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A Test of Wills

Charles Todd

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The First Inspector Ian Rutledge Novel

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In this quiet part of Warwickshire death came as frequently as it did anywhere else in England, no stranger to the inhabitants of towns, villages, or countryside. Sons and fathers had died in the Great War; the terrible influenza epidemic had scythed the county—man, woman, and child—just as it had cut down much of Europe; and murder was not unheard of even here in Upper Streetham.

But one fine June morning, as the early mists rose lazily in the warm sunlight like wraiths in no hurry to be gone, Colonel Harris was killed in cold blood in a meadow fringed with buttercups and cowslip and his last coherent thought was anger. Savage, wild, black fury ripped through him in one stark instant of realization before oblivion swept it all away, and his body, rigid with it, survived the shotgun blast long enough to dig spurs into the mare's flanks while his hands clenched the reins in a muscular spasm as strong as iron.

He died hard, unwilling, railing at God, and his ragged cry raised echoes in the quiet woods and sent the rooks flying even as the gun roared.

In London, where rain dripped from eaves and ran black in the gutters, a man named Bowles, who had never heard of Colonel Harris, came into possession of a piece of information that was the reward of a very determined and quite secret probing into the history of a fellow policeman at Scotland Yard.

He sat at his desk in the grim old brick building and stared at the letter on his blotter. It was written on cheap stationery in heavy ink by a rounded, rather childish hand, but he was almost afraid to touch it. Its value to him was beyond price, and if he had begged whatever gods he believed in to give him the kind of weapon he craved, they couldn't have managed anything sweeter than this.

He smiled, delight spreading slowly across his fair-skinned face and narrowing the hard, amber-colored eyes.

If this was true—and he had every reason to believe it was—he had been absolutely right about Ian Rutledge. He, Bowles, was vindicated by six lines of unwittingly damaging girlish scrawl.

Reading the letter for the last time, he refolded it carefully and replaced it in its envelope, locking it in his desk drawer.

Now the question was how best to make use of this bit of knowledge without burning himself in the fire he wanted to raise.

If only those same gods had thought to provide a way...

But it seemed, after all, that they had.

Twenty-four hours later, the request for assistance arrived from Warwickshire, and Superintendent Bowles happened, by the merest chance, to be in the right place at the right time to make a simple, apparently constructive suggestion. The gods had been very generous indeed. Bowles was immensely

grateful.

The request for Scotland Yard's help had arrived through the proper channels, couched in the usual terms. What lay behind the formal wording was sheer panic.

The local police force, stunned by Colonel Harris's vicious murder, had done their best to conduct the investigation quickly and efficiently. But when the statement of one particular witness was taken down and Inspector Forrest understood just where it was going to lead him, the Upper Streetham Constabulary collectively got cold feet.

At a circumspect conference with higher county authority, it was prudently decided to let Scotland Yard handle this situation—and to stay out of the Yard's way as much as humanly possible. Here was one occasion when metropolitan interference in local police affairs was heartily welcomed. With undisguised relief, Inspector Forrest forwarded his request to London.

The Yard in its turn faced a serious dilemma. Willy-nilly, they were saddled with a case where discretion, background, and experience were essential. At the same time, it was going to be a nasty one either way you looked at it, and someone's head was bound to roll. Therefore the man sent to Warwickshire must be considered expendable, however good he might be at his job.

And that was when Bowles had made his timely comments.

Inspector Rutledge had just returned to the Yard after covering himself with mud and glory in the trenches of France. Surely choosing him would be popular in Warwickshire, under the circumstances—showed a certain sensitivity for county feelings, as it were.... As for experience, he'd handled a number of serious cases before the war, he'd left a brilliant record behind him, in fact. The word scapegoat wasn't mentioned, but Bowles delicately pointed out that it might be less disruptive to morale to lose—if indeed it should come to that—a man who'd just rejoined the force. Please God, of course, such a sacrifice wouldn't be required!

A half-hearted quibble was raised about Rutledge's state of health. Bowles brushed that aside. The doctors had pronounced him fit to resume his duties, hadn't they? And although he was still drawn and thin, he appeared to be much the same man who had left in 1914. Older and quieter naturally, but that was to be expected. A pity about the war. It had changed so many lives....

The recommendation was approved, and an elated Bowles was sent to brief Rutledge. After tracking the Inspector to the small, drafty cubicle where he was reading through a stack of reports on current cases, Bowles stood in the passage for several minutes, steadying his breathing, willing himself to composure. Then he opened the door and walked in. The man behind the desk looked up, a smile transforming his thin, pale face, bringing life to the tired eyes.

"The war hasn't improved human nature, has it?" He flicked a finger across the open file on his blotter and added, "That's the fifth knifing in a pub brawl I've read this morning. But it seems the Army did manage to teach us something—exactly where to place the blade in the ribs for best results. None of the five survived. If we'd done as well in France, bayoneting Germans, we'd have been home by 1916."

His voice was pleasant, well modulated. It was one of the things that Bowles, with his high-pitched, North-Country accent, disliked most about the man. And the fact that his father had been a barrister, not a poor miner. Schooling had come easily to Rutledge. He hadn't had to plod, dragging each bit of knowledge into his brain by sheer effort of will, dreading examinations, knowing himself a mediocrity. It rubbed a man's pride to the bone to struggle so hard where others soared on the world's coattails of London-bred fathers and grandfathers. Blood told. It always had. Bowles passionately resented it. If there'd been any justice, a German bayonet would have finished this soldier along with the rest of them!

"Yes, well, you can put those away, Michaelson's got something for you," Bowles announced, busily framing sentences in his mind that would convey the bare facts and leave out the nuances that might put Rutledge on his guard, or give him an opening to refuse to go to Warwickshire. "First month back and you've landed this one. You'll have your picture in the bloody papers before it's done, mark my words." He sat down and began affably to outline the situation.

Rutledge left the outskirts of London behind and headed northwest. It was a dreary morning, rain sweeping in gusts across the windscreen from a morbidly gray sky draped like a dirty curtain from horizon to horizon, the tires throwing up rivers of water on either side of the car like black wings.

Hellish weather for June.

I should have taken the train, he thought as he settled down to a steady pace. But he knew he couldn't face the train yet. It was one thing to be shut up in a motorcar that you could stop at will and another to be enclosed in a train over which you had no control at all. Jammed in with a half dozen other people. The doors closed for hours on end, the compartment airless and overheated. The press of bodies crowding him, driving him to the brink of panic, voices dinning in his ears, the roar of the wheels like the sound of his own blood pounding through his heart. Just thinking about it sent a wave of terror through him.

Claustrophobia, the doctors had called it, a natural fear in a man who'd been buried alive in a front-line trench, suffocated by the clinging, slippery, unspeakable mud and the stinking corpses pinning him there.

Too soon, his sister Frances had said. It was much too soon to go back to work! But he knew that if he didn't, he'd lose what was left of his mind. Distraction was what he needed. And this murder in Warwickshire appeared to offer just that. He'd need his wits about him, he'd have to concentrate to recover the long forgotten skills he'd had to put behind him in 1914—and that would keep Hamish at bay.

"You're to turn right here."

The voice in his head was as clear as the patter of rain on the car's roof, a deep voice, with soft Scottish inflections. He was used to hearing it now. The doctors had told him that would happen, that it was not uncommon for the mind to accept something which it had created itself in order to conceal what it couldn't face any other way. Shell shock was an odd thing, it made its own rules, they'd said. Understand that and you could manage to keep your grip on reality. Fight it, and it would tear you

apart. But he had fought it for a very long time—and they were right, it had nearly destroyed him.

He made the turn, glancing at the signs. Yes. The road to Banbury.

And Hamish, strangely enough, was a safer companion than Jean, who haunted him in another way. In God's blessed name, how did you uproot love? How did you tear it out of your flesh and bone?

He'd learned, in France, to face dying. He could learn, in time, how to face living. It was just getting through the desolation in between that seemed to be beyond him. Frances had shrugged her slim shoulders and said, "Darling, there are other women, in a year you'll wonder why you cared so much for one. Let go gracefully—after all, it isn't as if she's fallen in love with another man!"

He swerved to miss a dray pulling out into the road without warning from a muddy lane running between long, wet fields.

"Keep your mind on the driving, man, or we'll both be dead!"

"Sometimes I believe we'd both be better off," he answered aloud, not wanting to think about Jean, not able to think about anything else. Everywhere he turned, something brought her back to him, ten thousand memories waiting like enemies to ambush him. The car...the rain...She'd liked driving in the rain, the glass clouded with their warm breath, their laughter mingling with the swish of the tires, the car a private, intimate world of their own.

"Ah, but that's the coward's road, death is! You willna' escape so easily as that. You've got a conscience, man. It won't let you run out. And neither will I."

Rutledge laughed harshly. "The day may come when you have no choice." He kept his eyes pinned to the road, as always refusing to look over his shoulder, though the voice seemed to come from the rear seat, just behind him, almost near enough to touch him with its breath. The temptation to turn around was strong, nearly as strong as the desperate fear of what he might see if he did. He could, he had found, live with Hamish's voice. What he dreaded—dreaded more than anything—was seeing Hamish's face. And one day—one day he might. Hollow-eyed, empty of humanity in death. Or accusing, pleading in life—

Rutledge shuddered and forced his mind back to the road ahead. The day he saw Hamish, he'd end it. He had promised himself that....

It was very late when he reached Upper Streetham, the rain still blowing in gusty showers, the streets of the town empty and silent and shiny with puddles as he made his way to the Inn on the High Street.

"Highland towns are like this on Saturday nights," Hamish said suddenly. "All the good Presbyterian asleep in their beds, mindful of the Sabbath on the morrow. And the Catholics back from Confession and feeling virtuous. Are you mindful of the state of your soul?"

"I haven't got one," Rutledge answered tiredly. "You tell me that often enough. I expect it's true." The black-and-white facade he was looking for loomed ahead, ghostly in another squall of rain, a rambling, ancient structure with a thatched roof that seemed to frown disparagingly over the faded in

sign swinging from its wrought-iron bar. The Shepherd's Crook, it read.

He turned in through a wisteria-hung arch, drove past the building into the Inn yard, and pulled the motorcar into an empty space between a small, barred shed and the Inn's rear door. Beyond the shed was what appeared in his headlamps to be a square lake with pagodas and islands just showing above the black water. No doubt the kitchen garden, with its early onions and cabbages.

Someone had heard him coming into the drive and was watching him from the back steps, a candle in his hand.

"Inspector Rutledge?" the man called.

"Yes, I'm Rutledge."

"I'm Barton Redfern, the landlord's nephew. He asked me to wait up for you." Rain swept through the yard again as he spoke, and he hastily stepped back inside, waiting to hold the door open as Rutledge dashed through the puddles, his bag in one hand, the other holding on to his hat. A minor tempest followed him across the threshold.

"My uncle said you were to have the room over the parlor, where it's quieter at night. It's this way. Would you like a cup of tea or something from the bar? You look like you could use a drink!"

"No, thanks." There was whiskey in his bag if he wanted it—if exhaustion wasn't enough. "What I need is sleep. It rained all the way, heavy at times. I had to stop beyond Stratford for an hour until the worst had passed. Any messages?"

"Just that Inspector Forrest will see you at breakfast, if you like. At nine?"

"Better make it eight."

They were climbing a flight of narrow, winding stairs, the back way to the second floor. Barton, who looked to be in his early twenties, was limping heavily. Turning to say something over his shoulder, he caught Rutledge's glance at his left foot and said instead, "Ypres, a shell fragment. The doctors say it'll be fine once the muscles have knit themselves back properly. But I don't know. They aren't always as smart as they think they are, doctors."

"No," Rutledge agreed bitterly. "They just do the best they can. And sometimes that isn't much."

Redfern led the way down a dark hall and opened the door to a wide, well-aired room under the eaves with a lamp burning by the bed and brightly flowered curtains at the windows. Relieved not to find himself in a cramped, narrow chamber where sleep would be nearly impossible, Rutledge nodded his thanks and Redfern shut the door as he left, saying, "Eight it is, then. I'll see that you're called half an hour before."

Fifteen minutes later Rutledge was in the bed and asleep.

He never feared sleep. It was the one place where Hamish could not follow him.

Sergeant Davies was middle-aged, heavysset, with a placidity about him that spoke of even temper, a man at peace within himself. But there were signs of strain in his face also, as if he had been on edge for the past several days. He sat foursquare at Rutledge's table in the middle of the Inn's small, cheerful dining room, watching as Redfern poured a cup of black coffee for him and explaining why he was there in place of his superior.

"By rights, Inspector Forrest should be answering your questions, but he won't be back much before ten. There's been a runaway lorry in Lower Streetham and the driver was drunk. Two people were killed. A nasty business. So's this a nasty business. Colonel Harris was well respected, not the sort you'd expect to get himself murdered." He sighed. "A sorry death for a man who went through two wars unscathed. But London will have gone over that."

Rutledge had spread homemade jam on his toast. It was wild strawberry and looked as if it had been put up before the war, nearly as dark and thick as treacle. Poised to take a bite, he looked across at the Sergeant. "I'm not in London now. I'm here. Tell me how it happened."

Davies settled back in his chair, frowning as he marshaled his facts. Inspector Forrest had been very particular about how any account of events was to be given. The Sergeant was a man who took pride being completely reliable.

"A shotgun. Blew his head to bits—from the chin up, just tatters. He'd gone out for his morning ride at seven sharp, just as he always did whenever he was at home, back by eight-thirty, breakfast waiting for him. That was every day except Sunday, rain or shine. But on Monday, when he wasn't back by ten, his man of business, Mr. Royston, went looking for him in the stables."

"Why?" Rutledge had taken out a pen and a small, finely tooled leather notebook. "On this day, particularly?"

"There was a meeting set for nine-thirty, and it wasn't like the Colonel to forget about it. When he got to the stables, Mr. Royston found the grooms in a blue panic because the Colonel's horse had just come galloping in without its rider, and there was blood all over the saddle and the horse's haunches. Men were sent out straightaway to look for him, and he was finally discovered in a meadow alongside the copse of trees at the top of his property."

Davies paused as the swift pen raced across the ruled page, allowing Rutledge a moment to catch up before continuing. "Mr. Royston sent for Inspector Forrest first thing, but he'd gone looking for the Barlowe child, who'd gotten herself lost. By the time I got the message and reached the scene, the ground was well trampled by stable lads and farmhands, all come to stare. So we aren't sure he was shot just there. But it couldn't have happened more than a matter of yards from where we found him.

"And no indication of who might have done it?"

The Sergeant shifted uneasily in his chair, his eyes straying to the squares of pale sunlight that dappled the polished floor as the last of the rain clouds thinned. "As to that, you must know that Captain Wilton—that's the Captain Mark Wilton who won the VC—quarreled with the Colonel the night before, shortly after dinner. He's to marry the Colonel's ward, you see, and some sort of misunderstanding arose over the wedding, or so the servants claim. In the middle of the quarrel, the Captain stalked out of the house in a temper, and was heard to say he'd see the Colonel in hell, first.

The Colonel threw his brandy glass at the door just as the Captain slammed it, and shouted that that could be arranged.”

This was certainly a more colorful version of the bald facts that Rutledge had been given in London. Breakfast forgotten, he continued to write, his mind leaping ahead of Davies’ steady voice. “What does the ward have to say?”

“Miss Wood’s in her room, under the doctor’s care, seeing no one. Not even her fiancé. The Captain is staying with Mrs. Davenant. She’s a second cousin on his mother’s side. Inspector Forrest tried to question him, and he said he wasn’t one to go around shooting people, no matter what he might have done in the war.”

Rutledge put down his pen and finished his toast, then reached for his teacup. He didn’t have to ask what the Captain had done in the war. His photograph had been in all the papers when he was decorated by the King—the Captain had not managed to bring down the Red Baron, but he seemed to have shot down every other German pilot whose path he had crossed in the skies above France. Rutledge had watched a vicious dogfight high in the clouds above his trench one July afternoon and had been told later who the English pilot was. If it was true, then Wilton was nothing short of a gifted flier.

Colonel Harris had been a relatively young man for his rank, serving in the Boer War as well as the Great War and making a name for himself as a skilled infantry tactician. Rutledge had actually met him once—a tall, vigorous, compassionate officer who had known how to handle tired, frightened men, and asked once too often to do the impossible.

Without warning, Hamish laughed harshly. “Aye, he knew how to stir men. There were those of us who’d have blown his head off there and then if we’d had the chance, after that third assault. It was suicide, and he knew it, and he sent us anyway. I can’t say I’m sorry he’s got his. Late is better than never.”

Rutledge choked as his tea went down the wrong way. He knew—dear God, he knew!—that Hamish couldn’t be heard by anyone else, and yet sometimes the voice was so clear he expected everyone around him to be staring at him in shock.

He waved Davies back to his chair as the Sergeant made to rise and slap him on his back. Still coughing, he managed to ask, “That’s all you’ve done?”

“Yes, sir, then we were told to leave everything for the Yard and so we did just that.”

“What about the shotgun? Have you at least checked on that?”

“The Captain says he used the weapons at the Colonel’s house, if he wanted to go shooting. But none of them has been fired recently. We asked Mrs. Davenant if she had any guns, and she said she sold her late husband’s Italian shotguns before the war.” The Sergeant glanced over his shoulder, and Barton Redfern came across the parlor to refill his cup. When the young man had limped away again, the Sergeant added tentatively, “Because of that quarrel, of course, it looks as if the Captain might be the guilty party, but I’ve learned in this business that looks are deceiving.”

Rutledge nodded. “And the murder was three days ago. After last night’s rain, there’ll be nothing to find in the meadow or anywhere else along the route the Colonel might have taken on his ride. Right, then, do you have a list of people to talk to? Besides the ward—Miss Wood—and Wilton. And this Mrs. Davenant.”

“As to that, there aren’t all that many. The servants and the lads who found the body. Laurence Royston. Miss Tarrant, of course—she was the lady that Captain Wilton had courted before the war, but she turned him down then and doesn’t seem to mind that he’s marrying Miss Wood now. Still, you never know, do you? She might be willing to throw a little light on how the two men got on together. And there’s Mr. Haldane—he’s the Squire’s son. He was one of Miss Wood’s suitors, as was the Vicar.”

Davies grinned suddenly, a wholly unprofessional glint in his eyes. “Some say Mr. Carfield took holy orders because he saw the war coming, but actually had his heart set on the theater. He does preach a better sermon than old Reverend Mott did, I’ll say that for him. We all learned more about the Apostle Paul under Mr. Mott than any of us ever cared to know, and I must admit Mr. Carfield’s a welcomed change!” He recollected himself and went on more soberly, “The two Sommers ladies are new to the district and don’t go about much. I doubt if they’d be helpful, except that they live near where the body was found and might have seen or heard something of use to us.”

Rutledge nodded as Redfern returned with a fresh pot of tea, waiting until his cup had been filled before he commented, “Miss Wood seems to have been very popular.”

“She’s a very—attractive—young lady,” Davies answered, hesitating over the word as if not certain that it was appropriate. “Then of course there’s Mavers. He’s a local man, a rabble-rouser by nature, always putting his nose in where it doesn’t belong, stirring things up, making trouble for the sake of trouble. If anything untoward happens in Upper Streetham, the first person you think of is Mavers.”

“That’s not a likely motive for shooting Harris, in itself.”

“In Mavers’s case, it is. He’s been annoying the Colonel since long before the war, nothing we’ve ever been able to prove, you understand, but there’ve been fires and dead livestock and the like, vindictive acts all of them. The last time, when one of the dogs was poisoned, the Colonel threatened to have Mavers committed if it happened again. He’s got a very sound alibi—Inspector Forrest talked to him straightaway. All the same, I’d not put murder past him.”

Rutledge heard the hope in Davies’ voice, but said only, “I’ll keep that in mind. All right, then, if that’s the lot, we’ll start with Miss Wood. She may be able to give us a better picture of this quarrel, what it was about and whether it might have had anything to do with her guardian’s death. I’ll want you there. Inspector Forrest can spare you?” He capped his pen, stowed the notebook in his pocket, and reached for his cup.

Davies looked stunned. “You didn’t bring a Sergeant with you, then?”

“We’re shorthanded at the Yard at the moment. You’ll do.”

“But—,” Davies began, panic sweeping through him. Then he thought better of what he had been on the verge of saying. The man to speak to was Forrest, not this gaunt-faced stranger from London with

his clipped voice and bleak eyes.

Then he bethought himself of the one fact he'd avoided so far, the one bit of evidence no one wanted to accept. He had been told to wait until Rutledge brought it up, but the man hadn't mentioned it. Because he discounted it? That would be too much to hope for! More than likely, the Inspector intended to rub the Sergeant's nose in it, now that he had his chance. But Davies knew it had to be dragged into the open, like it or not. You couldn't just ignore it, pretend it didn't exist—

He cleared his throat. "There's more, sir, though I don't know what it's worth. Surely they told you in London?" Staring at Rutledge, waiting for some indication that the man knew, that he didn't need to go into embarrassing detail, Sergeant Davies read only impatience in the face before him as the Inspector folded his napkin and laid it neatly beside his plate.

"A possible witness, sir. He claims he saw the Colonel on Monday morning." No, the man didn't know; it was hard to believe, but for some reason he hadn't been told! Davies hurried on. "In the lane that cuts between Seven Brothers Field and the orchard. And he saw Captain Wilton standing there beside the horse, holding on to the bridle and talking to the Colonel, who was shaking his head as if he didn't like what he was hearing. This must have been about seven-thirty, maybe even a quarter to eight. Then the Captain suddenly stepped back, his face very red, and the Colonel rode off, leaving the Captain standing there with his fists clenched."

Rutledge silently cursed London for ineptitude. He pulled out his notebook again and asked curtly, "How far is this place from where the Colonel was found dead? And why didn't you mention this witness sooner?"

The Sergeant's face flushed. "As to how far, sir, it's at most two miles east of the meadow," he answered stiffly. "And I was sure they'd have told you in London—You see, the problem is that the witness is unreliable, sir. He was drunk. He often is, these days."

"Even an habitual drunk has been known to tell the truth." Rutledge added another line, then looked up. "We can't discount what he says on those grounds alone."

"No, sir. But there's more, you see. He's—well, he's shell-shocked, sir, doesn't know where he is half the time, thinks he's still at the Front, hears voices, that kind of thing. Lost his nerve on the Somme and went to pieces. Lack of moral fiber, that's what it was. It seems a shame for a fine man like the Captain to be under suspicion of murder on the evidence of an acknowledged coward like Daniel Hickam, doesn't it? It isn't right, sir, is it?"

But London had said nothing—Bowles had said nothing.

In the far corners of his mind, behind the spinning turmoil of his own thoughts, Rutledge could hear the wild, derisive echoes of Hamish's laughter.

Misunderstanding the horrified expression on Rutledge's face, Sergeant Davies nodded sympathetically. "Aye," he said, "it's hard to swallow, I know. You were in the war, then? My youngest brother was in the Balkans, lost both arms. Took it like a man. Not a shred of weakness in Tommy!"

He began to fiddle with his cup as he went on, as if to distract himself from the rest of what he had to say. "Of course we didn't know about Hickam at first, I just came across him that same morning, lying under a tree on the lane, sleeping one off. When I tried to wake him up and send him off home, he swore he was sober as a judge, and told me I could ask the Colonel and the Captain, they'd vouch for him. I thought he meant generally, you see."

The cup spun out of his fingers, clattering against the sugar bowl and almost tipping over the cream pitcher. Davies caught it, returned it to his saucer, then plowed on, trying to conceal the sense of guilt that was still plaguing him. "I didn't pay any heed to him at first, I was in a hurry to find Inspector Forrest and tell him about the murder, but Hickam's place was on my way back to Upper Streetham and he was in no shape to get there on his own. By the time I'd reached his house, listening to him ramble all the way, it was beginning to sound a bit different from what I'd first thought. So Inspector Forrest went to talk to him that afternoon and got a little straighter version, and we couldn't just shrug it off, could we? Right or wrong, we had to take note of it, didn't we?"

It was an appeal for forgiveness, an admission of responsibility for what had plunged Warwickshire and London into this present predicament. If he'd left well enough alone, if he hadn't bothered to stop in the first place, no one would ever have thought to question the likes of Hickam about the Colonel or the Captain. There would have been no reason, no need.

Rutledge, still fighting his own battle for control, managed to keep his voice level, but the words came out harsh and cold, apparently without any sympathy for the Sergeant's moral dilemma. "What did Captain Wilton have to say about Hickam's story?"

"Well, nothing. That is, he says he wasn't in the lane that morning, he was walking in a different direction. He says he's seen Hickam from time to time in the mornings, reeling home or sleeping wherever he was or having one of his crazy spells, but not on that occasion."

"Which doesn't mean that Hickam didn't see him."

Sergeant Davies was appalled. "You're saying the Captain's lying, sir?"

"People do lie, Sergeant, even those who have earned the Victoria Cross. Besides, Hickam's description of what he saw is strangely complete, isn't it? The Captain holding the Colonel's bridle, the Captain's face turning red, the Captain stepping back with clenched fists. If it didn't happen that morning, if Hickam saw the two men together on another occasion, it could mean that their quarrel of the night before the murder had its roots in an earlier confrontation. That there was more animosity between the Colonel and his ward's fiancé than we know at this point."

Sergeant Davies was dubious. "Even so, Hickam might have misread what he saw, there might have

been a perfectly reasonable explanation. What if the two men were in agreement instead of quarreling? What if they'd been angry at someone else, or about something that neither of them liked?"

"Then why would Wilton deny that he'd met Harris in the lane? If this encounter did have some perfectly innocent explanation? No, I think you're on the wrong track there."

"Well, what if Hickam confused what he saw with something that happened at the Front? He doesn't like officers—he might even have made mischief on purpose. You can't be really sure, can you? Hickam might be capable of anything!" The disgust in Davies' face was almost a tangible thing.

"I can't answer that until I've spoken to Hickam and the Captain." Hamish's laughter had faded, he was able to think clearly again. But his heart was still pounding hard with the shock.

"Shall we start with them, then? Instead of Miss Wood?"

"No, I want to see the Colonel's house and his ward first." The truth was, he wasn't prepared to face Hickam now. Not until he was certain he could do it without betraying himself.

Had anyone guessed in London? No, surely not! It was sheer coincidence, there were any number of shell-shocked veterans scattered across England.... Rutledge got to his feet. "My car is in the back. I'll meet you there in five minutes." He nodded to Barton Redfern as he walked out of the dining room, and the young man watched the two policemen until they were out of sight, then listened to Rutledge's feet beating a quick tattoo up the carpeted stairs while the Sergeant's heavy leather heels clicked steadily down the stone passage leading to the Inn yard.

Upstairs in his room, Rutledge stood with his hands flat on the low windowsill, leaning on them and looking down into the busy street below. He was still shaken. Only a half dozen people knew about his condition, and the doctors had promised to say nothing to the Yard, to give him a year to put his life back together first. The question was, had Bowles kept silent about Hickam because he hadn't thought it was something that mattered? Or because he had known it was and might embarrass Rutledge?

No, that was impossible. It had been an oversight—or at most, Bowles had tried to make this murder investigation sound more attractive than it was. A kindness...? He remembered Bowles from before the war, good at his job, with a reputation for ruthless ambition and a cold detachment. Sergeant Fletcher, who'd died in the first gas attack on Ypres, used to claim that Bowles frightened the guilty into confessing.

"I've seen 'em! Shaking in their boots and more afraid of old Bowles than they were of the hangman. Nasty piece of work, I've never liked dealing with him. Mind you, he did his job fair and square, I'm not saying he didn't. But he wasn't above using any tool that came to hand...."

Not kindness, then, not from a man like Bowles.

Still, what London had done didn't matter now.

Because here in his own room, away from Davies' watchful eyes and Redfern's hovering, Rutledge

was able to think more clearly and recognize a very tricky problem. What if Hickam turned out to be right?

If it should come to an arrest—so far there was not enough evidence to look that far ahead, but assuming there was—how could the Crown go into a court of law with a Daniel Hickam as its prime witness against a man wearing the ribbon of the Victoria Cross? It would be ludicrous, the defense would tear the case to shreds. Warwickshire would be screaming for the Yard's blood, and the Yard for his.

He had wanted an investigation complex enough to distract him from his own dilemmas. Well, now he seemed to have got his wish in spades. The question remained, was he ready for it? Were his skills too rusty to handle something as difficult as the Harris murder successfully? Worse still, was he too personally involved? If so, he should back out now. This instant. Call the Yard and ask for a replacement to be sent at once.

But that would require explanations, excuses—lies. Or the truth.

He straightened, turned from the window, and reached for his coat. If he quit now, he was finished. Professionally and emotionally. It wasn't a question of choice but of survival. He would do his best, that was all anyone could do, and if in the days to come that wasn't enough, he must find the courage to admit it. Until then he was going to have to learn exactly where he stood, what he was made of.

The words coward and weakling had stung. But what rankled in his soul was that he had said nothing, not one single word, in Hickam's defense. In betraying Hickam, he felt he had betrayed himself.

Rutledge and Sergeant Davies arrived at Mallows, the Colonel's well-run estate on the Warwick road half an hour later. The sky had cleared to a cerulean blue, the air clean and sweet with spring as the car turned in through the iron gates and went up the drive.

Completely hidden from the main road by banks of old trees, the house didn't emerge until they rounded the second bend and came out of the shadows into the sun. Then mellowed brick and tall windows, warmed to gold, reflected the early morning light. Setting them off was a wide sweep of lawn mown to crisp perfection, the flower beds sharply edged and the drive smoothly raked. One glance and you could tell that not only had pride gone into the upkeep of this house, but unabashed love as well.

To Rutledge's appreciative eye, a master's hand had created this marvelously graceful facade. For the stone cornices, quoins, and moldings around the windows enhanced rather than overwhelmed the effect of elegant simplicity that the designer had been striving for. He found himself wondering who the architect had been, for this was a small jewel. Where had such a gift taken the man after this?

But Davies couldn't say. "The Colonel, now, he would have told you, and if he wasn't too busy, he'd have taken out the old plans for you to see. That was the kind of man he was, never a stickler for rank. He knew his place, and trusted you to know yours."

As Rutledge got out of the car, he found himself looking up at the windows above. One of the heavy

drapes had twitched, he thought, the slight movement catching the corner of his eye. In France, where life itself depended on quick reflexes, you learned to see your enemy first or you died. It was as simple as that.

The staff had already placed a heavy black wreath on the broad wooden door, its streamers lifting gently in the light breeze. A butler answered the bell. He was a thin man of middle height, fifty-five or thereabouts, his face heavy with grief as if he mourned the Colonel personally. He informed Rutledge and Sergeant Davies in tones of polished regret that Miss Wood was not receiving anyone today.

Rutledge said only, "What is your name?"

"Johnston, sir." The words were polite, distant.

"You may tell your mistress, Johnston, that Inspector Rutledge is here on police business. You know Sergeant Davies, I think."

"Miss Wood is still unwell, Inspector." He cast an accusing glance at Davies, as if blaming him for Rutledge's ill-mannered persistence. "Her doctor has already informed Inspector Forrest—"

"Yes, I understand. We won't disturb her any longer than absolutely necessary." The voice was firm, that of an army officer giving instructions, brooking no further opposition. Certainly not the voice of a lowly policeman begging entrance.

"I'll enquire," the man replied, with a resignation that clearly indicated both personal and professional disapproval but just as clearly made no promises.

He left them standing in the hall before a handsome staircase that divided at the first-floor landing and continued upward in two graceful arcs. These met again on the second story, above the doorway, to form an oval frame for a ceiling painting of nymphs and clouds, with a Venus of great beauty in the center. From the hall she seemed to float in cloud-cushioned luxury, far beyond the reach of mere mortals, staring down at them with a smile that was as tantalizing as it was smug.

Johnston was gone for nearly fifteen minutes.

Hamish, growing restive as the tension of waiting mounted, said, "I've never been inside a house like this. Look at the floor, man, it's squares of marble, enough to pave the streets in my village. And that stair—what holds it up, then? It's a marvel! And worth a murder or two."

Rutledge ignored him and the uncomfortable stiffness of Sergeant Davies, who seemed to grow more wooden with every passing minute. The butler returned eventually and said with ill-concealed censure, "Miss Wood will receive you in her sitting room, but she asks that you will make your call brief."

He led the way up the staircase to the first floor and then turned left down a wide, carpeted corridor to a door near the end of it. The room beyond was quite spacious, uncluttered, and ordinarily, Rutledge thought, full of light from the long windows facing the drive. But the heavy rose velvet drapes had been drawn—was it these he had seen stir?—and only one lamp, on an inlaid table, made a feeble effort to penetrate the gloom.

Lettice Wood was tall and slim, with heavy dark hair that was pinned loosely on the top of her head,

smooth wings from a central parting cupping her ears before being drawn up again. She was wearing unrelieved black, her skirts rustling slightly as she turned to watch them come toward her.

“Inspector Rutledge?” she said, as if she couldn’t distinguish between the Upper Streetham sergeant and the representative of Scotland Yard. She did not ask them to be seated, though she herself sat on brocade couch that faced the fireplace and there were two upholstered chairs on either side of it. A seventeenth-century desk stood between two windows, and against one wall was a rosewood cabinet filled with a collection of old silver, reflecting the single lamp like watching eyes from the jungle’s edge. Sergeant Davies, behind Rutledge, stayed by the door and began to fumble in his pocket for his notebook.

For a moment the man from London and the woman in mourning considered each other in silence, each gauging temperament from the slender evidence of appearance. The lamplight reached Rutledge’s face while hers was shadowed, but her voice when she spoke had been husky and strained that of someone who had spent many hours crying. Her grief was very real—and yet something about it disturbed him. Something lurked in the dimness that he didn’t want to identify.

“I’m sorry we must intrude, Miss Wood,” he found himself saying with stiff formality. “And I offer our profoundest sympathy. But I’m sure you understand the urgency of finding the person or persons responsible for your guardian’s death.”

“My guardian.” She said it flatly, as if it had no meaning for her. Then she added with painful vehemence, “I can’t imagine how anyone could have done such a terrible thing to him. Or why. It was a senseless, savage—” She stopped, and he could see that she had swallowed hard to hold back angry tears. “It served no purpose,” she added finally in a defeated voice.

“What has served no purpose?” Rutledge asked quietly. “His death? Or the manner of it?”

That jolted her, as if she had been talking to herself and not to him, and was surprised to find he’d read her thoughts.

She leaned forward slightly and he could see her face then, blotched with crying and sleeplessness. But most unusual nevertheless, with a high-bridged nose and a sensitive mouth and heavy-lidded eyes. He couldn’t tell their color, but they were not dark. Sculpted cheekbones, a determined chin, a long, slender throat. And yet somehow she managed to convey an odd impression of warm sensuality. He remembered how the Sergeant had hesitated over the word “attractive,” as if uncertain how to classify her. She was not, in the ordinary sense, beautiful. At the same time, she was far, very far, from plain.

“I don’t see how you can separate them,” she answered after a moment, a black-edged handkerchief twisting in her long, slim fingers. “He wasn’t simply killed, was he? He was destroyed, blotted out. It was deliberate, vengeful. Even Scotland Yard can’t change that. But the man who did this will be hanged. That’s the only comfort I’ve got.” There was a deeper note in her voice as she spoke of hanging, as if she relished the image of it in her mind.

“Then perhaps we ought to begin with last Monday morning. Did you see your guardian before he left the house?”

She hesitated, then said, “I didn’t go riding that morning.”

Before he could take her up on that stark reply, she added, “Charles loved Mallows, loved the land. He said those rides made up, a little, for all the months he spent away. So he usually went out alone, and was never a fixed route, you see, just wherever his list for that day took him—it might be inspecting crop or a tenant’s roof or the state of the hedges or livestock, anything. And he came back feeling—fulfilled, I suppose. It was a way of healing after all he’d been through.”

“How many people knew what was on his list each day?”

“It wasn’t written down, it was in his head. Laurence Royston might be aware that Charles was planning to look into a particular problem, if they’d discussed it. But for the most part it was Charles own interests that guided him. I don’t suppose you were a soldier, Inspector, but Charles once said that the greatest crime of the war was ruining the French countryside for a generation. Not the slaughter of armies, but the slaughter of the land.” She leaned back, out of the light again, as if realizing that she was running on and had lost his attention.

I didn’t go riding that morning—

Rutledge considered those words, ignoring the rest of what she had said. It was as if that one fact separated her entirely from what had happened. But in what way? He had heard soldiers offer the same excuse to avoid discussing what they had witnessed on the battlefield but had not been a part of: “I wasn’t in that assault.” I don’t know and I don’t want to know....

A denial, then. But was it a washing of hands, or a means of telling the absolute but not the whole truth?

Her face was still, but she was watching him, waiting in the security of the darkness for him to ask his next question. Her grief appeared to be genuine, and yet she was doing nothing whatsoever to help him. He could feel her resistance like a physical barrier, as if they were adversaries, not joined in a mutual hunt for a murderer.

She in her turn was silently counting her heartbeats, willing them to a steady rhythm so that her breathing didn’t betray her. In feeling lay disaster. Not for this London stranger with his chill, impersonal eyes was she going to lay out her most private emotions, and watch them probed and prodded for meaning! Let him do the job he had been sent to do. And why was it taking so bloody long? Charles had been gone for three days!

The silence lengthened. Sergeant Davies cleared his throat, as if made uneasy by undercurrents he couldn’t understand.

For they were there, strong undercurrents, emotions so intense they were like ominous shadows in the room. Even Hamish was silent.

Changing his tactics abruptly, Rutledge asked, “What did your fiancé, Captain Wilton, and your guardian discuss after dinner on Sunday, the night before the Colonel’s death?”

Her attention returned to him with a swift wariness. The heavy-lidded eyes opened wide for an instant but she answered, “Surely you’ve spoken to Mark about that?”

“I’d prefer to hear what you have to say first. I understand that whatever it was led to a quarrel?”

“A quarrel?” Her voice was sharp now. “I went upstairs after dinner, I—didn’t feel well. Charles and Mark were in the drawing room when I left them, talking about one of the guests invited to the wedding. Neither of them liked the man, but both felt they had to include him. An officer they’d served with, my guardian in the Boer War and Mark in France. I can’t imagine them quarreling over that.”

“Yet the servants told Inspector Forrest that there had been angry words between the two men, that, in fact, Captain Wilton had stormed out of the house in a rage, and that Colonel Harris flung his wineglass at the door the Captain had slammed behind him.”

She was rigid, her attention fixed on him with fierce intensity. Even the handkerchief no longer unconsciously threaded itself through her fingers. He suddenly had the impression that this was news to her, that she had been unaware of what had happened in the hall. But she said only, “If they heard that much, they must have been able to tell you what it was all about.”

“Unfortunately, they witnessed only the end of it.”

“I see.” As if distracted by some thought of her own, she said nothing for a time, and Rutledge waited wishing he could know what was going on behind those long-lashed eyes. Then she roused herself and repeated, “Yes, that is unfortunate, isn’t it? Still, you must know that neither Charles nor Mark is a hotheaded man.”

“I’d hardly describe slamming a door in anger or breaking a crystal glass against it as coolheaded. But we’ll have the answer to that in good time,” Rutledge responded, noting with interest that she hadn’t rushed to Captain Wilton’s defense when she had been given the perfect opening to do just that. Yet she must have realized where such questions were leading?

Oddly enough, he thought she had. And discounted it. Or ignored it? Accustomed to reaching beyond words into emotional responses, he found her elusiveness puzzling. But he couldn’t be sure whether that was his fault—or hers.

He took another tack, giving her a second opening but in a different direction. “Do you believe this man Mavers might have killed the Colonel? Apparently he’s caused trouble for your guardian for a number of years.”

She blinked, then said, “Mavers? He’s been a troublemaker all his life. He seems to thrive on it. He sows dissent for the sheer, simple pleasure of it.” Glancing at Sergeant Davies, she said, “But turning to murder? Risking the gallows? I can’t see him going that far. Can you?” She frowned. “Unless, of course, it might be just what he wanted,” she added thoughtfully.

“In what way?”

“He’s been everything from a conscientious objector to a roaring Bolshevik—whatever might stir up people, make them angry. But everyone has more or less grown used to his ranting. Sometimes I even forget he’s there. Laurence—Mr. Royston—always said it was the best way to take the wind out of his sails. But Charles felt that it might tip Mavers over the line, that being ignored was the one thing he

dreaded. That it was anybody's guess what he might do then. Charles was a good judge of character, he knew ~~Mavers better than the rest of us did.~~ Still, if I were you I'd be wary of any confession ~~Mavers made, unless it was backed up by indisputable proof.~~"

Which was a decidedly puzzling remark. She had just been offered a ready-made scapegoat, and she had refused it. In his mind, Rutledge went back over what she'd just said, listening for nuances. Well if she was trying to shift the direction of the enquiry, she had done it with an odd subtlety that was only just short of brilliant. Davies, out of her range of vision, was nodding as if he agreed with her about Mavericks being the killer, and she'd said nothing of the sort.

If it hadn't occurred to her that the Captain needed defending, why had questions about the quarrel made her so wary? Had Harris been at fault there, and she was trying to preserve his good name, his reputation? Rutledge moved to the mantel, hoping that the change in angles might help him see her more clearly in the shadows. But her face was closed, her thoughts so withdrawn from him that he might as well try to read the engraving on the silver bowl at her elbow. The pallid light reached neither of them.

"Is there anyone else in the village to your knowledge with a reason to wish your guardian dead?"

"Charles had no enemies." She sighed. "There are those who might wish Mark dead, if you believe the gossips. But Charles? He was never here long enough to make enemies. He was a soldier, and leave was a rare thing, a time of respite, not for stirring up trouble."

"No land disputes, no boundary quarrels, no toes stepped on in the county?"

"I've not heard of them. But ask Laurence Royston, his agent. He can tell you about running the estate and whether there were disputes that might have festered. I can't help you there. I only came here to live near the end of the war, when I'd finished school. Before that, I was allowed to visit on school holidays when Charles had leave. Otherwise, I went home with one of my classmates."

Questioning her was like fencing with a will-o'-the-wisp. I don't know, I can't help you there, I didn't go riding that morning—And yet he had believed her when she said that hanging the murderer would bring her comfort. In his experience, the shock of sudden, violent death often aroused anger and a thirst for vengeance. But it seemed to be the only natural, anticipated reaction he'd gotten from her. Why did she keep drifting away from him?

He was reminded by a shifting of feet that Sergeant Davies was in the room, a witness to everything she said. A man who lived in Upper Streetham, who presumably had a wife and friends...was that the problem? He, Rutledge, was a private person himself; he understood the fierce need for privacy in others. And if that was the case, he was wasting his time now.

"How did you spend the morning? Before the news was brought to you?"

She was frowning, trying to remember as if that had been years ago, not a matter of days. "I bathed and dressed, came down to breakfast, the usual. Then I had a number of letters to write, and was just coming out of the library to see if Mr. Royston might take them into Warwick for me, when—" She stopped abruptly, then continued in a harsh voice. "I really don't recall what happened after that."

“You didn’t leave the house, go to the stables?”

“Of course not, why on earth should I tell you I did one thing when I’d done another?”

Rutledge took his leave soon afterward. Davies seemed relieved to be on his way downstairs at the butler’s heels, showing an almost indecent haste to be gone.

But Rutledge felt unsatisfied, as if somehow he had been neatly outmaneuvered in that darkened room. Thinking back over what the girl had said, he couldn’t pinpoint any particular reason for disbelieving anything she’d told him, but doubt nagged at him. She couldn’t be more than twenty-one or twenty-two, and yet she had shown a self-possession that was uncommon at that age—or any other. And he hadn’t been able to break through to the person underneath. To the emotions that must be there. To the unspoken words he’d wanted to hear but that she had managed to hold back.

Her detachment, then. That was what disturbed him. As if she didn’t connect the reality of violent death with the questions that the police were asking her. No passionate defense of her fiancé, no rush to push Mavers forward in his place, no speculation about the nature of the killer at all.

It was almost, he thought with one of those leaps of intuition that had served him so well in the past, as if she already knew who the killer was—and was planning her own private retribution.... “I can’t imagine how anyone could have done such a terrible thing to him,” she’d said. Not who—how.

Then as he reached the foot of the stairs he remembered something else. Both Sergeant Davies and the butler had mentioned a doctor. Had the girl been given sedatives that left her in this sleepwalker’s state, detached from grief and from reality too? He’d seen men in hospital talk quietly of unspeakable horrors when they’d been given drugs: stumbling to describe terrors they couldn’t endure to think about until they were so heavily sedated that the pain and the frantic anxiety were finally dulled.

He himself had confessed to Hamish’s presence only under the influence of such drugs. Nothing else would have dragged that out of him, and afterward he had tried to kill the doctor for tricking him. They’d had to pull him off the man, and he’d fought every inch of the way back to his room.

It might be a good idea, then, to speak to the family’s doctor before deciding what to do about Lettice Wood.

Before the butler could see them safely out the door, Rutledge turned to him and asked, “What was your name again? Johnston?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Can you show me the drawing room, please. Where the quarrel between the Captain and the Colonel took place?”

Johnston turned and walked silently across the polished marble to a door on his left. He opened it, showing them into a room of cool greens and gold, reflecting the morning light without absorbing it. “Miss Wood had coffee brought in here after dinner, and when the gentlemen joined her, she dismissed me. Soon afterward she went upstairs, sending for one of the maids and saying that she had

a headache and would like a cool cloth for her head. That was around nine o'clock, perhaps a quarter past. ~~At ten-fifteen I came here to take away the coffee tray and to see if anything else was needed before I locked up for the night.~~

“And you hadn't been into or near the drawing room between taking the tray in and coming to remove it?”

“No, sir.”

“What happened then? At ten-fifteen?”

At Rutledge's prodding, Johnston stepped back into the hall again, pointed to a door in the shadows of the stairs, and went on reluctantly. “I came out of that door—it leads to the back of the house—and started toward the drawing room. At that moment, Mary was coming down the stairs.”

“Who is Mary?”

“There's seven on the staff here, sir. Myself, the cook, her helper, and four maids. Before the war there were twelve of us, including footmen. Mary is one of the maids and has been here the longest, next to Mrs. Treacher and myself.”

“Go on.”

“Mary was coming down the stairs, and she said when I came into view that she was looking to see if the banisters and the marble floor needed polishing the next morning. If not, she was going to put Nancy to polishing the grates, now that we were no longer making up morning fires.”

“And?”

“And at that moment,” Johnston answered heavily, “the door of the drawing room opened, and the Captain came out. I didn't see his face—he was looking over his shoulder back into the room—but I heard him say quite distinctly and very loudly, ‘I'll see you in hell, first!’ Then he slammed the drawing-room door behind him and went out the front door, slamming that as well. I don't think he saw me here, or Mary on the stairs.” He seemed to run out of words.

“Finish your story, man!” Rutledge said impatiently.

“Before the front door had slammed, I heard the Colonel shout, ‘That can be arranged!’ and the sound of glass shattering against this door.”

His hand drew their eyes to the raw nick in the glossy paint of one panel, where the glass had struck with such force that a piece of it must have wedged in the wood.

“Do you think Captain Wilton heard the Colonel?”

In spite of himself, Johnston smiled. “The Colonel, sir, was accustomed to making himself heard on parade ground and over the din of the battlefield. I would think that the Captain heard him as clearly as I did, and slammed the front door with added emphasis because of it.”

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