

# **A MALIGNANT DEATH**

*Inspector James Given Mysteries*

*Book Five*

**Charlie Garratt**



But now two mirrors of his princely semblance  
Are crack'd in pieces by malignant Death.

— *Richard III*, William Shakespeare

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ALSO BY CHARLIE GARRATT

## PROLOGUE

The flickering bulb had bothered Ernest Parkes all week. He'd expected it to blow, so he'd be forced to do something about it, but it hadn't. If it had flashed constantly, he'd have taken the trouble to replace the damned thing. Instead, there'd be half an hour of steady illumination followed by two or three minutes of fitfulness. It wasn't as if there'd been the incentive of his machine being plunged into semi-darkness; the other factory lamps gave enough light. It was simply annoying.

Ernest was also convinced that it added to the headache he'd had every night recently. He knew it wasn't just the lightbulb, he had other things going on, but it didn't help. Tonight, it was worse than ever, and the engineer rubbed his forehead, leaving an oily smear. The argument he'd had in the late afternoon had brought this one on, he was sure.

Alone now on the factory floor, all the other workers having gone home for the night, it would be a chance to fetch the ladder and get the job done without twenty-five pairs of eyes watching. They were all good lads, but they'd not be able to stop themselves from barracking him, goading him into a slip or a mistake. No, this was better. Do it when they wouldn't see.

No longer a young man, Ernest had to rest twice as he carried the long wooden A-frame from the stores with the replacement bulb tucked safely in his overalls' pocket. He found the placement of the stepladder awkward because the errant lamp hung high above a lathe. Wrestling with the ladder forced another pause for breath.

Sitting there, he realised he hadn't often experienced the factory silent. All day long machines rattled, metal shrieked as it was torn, and the men's banter was endless as they pushed production forward.

When his breathing eased, Ernest realised the room wasn't entirely without sound, even now. An almost imperceptible electric hum. The momentary fizz of the faulty lightbulb. Waterpipes settling after a day's work. Together, the snoring of a sleeping workplace. And, somewhere upstairs in the offices, footsteps.

It took Ernest another minute to navigate the bank of switches to turn off the lights in his section, and another two to locate a glove so he'd not burn his hand. He'd never been comfortable with heights, and the stretch above his head to reach the bulb made

his head spin. He grabbed the ladder, cursed, and counted to calm his breathing. When the panic passed Ernest squeezed his eyes shut, reached upwards again, and twisted the culprit from its bayonet.

With the defunct item in his pocket, he repeated the exercise with the new one. At full extension, with one hand on the shade and the other trying to feel the bulb into the fitting, a gasp escaped Ernest when the ladder rocked. This cry, for a split second, exploded to a scream as he fell.

Ernest heard the click of a door closing at the far end of the room. After this, only the sweet silence of eternal sleep.

## ONE

*Friday 14th June, 1940*

My father had put down his scissors, stood, straightened his tie, wandered round the workshop, and pretended to look over the pieces created by his dozen cutters, trimmers and seamstresses. He moved along two rows of benches, one mounted with sewing machines, then to another large table beneath the tall window. Two men there inspected khaki trousers for flaws, before bundling them for despatch to army bases around the country. While winding this circuitous route, my father kept an eye in my direction, until he climbed the two steps to my desk for the fourth time that morning to ask about progress.

‘Have you cheques for me to sign yet, Jacob? Are the invoices ready to go?’

‘No, and I’ll get nowhere if I have to stop every five minutes.’

He sucked sharply through his teeth. ‘But these all need to be dealt with today. All of them.’

‘And they will be, if you let me get on with it. Or would you prefer to look after them yourself?’

He’d rather do anything than deal with the accounts. Give him a needle and thread, a bolt of cloth, and a pattern, and he’d work from sunrise to sunset without complaint. This was why he’d bent over backwards to persuade me to take over some aspects of running the business when I returned from France. The problem was, he didn’t trust me to do the job. Despite my years away from home, he still thought of me as the impetuous sixteen-year-old who’d run away to sea.

‘Why are they so urgent? You have plenty of orders, lots from the army. They pay straight away, and our suppliers are happy to wait because you’ve never let them down.’

‘That’s you all over, Jacob. You’ve never understood business. It’s important to look after good customers and good suppliers alike. One sends us new orders, the other will look after us if there are shortages with this war. The name ... my name ... Dov Geffen, is respected, and we get the better service as a result than the man who holds back payment until the last minute. It’s in our interest to keep them happy, and settle the paperwork as soon as we can.’ He pulled his silver watch from his waistcoat pocket,

stretching his arm to focus without his glasses. 'Look at the time, Jacob. I can't keep chatting here all day. Things to do.'

Having made it sound as if I was the one disturbing him, he turned to leave. I raised a finger and stopped him.

'Papa.'

'Jacob?'

'Could you, just once, call me James? James Given. It's my name now, and well you know it.'

'Not to me it isn't.'

And this is how it went. Every time. His continued use of my birth name, rather than the one I'd chosen for myself, symbolised how he saw me. To him, I'd always be a Russian Jewish boy and never an Englishman in his mid-thirties, with wife and a life, and at least as much experience of the world as he'd had. Even when I'd been a Detective Inspector, he'd always believed I'd see sense one day and become a tailor like him. I shook my head as he walked away.

Our house was flaming-June hot. Even in the kitchen at the back, with its cold, quarry-tiled floor and open window, the air was oppressive. I stood in the doorway, watching my wife as she washed lettuce at the sink, and wondered again, as I did most nights, how I could have married someone so beautiful. When we'd met less than a year earlier, I'd been knocked off my feet by this slim, witty, strong-minded woman who played piano, violin and cello like an angel, while I was of average height, overweight, and hardly a decent catch. But we got on well from the first moment and, even though she learned I found occasional solace in the bottle, we married within months.

I crossed the room to slip my arms round her waist from behind. She lay her head back on my shoulder.

'Mmm, that's nice. Good day?'

'Awful. Papa fussed the whole time. I wouldn't mind if his workshop was struggling, but it isn't. He has orders for weeks ahead, and even some from the War Office. From what I can see, his suppliers know he's a good payer, so why he was rushing to get the bills sorted out today I'll never understand. His biggest problem is getting the work done on time. With all the young ones conscripted, he's short of skilled men and there's so much competition for the retired ones to return.' I walked back to the doorway, wafting my face with my hat. 'To tell you the truth, I have to get away.'

‘From your job?’

‘And from here. I can’t stand the city any longer.’

‘But I thought you liked this house.’

I had no objection to the house, except that it was Rachel’s and not ours. She’d owned it before we’d got together; it had been left to her from several owned by her father. Her brother, Bernard, got the rest. I’d sold my small cottage in Kenilworth after we married, reasoning that we could rent out her Birmingham home more easily when we left the country to start our new life in France. The Nazis put paid to that dream.

‘It’s not the house, it’s the noise, and the smell of the city ... and being crowded in all the time. I walk around and, unless I look straight up at the sky, all I can see are buildings. I didn’t realise how much I’d miss our little place in Brittany.’

I’d worked on the French farm for a few months, and it had got into my bones and taken me back to when I was a young man working in the open air, sailing the world or picking fruit and sleeping under the stars. Rachel and I had prayed for France to hold back the Germans, hoping things would return to normal in a short time, but once the defences had been broken, we knew, as Jews, we needed to return to England.

Rachel began to carry our evening meal to the table. ‘So what will we do?’

‘I’ve been thinking about us buying a place in the countryside. Sell here, put the proceeds with the money I have left from my house, and try to find a cottage with some land. Enough to feed us and maybe produce left over for market. I could always get farm work again if we need it to make ends meet. What do you think?’

She rubbed her eyes. ‘I don’t know, James, it’s all a bit sudden. We’ve only been back here five minutes. Let me finish serving tea, then we can chat while we eat.’

Rachel laid out our meals, then listened while I explained that it was something I’d considered even before we’d returned to Birmingham, and the feeling only grew stronger every time I left the house.

‘I can’t stay working with Papa for much longer. I’m not cut out for it, and he’s driving me crackers. I want what we had in Brittany. A cottage and some land to look after, except this time the land would be ours.’

‘Have you anywhere in mind?’

‘I have, actually.’ I grinned and pulled a newspaper from my jacket pocket, flipping it open to where I’d marked two advertisements with my pen. ‘These are in Kenilworth, and we’re going to look at them tomorrow.’



Rachel looked at me, then at the newspaper, then at me again. ‘Whoa, wait a minute. You’ve been planning to sell our house ... my house ... without discussing it with me?’

‘Not planning, just thinking of options. I’m sorry. I thought you’d feel the same as me.’

Rachel shook her head. ‘I’m not sure I do. I like the city. There are always people around, and it can be lonely out in the middle of nowhere. Anyway, that’s not the point. You had no right to plan such a move before talking to me.’

I held up my hands. ‘You’re right. It was wrong of me.’

‘It was, James, but you do it all the time. You seem to think you can snap your fingers and I’ll follow. When we married, we agreed we’d both been independently single for so long that we couldn’t face an unequal relationship.’

‘Hang on. This isn’t about equality —’

‘Yes it is. If you believe you can plan our future without consulting me, then you must think you have a bigger say in it than I do.’

I stood, ready to escape to the front room and the wireless, but I stopped and sat again. Rachel was right. She and I had lived on our own for years before we’d met, and we’d both made our own choices in life. We hadn’t yet been together long enough for the rough edges of that independence to have rubbed away, and we sometimes needed to take a step back from our opinions. Tonight, it was going to be my turn.

‘I don’t want to argue, Rachel. I’ve said I’m sorry, and I mean it. If I’ve been thoughtless, it was stupid of me. All I wanted was to do a little looking around without getting our hopes up. But, if you’re unhappy, we can forget about the whole idea and just go to Kenilworth tomorrow as a day out, nothing more.’

Without speaking, Rachel cleared the table and washed the dishes. Usually, we’d chat while I put them away, but she was having none of it. She didn’t speak to me for another two hours, until she made our bedtime Horlicks.

‘I’ve been thinking about what you said, James, and I’m still not happy about what you did. But let me sleep on it. We can go on the trip, anyway. It will be nice to have a day out, and we’ll see in the morning if I want to look at the houses.’

I opened my mouth to argue, but there was no point. My vision of our future would only work if Rachel wanted to go along with it. I washed the cups and put out the light, then followed my wife up to bed, where the atmosphere still hung with frost. I didn’t fall asleep for a long time, and I suspected Rachel didn’t either.



## TWO

*Saturday 15th June, 1940*

Thunder in the early hours had brought a fresh breeze to the morning, which seemed to have blown away the tension between Rachel and me. With the sun shining, and the humidity gone, she'd agreed, over breakfast, we could add house-hunting to our trip after all.

I'd got rid of my car before we went to France. Petrol rationing, and living in the city and close to work, meant there was no point buying another, so I'd planned to take the train for our Saturday jaunt. Then I'd spotted a poster advertising a coach excursion to Kenilworth from the city centre.

I'd lived in Kenilworth for over ten years and I liked the town, which was small enough for its inhabitants to know one another. Though I'd seen bad things happen there during my career, and in the surrounding countryside, I'd loved my cottage by the castle, and I missed it sometimes. When our red and cream coach rattled to a halt outside Birmingham Town Hall, I was happy to climb on board. Though half the seats were taken by passengers who had boarded in Wolverhampton and the towns in between, we found a pair near the back, Rachel taking the one by the window. She had packed sandwiches and a flask of tea into a small haversack, which I swung onto my knee when we sat down. The other seats were soon filled by mothers, children and older couples in a holiday mood. It would be one of the few times in the year that any of them would leave the grey city streets. Across the aisle from us, a woman in her early twenties tried to settle her children — a boy in jacket, short pants and heavy shoes, and a curly-haired girl I assumed was his sister. Neither seemed to want to sit still, and the mother smiled apologetically to all her neighbours.

Once on our way, Rachel's face lit up as we passed through Warwickshire villages. From her seat by the window, she pointed to exuberant displays of roses and the neat vegetable plots. Fields shimmered after the overnight rain, lush and green before the harvest and, with the laughter and chatter of our fellow travellers, the world seemed at peace, even though it wasn't.

Rachel turned her attention away from the passing scenery. ‘Hardly seems as if there’s a war on, does it, James?’

‘Not today. Not here.’

‘But there is. Even France is about to surrender.’

I shrugged. ‘Well, it was only a matter of time after Paris fell last week. They’re saying Hitler is planning to humiliate the French by making them sign in Compiègne, where Germany signed after the last one.’

‘Hardly seems right, does it, all the deaths over there, and we’re on a charabanc trip?’

Rachel was right. Young men and women were being killed every day. God knew how many — the wireless didn’t say — but our lives went on as normal. There was rationing and queues for food, and no cinemas or theatres, but, otherwise, we all went about our business in much the same way as we always did.

Rachel squeezed my hand. ‘It’s odd, isn’t it? Children still come to me for their music lessons, you’re still leaving the house for work every day, and the birds still sing in the skies above.’

‘Well, I see some differences when I’m out and about. There’s less traffic for one thing, and everyone seems to have an ear listening for the drone of bombers.’

‘Do you think they’ll come, James?’

‘The wireless reports say it’s inevitable.’

Rachel shivered, then leant over and stroked the handle of my walking stick hanging on the rail in front. For the first few weeks after we’d returned from Brittany, I’d drawn suspicious glances on the street, a seemingly fit man not in uniform. As a result, I’d taken to using a stick again, even when I didn’t need it — a badge to show an injury kept me out of the army. Today, though, I’d need the stick for the miles we intended to wander round Kenilworth, looking for a new home.

‘I’m so grateful you’ve not been called up. Small compensation for the pain, I know, but a blessing in these times.’

Now I squeezed *her* hand, and held it as the farms and hamlets slid by. In less than an hour, we reached our destination by the castle. We sat while the families in front filed off, then followed them into the sunshine.

‘So what do we do first, James? This is your stomping ground.’

‘One of the houses we want to see is on this side of town, about half a mile from here. We could go there first, and then come back to have our picnic by the castle. Afterwards, we can go up the hill and I’ll pop into the police station to see who’s about

and say hello. The other place, the farm, is way out on the Leamington side. By the time we've seen it, we'll need to get back down here ready to go home. Is that all right with you?'

Rachel laughed. 'Sounds like you've got it all planned with military precision, so I'll just follow orders. Let's look at your old cottage first, though. It's only over the road.'

Nothing appeared to have changed since I'd moved out, other than there being a new coat of paint on the front door. I was tempted to knock but thought better of it. I didn't know the couple who'd moved in, and it might seem like prying. Instead, we just stood on the opposite pavement, arms linked, and looked for a minute or two before rambling away.

A quarter of an hour's walk down the road to Burton Green, we found the place we were looking for. It was stone-built and on a small junction, set back perhaps twenty feet. The front garden was packed with herbaceous flowers and shrubs, and roses grew over the arched gate.

Rachel smiled when she stepped through and took in the four windows with white frames. 'Very nice, and a similar size to the one in France. Love the garden.'

The owner, Mrs Harris, had advertised in the *Evening Gazette* and I'd sent a telegram to warn her we would call. A tiny lady of about sixty, wearing a cardigan and a floppy hat, answered my knock.

'Mr and Mrs Given? Please do come in. I'll make tea. You've walked a long way out to see me, and I'm glad of any visitors.'

Two cats wandered through from the kitchen and decided my trousers would be a good place to rub their heads. Our host poured three cups and invited us into the back garden.

Rachel stopped on the step and bit her bottom lip. 'Is there more land, Mrs Harris?'

'I'm afraid not, dear. Just my little lawn and a vegetable garden. We had the fields behind when my Dennis was alive, round about fifteen acres. I couldn't handle it on my own, and I sold it when he went. Did you want more?'

Rachel smiled and nodded. 'We did. I'm sorry we've wasted your time.'

'Ah well, it can't be helped. I should have been clearer in the advertisement, but the newspaper charges such a lot, you know.' Mrs Harris screwed up her eyes and peered at me. 'Do I know you, Mr Given?'

'Perhaps. I lived in the town for a good few years, down by the castle. I was in the police. You'll maybe have seen me about the place.'

‘That will be it, I expect,’ the old lady chuckled, ‘not that I’d have much to do with the police.’

We chatted for a quarter of an hour over our tea. I explained we were looking for somewhere to grow enough to feed us, and perhaps keep a few animals. Mrs Harris said she didn’t know of anywhere at present.

‘If I hear of anything, I’ll give you a call. I’ve got your number from your message. If you’d like me to, I could ask the farmer behind if he’d be willing to sell the field back?’

I said we’d be grateful if she would, then thanked her and left. Rachel spoke as soon as we were out of earshot.

‘What did you think of it?’

‘Very nice. I could see you loved the cottage.’

‘I’d have jumped at it if she had more land.’

‘Really?’

‘Come on, James, you know *you* would. Perhaps Mrs Harris will convince her neighbour to sell back a couple of fields. That would give us a start, at least.’

By the time we arrived at the castle, I was ravenous. We wasted no time in finding a grassy spot below the red sandstone walls, where we were shielded from the breeze. I’d seen the spot used a hundred times from my gate. I wondered if someone was sitting at a window now, looking over and watching the day-trippers eating their lunch in the sunshine and gazing across the fields. At my desk by that window, I’d spent many an hour pondering, using the grass and the big sky to see beyond the bare facts of a case, hoping for an insight. Unusually, although the castle sat on a mound and had a view for miles in most directions, it lay on the edge of the town and was at the bottom of a hill. It had been a target for tourists like us since it went out of use after the Civil War.

A restless night, our morning walk, and the lunch of sandwiches and cheese packed by Rachel almost made me nod off, until the peace was shattered by three Spitfires roaring in formation overhead. The noise of their engines rattled off the castle wall, causing the cows grazing by a stream to stampede away.

Rachel squeezed my hand. ‘Makes it real, doesn’t it?’

‘It’s real enough anyway, don’t you think? It’s on every news item on the wireless, and it’s all anyone talks about.’

‘It is, but seeing those planes up close is different somehow. Almost like the war’s right here, in our backyard.’ She shivered. ‘Anyway, I’ll not rest now, so we might as well go on our way. You said you wanted to call in at the police station on the way?’

‘Just to say hello if anyone is around. Do you mind?’

‘Provided it’s quick. I’ve not come out for the day to spend it in some stuffy police station.’

I promised I wouldn’t be too long, and we began the climb up the hill to town, after I dropped our rucksack back in the coach. Halfway up, we turned into Abbey Fields and meandered past the lake to the other end then round to the police station. I suggested Rachel should go to a café for a cup of tea while I went inside. She told me she’d be annoyed if I kept her waiting and, knowing I’d only just got out of her bad books, I promised I’d be no more than quarter of an hour.

I stood for a couple of minutes across the road from the police station, the flagpole distinguishing it as an official building, unlike its neighbours. Looking up at my old office, remembering the horrors of my last cases, I wasn’t sure if going inside would be such a good idea, but curiosity propelled me across and up the two steps. At the front desk was Sergeant Tommy Burns, who threw his hands in the air and clapped as soon as he looked up from his paperwork.

‘Inspector, how good to see you. Checking up on us, are you?’

Burns would now be close to retirement, having spent many a good year dealing with concerned members of the public, and processing villains brought in by his colleagues. I’d never been sure if he’d been chosen for the job because he looked like a desk sergeant, or if he’d physically developed to fill the position. His sedentary days spent at the desk had done nothing to constrain his waistline, and his wide smile shining through half-moon spectacles was guaranteed to put visitors at ease. We’d usually got on well, particularly as I rose up the ranks and showed I was a decent detective, as committed as Burns was to keeping the town safe.

‘It’s just James now, Tommy. You’re well, I hope?’

‘Never better.’ He looked at my stick. ‘Your leg still not right?’

‘Good days and bad days. We’re in town to look at some houses, so we have a couple of long walks today. I thought I’d need it.’

‘You’re thinking of moving back to Kenilworth? I thought you had your sights set on foreign parts.’

‘I did, and it’s a long story. We’re in Birmingham at the minute, but I want to get out. Is anyone about?’

‘Afraid not. Well, no-one you’d know anyway. Saturday, always quiet, and a few of the younger ones have joined the forces even though they don’t need to.’ Burns rapped his knuckles on his desk. ‘Hang on. Phil Trimble called in. He might still be upstairs. I’ll give him a buzz.’

Inspector Phil Trimble and I had been colleagues, and he’d taken over my job after I’d left, but I wouldn’t have said we were friends. He’d been a bit of a plodder and sometimes too willing to take the easiest explanation at face value. He’d also been a bit too openly religious for my liking, always ready with a spoken prayer or a bowed head if he thought the occasion warranted it. Within a couple of minutes I heard shoes coming down the stairs, and Phil turned into the reception area wearing a broad but polite smile. He had on a green tweed jacket and held a manilla folder under his arm.

‘James, what a surprise.’ He shook my hand. ‘You’ve been in France, I hear.’

‘For a few months, yes. Became a little too hot after the invasion, so we’re back.’

Trimble glanced at his watch. ‘Actually, James, I don’t really have much time today. I only came in to pick up these papers. Can we catch up another day?’

‘It’s fine, Phil. My wife and I are only in Kenilworth for a few hours, a bit of an excursion, but I may be here again in the not too distant future. I’ll give you a call and we can perhaps grab a bite to eat.’

‘That would be great. I’m sorry, but I do have to dash.’ He glanced at the desk sergeant. ‘Give James a cuppa, Tommy. Make him feel at home.’ My successor waved with his folder and headed out of the door.

‘Don’t bother with the tea, Tommy. I’ve not much time myself. Told Rachel I wouldn’t be long.’

We chatted for a few minutes about who was still at the station, who’d moved on or been promoted, and who’d left. Tommy avoided any mention of the constable who’d been my partner on my last case before I’d left, someone he’d grieved for almost as much as I had. I asked if he’d heard from our old boss, Superintendent Dyer.

‘Still not got away to the seaside — some kind of problem selling his house. The war, I expect. Sure you won’t have that tea? I’m having one myself.’

I refused again, and told him I had to be off. ‘Good talking to you, Tommy. Give my regards to the lads and tell them I’m sorry I missed them. Maybe next time.’



I left and hurried round to the café to meet Rachel. Through the plate glass window, I could see she was still drinking tea, and engaged in conversation with a woman with a baby on the next table. I waited for a couple of minutes to catch her eye, and then had the satisfaction of tapping on the glass and holding up my watch to suggest she was now keeping me waiting. Her frown disappeared when she saw me chuckling on the street. It didn't stop her folding her arms, shaking her head and mouthing the word "idiot" at me, before paying her bill and joining me.

The farm turned out to be no good. It was far too big and very run down, with a strong smell of animals and black mould growing on the bedroom walls. The half mile walk out there had been a waste of energy. At least it meant we were back in good time for our motor-coach, and I was glad to sit down for a while.

The other passengers returned in dribs and drabs, some of the men garrulous and flushed from spending the afternoon in the pub, the children red-faced from running about in the sun for too long. Everyone seemed to be in good spirits, and we'd barely pulled away from the castle when the singing started. It continued until we reached the suburbs of Birmingham.

In the lull, I asked Rachel if she'd enjoyed her day.

'It was lovely. Tiring, but lovely. Kenilworth is so nice.'

'You remember when we bumped into each other that day outside the castle, only the second time we'd met?'

She smiled. 'I do.'

We'd met in Birmingham while I was trying to find Meena, the German Jewish refugee my parents took in before the war started. The girl went missing and Rachel had been her violin teacher. She hadn't known where Meena had gone, but I'd been very taken with Rachel's stunning looks and sense of humour, so I was glad to have bumped in to her later, only a few steps from my front door. Even though I'd been busy, I'd dropped almost everything to spend the day sightseeing with her.

A baby at the front of the bus wailed, and everyone peered to see what was going on. A couple of the older women tutted and shook their heads, as if no child of theirs would ever make such a racket. I took Rachel's hand.

'So would you consider moving to Kenilworth?'

She laughed. 'James, you are relentless. Isn't it enough I let you take me out there today? Doesn't it tell you I'm not completely set against the idea? It's just such a big step — plus you sprung it on me without any discussion. Perhaps if you'd thought about

it properly, you'd have brought me on the trip first, then suggested we might move. That would have been the clever way to play your hand.'

When I'd played cards, unless I was drunk, I'd been a shrewd gambler, never looking for the quick win, but luring my opponent into a false sense of security. Rachel was right — I'd been clumsy. My excuse was that I'd assumed she'd have been as keen to leave the city as I was. The fact she was still talking to me suggested I shouldn't lose hope.

'You will think about it, then?'

'I suppose I'll have to — you seem so keen. But don't keep going on about it. Let it simmer for a few days, and we'll see what comes out the other end.'

A few minutes before we arrived back in Birmingham, Rachel took my hand. 'I'm not promising anything, James, but I did love Mrs Harris's cottage. I could see myself there if she can convince her neighbour to sell back some of the land.'

Half an hour later, I still had a smile on my face and we were home. A telegram lay on the mat behind the front door. I picked it up and ripped open the envelope. 'How strange.'

Rachel filled the kettle. 'What's that, James?'

'It's from Henry Dyer. I was just asking about him earlier.'

'Is there something wrong?'

'Hard to tell. He's asked if I can visit him in Leamington. Says he's a favour to ask but can't go into it in a telegram.'

'What will you do?'

'Well, I can't drop everything and go over there. My father would go mad. I'll send a note back in the morning and tell him it will need to wait until next weekend.'