor then saw Miss Parry at the bottom of the stairs, about to run out of the front door.’

There was a silence.

‘And who is Miss Parry?’

I think I knew the answer before he gave it. It would be too much of a coincidence for it not to be her.

‘Miss Elizabeth Parry is the housekeeper, Inspector.’

I hadn’t expected to hear her name ever again. It made my stomach churn and my head spin.

‘So what did you do?’

‘I knew something must be wrong so I joined her. Mr Haleson, Mr Barleigh’s friend, also appeared at that point and came with us. I wasn’t sure which direction to go but she said it was on the side lawn so we went that way. I shouted for her to stay behind me in case there was still any danger.’

‘That was very brave of you, Mr Jervis.’

‘I don’t know about brave, sir, I was doing my duty.’

I went on to question him about what he’d seen when he arrived at the side lawn and he repeated what he’d told Sawyer. He also confirmed he’d gone inside to find Sir Arthur straight after the bodies were discovered. He had asked Elizabeth Parry to tell the rest of the staff what had happened. ‘You let Miss Bamford into the house when she returned?’

‘I did.’

‘And you told her what had happened?’

‘Oh no, Inspector. I was under strict instructions from Sir Arthur not to say anything, that I should simply inform her he wanted to see her upstairs in his room.’

Jenny left him in the hallway and climbed the main stairs to the upper landing. Shortly afterwards he was making his way to the kitchen to join the other staff when he heard a shot from upstairs. He ran back through the house and up the central staircase then searched from room to room to try to find where the shot had been

fired. He arrived at Tom Barleigh's room last of all and saw Sir Arthur and Alan Haleson standing over Jenny Bamford. A revolver was on the floor beside the bed.

His voice caught in his throat when he recalled seeing the dead young woman, though his face gave nothing away. I couldn't help wondering if he was perhaps fonder of her than of the others. There was nothing else he could tell me so I asked him to contact me straight away if he thought of anything important he'd missed. I didn't really expect he would. Jervis had a butler's loyalty so family secrets would remain secret.

Sir Arthur still hadn't returned when I'd finished with the butler. I decided to move on to the maid who had witnessed the first two deaths on the side lawn. I asked for her to be sent to the room which had now been put at my disposal, the "morning room". I'd spent several years at sea, often with four to a cabin, and it amused me to think the aristocracy have special rooms they only utilise at particular times of the day. I even think my own little cottage is spacious, having the luxury of an extra bedroom for me to use as an office.

Marion Clark stood before me, looking nervous, and confirmed she was upper housemaid to Sir Arthur and Lady Isabelle Barleigh. She'd been in their employment for about two years. There was something about the girl's face that hinted at a touch of stupidity and though she was twenty years old or thereabouts, she looked much younger.

'You were interviewed by Constable Sawyer on Tuesday, weren't you, Marion?'

'Yes sir, I was, sir.'

'Well, I'm a detective and an Inspector, so much more senior than he is and there can be no lies from you. Do you understand me, Marion?'

If the girl had been nervous before, she now looked like she'd faint away any moment, her eyes darting this way and that, and her hands wringing her apron front.

'I understand, sir. I wouldn't lie.'

I told her to take a seat.

'You've known the family for a good while now, so what do you make of them?'

She appeared to struggle for words.

'They've always treated me well, sir.'

'I wasn't asking how they treat you, Marion. Were Sir Arthur and Lady Isabelle a happy couple?'

‘That wouldn’t be for me to say, Inspector Given, I’m not one for telling tales.’

‘But that’s exactly what I want you to do, Marion. In fact I’m actually *expecting* you to tell tales. We have three deaths here and I dearly want to get to the truth of what happened. But we’ll perhaps come back to what you think of the family a little later. For now you can tell me what you saw on Tuesday.’

‘Tuesday? Well, sir, Tuesday is my day for cleaning Mr Tom’s room. His nurse, Miss Collinge, sees to it most days but once or twice a week the other staff take a turn and on Tuesday it’s me. I start with the beds, then brush the carpet and finish up by tidying his desk.’

For some reason this turned on the waterworks and we had to pause for a minute or two.

‘I’m sorry sir, it’s just the thought of it... Mr Tom is ... was very fussy, you know and didn’t want us messing about with his papers, only to put them neatly into piles where he left them. I was at the desk, and I could see out of the window and across the side lawn. It was such a lovely day I couldn’t stop myself from looking out for a few minutes. I wasn’t slacking sir, honest I wasn’t. If only it had been raining then none of this might have come about. Mr Tom wouldn’t have been outside and his mother wouldn’t...’ She sniffled and I was certain she’d open the sluice gates again.

‘Hold on, Marion, let’s stay with what you saw out of the window.’

There was more sniffing and a blow of her nose before we could resume.

‘As I said sir, I was by the desk, and looking out of the window at Mr Barleigh out on the lawn. He sat in his wheelchair reading most days when the weather was good enough. Always very fond of his books he was, sir, even before his accident.’

‘You were here before that happened?’

‘Oh yes, sir, though I hadn’t been here long then, a great shock to us all it was, especially to Lady Isabelle. She seemed to worry about him all the time after he came back from the hospital.’ The maid looked like she was going to tell me more but caught herself and returned to my earlier question. ‘Sorry, sir, I was telling you what I saw. Suddenly the blackbirds pecking for worms took off and Lady Isabelle came into view, from the front gate I think, though I couldn’t be sure. I straight away thought something must be wrong ’cos her ladyship seemed to be shouting and waving her hand about like she’s half mad.’

‘What about the other hand?’

‘The other hand? Well, I think she must have had the shotgun under her arm because she was holding something close to her side.’

‘Did you see the shotgun, Marion?’

‘No, I didn’t. But that’s what it must have been, mustn’t it, otherwise where would she have got it from?’

‘That is something quite else. You remember what I said, and tell me what you actually saw, no more and no less. Understand? So what happened next?’

‘Mr Tom looked up at her — I didn’t see no more, sir, because Miss Parry, the housekeeper, had been watching me from inside the doorway and shouted for me to get on with my work.’

‘So you didn’t see the actual shooting take place?’

‘No sir, can’t say as I did. I heard the shotgun go off right outside, and Miss Parry and I both looked at each other but before we can do or say anything, there’s a second shot. We were then so terrified, sir, honest sir. Miss Parry tells me to go back up to my room, quick as I can, and she heads off down the stairs to look for Mr Jervis. I...’ She stopped, blushing.

‘What is it, Marion? Remember, this is a police matter, we need the complete truth.’

‘Yes, sir, Mr... Inspector. Well ... truth is I didn’t go straight back upstairs. I crept back across the bedroom and peeked out of the window. It was only for a second, ’cos I couldn’t face it no longer, but what I saw was the two of them, Mr Tom and his mother, lying on the ground with the shotgun beside Lady Isabelle.’ She stared sightlessly ahead, remembering. ‘There was just the wheels of his chair going round and round...’

‘Did you see anyone else there, Marion?’

‘No, sir. All I could do was stare at those bodies. The blood and the stillness all around. There was no-one else there that I saw.’

The maid seemed transfixed by the memory and I had to prompt her to continue.

‘It’s all I know really, sir. I ran up to my room and stayed there until Miss Parry called all the staff together to tell them what had happened.’ Suddenly she looked at me, her eyes focusing. ‘Why’d she do it, sir? They were so close, the two of them.’

‘Well, that’s what I’m here to find out. Where were you when the third shooting occurred, that of Miss Bamford?’

‘Just where I said, sir. Miss Parry had called all the servants together in the kitchen to tell them what had happened. She was shaking like a leaf and said there’d been a

terrible accident. A minute after she told us Mr Jervis had phoned the police there was another shot, from upstairs.'

'Who was in the kitchen at the time, Marion?'

'Well, sir, apart from me and Miss Parry, there was Mrs Veasey, she's the cook, Peggy Shaw, the other maid, and Mr Perkins, the head gardener.'

'So there were five of you, is that correct?'

Clark slowly counted the names in her head and on her fingers to confirm the number. 'Yes, sir, that's it.'

'Mr Jervis and Nurse Collinge weren't there with you?'

'No, sir, they weren't. Mr Jervis had been waiting for Miss Bamford to come back and someone said Nurse Collinge was too upset to come down. She was very fond of Mr Barleigh, you know.'

'Had you seen Jenny Bamford arrive back at the house?'

'I hadn't, sir. As I told you, I went to my room like Miss Parry had told me and stayed there until she called for us to the kitchen. I don't know when Miss Bamford came back, sir.'

I spent another few minutes clarifying some of the points she'd made and I underlined a couple of items in my notebook, then told her she could go. There was still something niggling me about what she'd seen that didn't seem right.