

THE INSPECTOR GEORGE GENTLY CASE FILES



GENTLY THROUGH THE MILL

Alan Hunter

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Gently Through the Mill

Alan Hunter



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IN MEMORY OF *THUNDERBIRD*

A Broads gaff sloop in the classic tradition, 27ft 6in by 8ft 6in by 2ft 9in. Built at Wroxham in 1911 by Alfred Collins and christened *Windmill*, she has been a thing of beauty about the Broads for nearly a century. Few yachts of her class were faster or sweeter to handle, none could get their shoulder down and drive up into the wind with such power and vivacity. Now she is old, but long may she linger. She enriched the author by two *Thunderbird* summers.

CHAPTER ONE

WHY WAS THE baker in a temper that morning, shouting so loudly that one might hear him across the mill yard? It wasn't the way with Blythely, that quiet, chapel-going fisherman; nobody could remember the last time he had been in a temper.

'Didn't I tell you not to make a seed-cake mixture!'

It was Ted Jimpson, his young, fair-haired assistant, who was coming in for the full blast of it.

'We can't sell seed-cakes at Easter. How many more times have I got to tell you that?'

Sitting in his dusty little office by the mill gate, Fuller, the miller, could imagine the scene in the gloomy, sweating bakehouse. Poor, crestfallen Ted, his limp hair draped over his brow, was mumbling an excuse about the huge bowl of yellow mixture. Blythely would be standing by him, perspiration gleaming on his pale face.

'I said to make it up—!'

A pause while Ted offered his hesitant explanation.

'That's what *you* tell me. *I* don't remember it!'

So Blythely was being forgetful as well as in a temper.

Finally: 'All right – all right. We'll call it my mistake and put it in! But another time, young man—!'

Another time!

It was Blythely who had been wrong all along, and now he was too upset to admit it and apologize.

Across the yard the naphtha engine was thumping away in its pit, three small boys hanging round the open doors to watch the huge, half-buried fly-wheel. A big attraction to small boys was the rambling mill. They would love to have explored the many-floored mystery behind the dusty windows, the bridge which joined it to the bakehouse, the inexplicable hoists ...

Fuller noticed Sam Blacker come out of the sack-store and make a threatening gesture towards the small boys.

'Clear out of it, you! Don't you know it's dangerous round here?'

The boys took to their heels, but stopped to jeer from a safe distance. Blacker waved his fist at them. Fuller, his lips compressed, turned to pick a letter from the pile his clerk had laid on the desk for him.

In the shop facing the street Blythely's wife was rushed off her feet by an impatient queue of customers. It was the only baker in Lynton to open on Good Friday for the sale of hot cross buns, and what was more, they were the best buns in Lynton.

But Mrs Blythely didn't mind being rushed off her feet. She was a good-natured woman and she smiled at her customers as she handed over the white paper bags redolent of cinnamon.

'A dozen, Mrs Simmons? Your Ernie come home?'

She was popular with the customers. She was eight years younger than her reserved, straight-faced husband.

The town was awake and busy with people, though most of the shops were closed. Good Friday was an odd sort of day. You never knew who was working and who was not. The builders, for instance, were here at the mill ... but other folk were dressed in their Sunday clothes, and some of them planning to attend the local league cup-final in the afternoon.

At seven in the evening there was to be a Procession of Witness led by the Vicar of St Margaret's. Heading the laity would be the mayor and mayoress, with such Lynton notables as the superintendent of police and Geoffrey Pershore, the affluent owner of the mill property.

The weather was going to be fine for it; Easter was late this year, and the pink blossoms of the ornamental cherries in the Abbey Gardens were already fluffing out.

'Hullo ... is that Mr Brooks?'

Fuller was on the telephone to the grain warehouse by the docks.

'Look, Mr Brooks, I want that consignment of Canadian ... yes, I know, but it's past ten and haven't got a damned thing here to go on with!'

From the corner of his eye he could see the three small boys creeping back to the door of the engine-room.

'But don't your men work on Good Friday now?'

Each one was daring the other, their exaggerated stealth had something laughable about it.

'Well, I must have it this afternoon ... two, at the very latest.'

Blacker flew out like an enraged ogre, scattering the three boys as a hawk scatters sparrows. They all dashed back down the narrow passage between the mill and the bakehouse. There, behind the mill, an old drying-ground formed a popular playground ... why did the thought of it cause Harry Fuller to compress his lips again?

He hung up and swivelled round in his chair.

'Mary ... get out a letter to Marshall's to say we'll be a day late delivering that consignment.'

'Shall I tell them why, Mr Fuller?'

'Naturally. Why should we take the blame?'

He got up and went out across the yard. Blythely was shouting again – how that man had lost his temper! In the sack-store Blacker was smoking a cigarette, and he didn't pretend to be doing anything else.

'Right – that Canadian stuff won't be here till this afternoon.'

Blacker shrugged. He was a tall, bony fellow with a humourless face and a weak mouth.

'We might as well pack up ... have a holiday like other people.'

'I'll tell you when to pack up!'

Neither of them was looking at the other.

'That hopper of spoiled flour – now's the time to clear it out. Leave Tom and Sid to put the last of the oats through, and get the others on the hopper.'

He stalked out, not deigning to watch his order obeyed. Blacker was his new foreman, very new indeed was Blacker. Behind his back, Fuller knew, his employees were criticizing him for promoting such a fellow.

He stood by the mill gate and stared moodily across at the café opposite. To his left the shop bell tinkled prosperously as the customers pushed past each other.

'You got home all right last night?'

It was Bradshaw, secretary of the golf club, with whom he had been to a stag party which had lasted into the small hours.

'You must have been the only one who wasn't blotto ... what did the little woman say, eh?'

Fuller managed to grin at him. His wife ... as a matter of fact, she had never criticized him because of his annual binge. She was a very sensible woman. Though perhaps there was a limit to that.

He went back into the office and sat idle, listening to the thump of the naphtha engine. Behind him Mary was banging away at her typewriter, glancing at him now and then, no doubt, surprised at his

inactivity. At thirty she was not unattractive. He was aware that she had no boyfriend and would probably accept a gesture from him.

‘Are you doing anything for Easter, Mary?’

He half-turned, though without really facing her.

‘Nothing much, Mr Fuller ... I’m going on one of those coach trips to Blenheim Palace on the Monday.’

‘Going with someone, are you?’

‘Oh no, Mr Fuller. Just a little outing on my own.’

‘Let me pay for the ticket. It’ll be an Easter egg from the firm.’

Through her pleased expressions of gratitude he was thinking: ‘Now if I’d been sensible, perhaps ...’

There was a tap on the door and Fred Salmon, one of his hands, took a hesitating step into the office.

‘Guv’nor ...’

He was looking pale, even under the dusting of flour on his greyish features.

‘What is it, Fred?’

‘Guv’nor, you’d better come and see ...’

Fuller stared at him a moment and then got quickly to his feet. It was plain from the man’s appearance that something serious had occurred.

‘An accident, is it?’

They were hurrying across the yard.

‘I didn’t like to say ... his foot is sticking out of the sleeve.’

‘Who? Who is it?’

‘Christ knows, guv’nor. It isn’t one of us.’

With a sickening feeling in his stomach Fuller bounded up the wooden steps to the sacking-room. It had happened once before, that, when he was serving his apprenticeship. A man had overbalanced and fallen into a hopper of flour. He remembered the terrible casualness of it. The man had simply disappeared into the expressionless white silence. Five minutes later, when they had managed to get the ladder down, the same man had been pulled out ... soft, warm, but completely lifeless. For weeks he had been haunted by the horror of those five minutes.

They were standing round the sleeve, which had been emptying into the wooden hopper-trolley. None of them seemed to know what to do, not even Blacker.

From the mouth of the sleeve protruded that single, terrible foot. It was wearing a cheap stamped leather shoe and had completely obstructed the flow of sour-smelling flour.

‘One of you ... get some tools. You, Charlie – don’t stand there gaping!’

Charlie Savage gulped and ran to go down the steps.

‘Shut the flour off, one of you – Fred, get a ladder. We’ll have to take the sleeve off. We’ll never get him out the other way!’

He was in command, he was dispelling the panic, but the nausea in his stomach continued to grow. The precipice he had felt beginning to yawn at his feet that morning had suddenly opened wide below him. He had a strange impression of not being responsible for himself.

‘Set the ladder against the beam. Sam, get in the trolley with Fred and take the weight of it.’

They went about his orders with a sort of plaintive eagerness, glad to make a show of normality in the business. ‘Ease it down now – ease it! He can’t be all that heavy.’ Dead men were heavy, though. During the air-raids, he remembered ...

Reverently they disencumbered the corpse of the canvas sleeve. The stiff foot persisted in sticking in the mouth of it, and Fred Salmon had to unlace the shoe, breathing through his teeth the while. Then they brushed the sour flour off it and laid it on the floor. It had stiffened in a crouched position and looked tiny and unnatural.

‘Anybody know him?’

They made a pretence of studying the floury features. The man had died with a snarl on his face showing the teeth like those of a beast.

But no, nobody knew him. In life and death he was a stranger.

‘All right then – carry him down to the sack-store. I’ll get on to the police and see what they make of him.’

Wordlessly they picked it up and went shuffling and clumsy towards the steps.

Fuller remained standing there, aware of the pallor showing beneath his eyes. And he was sweating too, though it was a day with a chill breeze. Why ... how? Why did he feel as though reality were slipping away from him? So some illicit prowler had taken a tumble into a flour-hopper!

He knew the police inspector who came to make enquiries. Griffin, his name was, and they had been several times gone round the links together. But now there was a subtle change in the man. He was quieter, more watchful, he had no casual words to exchange.

‘The mill buildings are locked, are they?’

‘I always lock them myself.’

‘Who would have the keys, sir?’

‘I have, naturally ... and Mr Blythely.’

‘You wouldn’t have noticed any forced entry, sir?’

‘No ... but there are plenty of windows with broken panes.’

There was nothing offensive about him, just a damnable persistence. He kept on asking questions long after a reasonable man would have left off.

‘And you’re sure you don’t know him, sir?’

Three times he had asked that question.

‘And you lock the mill buildings yourself?’

It was as though his mind couldn’t grasp things and so you had endlessly to repeat them.

Fuller usually lunched at home, but today he felt unable to face his wife and the two young children. On the phone he was cowardly and gave business as an excuse. In effect he joined Mary, who took her lunch across the road.

‘A fine way to start Easter, Mary—!’

He wanted his voice to sound flippant, but he could hear the strained note in it. Neither could he fancy the food offered by the café.

‘I’ve got that bad flour on my stomach ...’

Only he knew it wasn’t the flour.

Over in the shop, where the rush had long since ceased, he could see Blythely and his wife in a long and earnest conversation. On a bench in the mill yard Fred Salmon and Sid Neave sat eating their sandwiches and drinking cold tea.

It was more and more like a dream. He wondered how long it would be before he was unable to continue acting the part expected of him.

Mary, for instance ... wasn’t she already beginning to look at him a little queerly?

The inspector came back in the middle of the afternoon. He had with him Geoffrey Pershore, the man who leased Fuller the mill, and a leading light in Lynton society. Pershore had a grave expression

on his self-consequential features.

‘Hullo, Fuller ... could we have the office to ourselves?’

Mary took the hint and said she would go to fetch the tea. Pershore sat himself familiarly on the corner of Fuller’s desk, taking care, however, to hitch up his finely creased trousers.

‘This fellow you pulled out of the flour-hopper, Fuller ...’

Fuller nodded automatically from the part of himself that was listening.

‘I’m afraid it’s more serious than it seemed. He didn’t, it appears, die from suffocation in the flour.’

What ought he to do? How should he react?

‘No,’ continued Pershore, staring heavily at the varnished screen. ‘According to the inspector Fuller, that poor devil was strangled.’

The assistant commissioner was standing by his window when Gently tapped and entered. He might have been watching the courtyard or the segment of Embankment beyond, but Gently knew from experience that this was the A.C.s way of chewing over a problem. He rustled the folder he was carrying and dropped it noisily into the in-tray. The assistant commissioner turned to survey him through heavy tortoiseshell-framed glasses.

‘Ah, there you are, Gently. Is that the report on the Meyerstein business?’

Gently murmured inarticulately, never being one to waste his words.

‘Well, take a pew there, will you?’

The assistant commissioner came slowly over from the window.

‘There’s a curious little matter which has turned up from the country ... it’s intriguing me a good deal, and I think it’s right up your street.’

Gently sat as he was bid but with rather less than enthusiasm. Twenty years in the Central Office had taught him to be wary of cases which A.C.s found intriguing ...

The assistant commissioner sat down also and took up an envelope which lay on his blotter. He shook out three photographs and pushed them across for inspection.

‘Do you know these fellows?’

Gently nodded, spreading out the prints in front of him.

‘They’re a Stepney lot, aren’t they ... go around working the racetracks?’

‘Mmn.’ Gently nodded again. ‘They’ve all got records. That’s Punchy Ames, the rough-looking one ... he’s an ex-boxer who’s been in for assault. The rat-faced one is Steinie Taylor ... Roscoe, I think the other one is called.’

‘Just so, Gently.’ The assistant commissioner had removed his glasses and was dandling them in a distracting manner. ‘And if you didn’t find them in Stepney, where next would you look?’

‘Well ... any town with a racetrack, I suppose.’

‘But if they weren’t in Stepney and nowhere near a racetrack?’

Gently made a face. ‘In stir – unless they’d cooked up a different racket for themselves!’

‘Exactly.’

The assistant commissioner swung his glasses through a complete circle.

‘And that looks like being the situation, Gently, as far as I can make out.’

He paused, making the glasses pause with him.

‘You’ve seen the papers over the weekend?’

‘Mmn ... I glanced at them.’

‘You noticed that curious affair at Lynton – the body being found in a flour-hopper?’

‘It was all over the front page.’

‘Well, then.’ The glasses commenced to swing again. ‘This is where we get the connection.

Because the body in the hopper happened to belong to Steinie Taylor. The Borough Police have seen the prints up, and there’s no possible doubt about it.’

Gently stared impassively at the three photographs on the desk. So that was the end of Steinie Taylor ... ignoble, just as had been the man!

‘What about the other two?’

The A.C. made a disclaiming wave.

‘They disappeared from their haunts at the same time as Taylor, which as near as we can make out was a fortnight ago.’

‘Have Lynton had their description?’

‘Yes, but it doesn’t seem to have helped them. They’ve got nowhere since Friday and now they want us to carry it.’ Gently shrugged indifferently. It was the usual way of things. The locals tried their hand, and then passed the mess over to the Central Office.

‘Killed about midnight Thursday, wasn’t he?’

‘That’s the pathologist’s estimate.’

‘Much force used?’

‘The usual fracture. Taylor was a little man.’

‘Yes ... I’ve had to do with him.’

The assistant commissioner twisted his glasses like a diviner’s twig and appeared to be studying the set of them.

‘You know what puzzles me – and it is a puzzle – is what the deuce those fellows were doing in a quiet little place like Lynton. What game were they up to? That’s the star question. It was dangerous enough to get one of them murdered.’

Gently nodded agreement. ‘Criminals work to a pattern.’

‘There’s that again ... how did they get on to a different line?’

‘It must have seemed worth the risk.’

‘True – there’d be money in it. But what goes on at Lynton offering that sort of opening? And even if it did, how did they come to hear about it? There’s your angle of attack for you, Gently. If you can find the racket I think you’ll find your man.’

Gently grunted as he shuffled the photographs together. There was nobody like the A.C. for making the obvious sound inspiring.

At the same time he had been overlong in town, and a trip to the country was something he had been wishing himself.

‘I’ll have Dutt with me, will I?’

‘Certainly, Gently. I know you make a good team.’

‘He’s working with Jessop just now.’

‘I’ll have him taken off directly.’

Gently went back to his office feeling that things might be worse in this second-best of all possible worlds.

CHAPTER TWO

IT WAS TEATIME at Lynton when the slow, stopping train from Liverpool Street eventually pulled in at the station. Over a cup of what the British Railways facetiously termed coffee Gently examined the evening paper and grunted his satisfaction. There was yet no mention of the Yard having been called in.

‘We’ll check in the cases and stroll across to look at the mill ... it may give us some ideas to talk over with the locals.’

‘Are we going to have a meal, sir, before we report?’

‘I think so, Dutt. Not knowing their canteen.’

‘I missed me lunch, sir, that’s why I mention it ... got shoved on this job in such a blinking hurry.’

Outside the station a grey road led them to the narrow streets of the town centre. At this hour the streets were thronged with workers returning from the big chemical works and other establishments on the town outskirts. Some afoot, many on cycles, they created an unwonted appearance of populousness and the shops were busy with people making last-moment purchases.

A small town ... what had three petty criminals found to do here which had ended in the death of one of them?

On a wide square a few brightly awninged stalls were selling off vegetables cheaply. In the distance the quarter chimed from the twin flint-faced towers of St Margaret’s Church.

As they passed the Abbey Gardens they noticed a group of youths in drainpipe trousers lounging about the gates, opposite to them a few expensive cars parked in front of an old coaching inn called The Roebuck.

A bit of shop-breaking or rowdyism, that was the style of Lynton. If you got a murder here it would be an amateur job, somebody batting their wife and sticking their head in the gas oven ...

‘This is Fenway Road, sir.’

And over there would be the mill, an untidy yet somehow attractive jumble of buildings in a mixture of timber, brick and slate.

Gently came to a stop while he let the impression of it sink into his mind. It gave one the idea of irrational complexity, as though a simple idea had been carelessly embroidered upon.

At the front was the bakehouse and shop, a stark rectangular group in pinkish-yellow brick, three storeys high with the baker living over the shop. At the back it dropped a storey and became storehouse, outhouse, anything.

Behind this and nearly touching it rose the main block of the mill. It was quite a skyscraper, seven storeys at least. The brick here was dark red beneath blue-black tiles. The numerous square windows looked dusty and obscured, with sacks stuffed into frames which had lost their glass.

Much lower, but adjoining it, came a tiled and weatherboarded structure on a brick lower storey and then a similar but higher erection with a shallow gable and an outside hoist.

A tall brick chimney sprouted from somewhere in the middle, a small office by the gate had low windows directly on to the road.

‘A useful place to hide a body, sir!’

Dutt was also appraising it with a professional eye.

‘I’ll bet they don’t use half of it ... then look at all those outbuildings and things.’

‘There’s a yard or something at the back there, Dutt. You can see the tops of some trees over the roofs of those old cottages.’

‘Our geezer was unlucky, wasn’t he?’

‘Yes ... it might have been weeks before the corpse turned up.’

They moved along as far as the café, the sight of which provoked less professional thoughts in the mind of the hungry Dutt.

Some last few customers were being served in the shop by a talkative, fair-haired woman. In the office a middle-aged man with dark, bushy locks sat staring at some papers on his desk. As they watched a younger woman came through to him and her sudden appearance made him stare perceptibly.

‘Would that bloke be the miller?’ muttered Dutt.

‘It seems a fair bet.’

‘Looks as though he’s got something on his mind.’

‘So would you have if you were on the wrong end of a homicide investigation ...’

Gently sighed to himself and felt aimlessly about in the pockets of his raincoat. There was nothing suggestive here at all, nothing in the town, nothing in the mill.

Almost, he began to think, the whole circumstance was accidental ... Steinie Taylor had got bumped off in some more promising venue, and his body was dumped at Lynton the more thorough to confuse the issue.

‘Come on,’ he said. ‘Let’s try this café before it closes.’

But Dutt was already turning the handle of the door.

Lynton Borough Police H.Q. had been burned down by incendiary bombs during the war and had since arisen, a tribute to contemporary style, from its literal ashes.

It stood facing the market square where it created no disharmony. The big, frameless window of pastel brick, and supporting columns of varnished wood blended naturally with the Georgian setting, proving, if it were necessary, that good taste never quarrels with itself.

The super’s office was in keeping with the architectural promise. It was lofty and light and discreetly furnished with chairs, desk, and filing cabinet in two-toned wood, while the carpet, by police-station standards, was unashamedly vivacious.

It had the smell of somewhere new: it smelled of linseed and dyed fabrics and fresh cement.

‘Well, gentlemen, you know the outline of the case.’

Superintendent Press was sitting uneasily behind his desk, his hands moving restively as he talked to the Central Office men.

‘This fellow Taylor and his associates are nothing to do with Lynton. I don’t mind telling you that in our view the culprit will be found elsewhere.’

He was a man in his fifties with fleshy, boyish features. He had hard, greyish eyes and a fruitless voice.

‘Your people think it’s a gang killing, and we have found nothing to suggest that it isn’t. The obvious theory is that he was murdered by his associates. The fact that they have disappeared goes a long way to substantiate it.’

Gently nodded absent-mindedly and brought out his pipe. After looking round the town he was prepared to concede this theory as being the obvious one.

‘As to what they were doing in Lynton, your guess is as good as mine. I understand that these three men were in the habit of frequenting racetracks, but there is nothing closer to Lynton than Newmark

and Lincoln. The last racing in the vicinity was at Newmarket three weeks ago.'

In the square below the window a man was feeding the pigeons. The red sky of a fine April evening outlined a satisfying horizon of Georgian roofs and chimneys.

'We've got another idea ... we think it might be unconnected with racing.'

'Wouldn't that be unlikely?'

'Uncharacteristic, but then, so is murder.'

The super jiffled with even greater unease.

'What exactly did you have in mind – burglary, something of that sort?'

No.' Gently shook his head. 'That would be *too* uncharacteristic. Burglary is a specialist crime you don't find other criminals casually turning to it. What we should look out for is some sort of racket, something which has suddenly provided a special opportunity. We'll suppose that our three men heard about it and came to cash in ... then they ran up against some opposition and one of them got killed. The other two, quite naturally, dropped the business like a hot brick.'

'And all this in Lynton?'

'We can't be quite certain.'

'You can be certain enough of that one thing, Inspector. There are no rackets being operated in Lynton.'

A big diesel truck crossed the square and sent the pigeons momentarily fluttering. The man who was feeding them threw his last fragment and crumpled the bag into a ball.

'You have some docks here, haven't you?'

Gently blew a quiet little smoke-ring.

'Yes ... in a small way. Only light-draught vessels can come through the estuary.'

'Any continental traffic?'

'A few timber boats from Germany and Scandinavia. There's a Dutch ship, I believe, which carries on a coal trade.'

'There might be something there.'

The super frowned at his fingernails.

'As a matter of fact we did have a case ... but no stretch of imagination could make a racket of it. Inspector Griffin, you handled that business. Perhaps you can give Chief Inspector Gently an account of it.'

Inspector Griffin sat up a little straighter. He was a lean, fit-looking man with a severe moustache and a severe manner.

'February the twenty-third, I think, sir. On information received I detained a German seaman named Grossmann as he was leaving the cargo-vessel *Mitzi*, arrived from Bremen with a cargo of machine-spares. He became violent and I was forced to restrain him. On being searched he was found to be carrying a package containing several thousand grains of heroin, and more was discovered in his sea-chest. We obtained a conviction, sir.'

'And that, I think, is our only serious case of smuggling, Inspector?'

'Yes, sir. For as long as I've been on the Force.'

The super extended an exonerated hand. 'You see? A single case involving a solitary individual.'

'Mmn.' Gently puffed steadily. 'And the person he was going to sell it to?'

'He'd got no contact, sir.'

Griffin came in like a bullet.

'He was a rather stupid and uneducated man with no knowledge of what he was doing. Apparently he was under the impression that he could sell heroin to the nearest chemist or doctor. It was

obviously the first time he had attempted anything of the sort.'

Gently shrugged and struck himself a fresh light. At all events he was trying to get straw to make some bricks from ...

'There's nothing else you can think of?'

He was looking towards the super, but his question was addressed to Griffin. The super, he felt, had present visions of a shining, crime-free Lynton.

'We have our quota of petty crime, but nothing at all out of the way.'

'No forgeries, defalcations, outbreaks of armed assault – that sort of thing?'

'Nothing of the sort has come to our notice lately.'

They were on the defensive, both of them. The super had a stubborn expression on his fleshy face and Griffin was intent, ready to throw up his guard.

You had only to suggest for one moment that there might be undiscovered crimes lurking in the district ...

'Well, we'd better leave that angle and get down to brass tacks. Who have we got at the mill, and what have they got to say for themselves?'

Immediately the atmosphere relaxed. The super, opening a drawer, produced a box of cigarettes and offered them around, irrespective of rank. Inspector Griffin picked up a file he had brought with him and rustled the sheets in it with an air of confidence.

'First there's the people who live on the premises ... Henry Thomas Blythely, the baker, and Clara Dorothy Blythely, his wife. And you have to count the assistant, Edward John Jimpson. He was working in the bakehouse during the time the crime was committed.'

It had been a busy night, the one preceding Good Friday. Unlike his fellows Blythely baked the hot cross buns to be fresh on the day. The addition of these to his regular quota had meant an early start and both his assistant and himself were in the bakehouse by ten p.m. on the Thursday evening.

'And that's their alibi – they worked right through together. At seven in the morning they knocked off for a couple of hours, Blythely taking a nap on his bed and Jimpson on a shake-down at the back of the shop. But the latest time the pathologist gives for the killing is two or three a.m.'

'And the earliest?' interrupted Gently.

'Ten or eleven p.m. on the previous evening.'

Nothing was known to the demerit of either Blythely or his assistant. The baker's wife, by her own account, had retired to bed soon after her husband had gone down to the bakehouse, and had been awakened by him at seven in order to open the shop at half past.

'Now we come to the mill people, though it seems unlikely that they would have had anything to do with it.'

First the miller, Harry Ernest Fuller. He had locked up the mill at six p.m. on the Thursday and gone home to have tea with his wife and two young children. It was the night of the annual stag party given by his golf club. He had arrived at this – it was held in a pavilion attached to The Spreadeagle public house – at eight p.m., and left it again at approximately three a.m. on the Friday morning, the time being vouched for by his wife and an employee at the establishment.

Griffin paused before he continued.

'This may be irrelevant, sir, but I think I ought to mention it. Fuller impressed me unfavourably in the way he answered my questions. I didn't attach much importance to it because the man had just had a bad shock, but I feel that the chief inspector ought to have all the facts.'

Gently nodded his compliments and puffed on at his pipe. It didn't take long to sum up Griffin as a conscientious officer. He'd lost his case, it had been given to the Yard, but that wouldn't stop him

handing over what might be of assistance.

~~‘There are a foreman and six hands employed at the mill, and two drivers who deliver and pick up grain.’~~

Griffin had questioned each one and checked on his story. No fish was too small for the C.I.D. man’s painstaking net. This one had been in a pub, that one at the cinema. Blacker, the foreman, had had to admit a night with a woman of the town. But they were all accounted for, even Miss Playford Fuller’s clerk.

None of them could be truthfully described as suspects, and all of them had reasonable alibis.

‘Any bad hats amongst them?’

It seemed that there were not. Blacker, perhaps, had a taste for low company, but it had never run him into any cognizable trouble.

‘Fuller for instance ... has he got any money troubles?’

Another blank there – the miller was mildly prosperous.

The super was listening to it all with an expression of benignity. His man had done a good job and the rider was self-evident.

‘I think you’ll have to admit, Inspector, that Taylor’s associates are your men. There’s nobody here who even knew the fellow, let alone had a motive.’

Yes, it was getting plain enough. The more you listened, the more you probed, the less probable did it seem that Lynton had any more than a proprietary interest in the crime which had been fathered on it.

On the roof where they had retired the pigeons cooed their complacent innocence.

‘Fuller and Blythely were the only ones with keys?’

‘Yes, but several ground-floor windows are broken.’

‘You checked them, of course?’

‘I was unable to come to any definite conclusion.’

‘Who knew that the hopper of sour flour might go undisturbed for a week or two?’

‘Almost everyone ... it was an odd job which would get done only when the routine work was held up.’

Back and forward went the shuttlecock, with Griffin never at a loss for his reply. He had thought it all and checked it all; one could picture him going his rounds, quiet, alert and ruthless and pertinacious. He had wanted the facts and he had got them; where Griffin had been, Scotland Yard must follow suit.

‘And there’s no trace of any of these three having stayed in the town?’

As the conference progressed Gently was hunching ever deeper into his comfortable chair.

‘We’ve talked to all the lodging-houses and cheap hotels. A man disappeared on that date from one address, but we managed to trace him and he was only bilking his landlady.’

‘What about the other hotels?’

‘Would these men be likely to stay in them?’

‘Not in the usual way, but it’s just possible that they were in the money.’

Griffin hesitated and for once looked put out. But he quickly recovered his stride.

‘We are always informed, of course, if anything irregular has occurred. Nobody could disappear from a hotel in the town without us hearing about it.’

‘His pals might have paid his bill.’

Griffin looked as though he thought it were unlikely. Gently thought so too, but he lingered over the point. It was the only time he had caught the efficient inspector napping ...

Outside the shadows were lengthening in the square. A few knots of people had emerged from the Corn Exchange, where a concert was in progress. They were spending the interval talking and smoking cigarettes.

‘Well, I suppose that covers the case in outline.’

Relief showed in Griffin’s face, and the super could not repress an audible sigh.

‘If you’ll let me have the reports I’ll go through them this evening. Tomorrow, perhaps, we can do a little checking.’

They rose and shook hands, the super now cordial in his expressions of goodwill and offers of cooperation. A car would be at their disposal, an office was set aside for them. The super personally had booked them rooms at the St George Hotel, which they could see across the square.

Gently thanked him and left clutching Griffin’s well-stuffed file. Dutt tagged along behind him, a gloomy expression on his cockney features.

‘They certainly pick them for us, don’t they, sir?’

Gently grunted and tapped out his pipe on his heel.

‘Everythink cut and dried – except they haven’t got the leading suspects. So they calls us in to produce them out of a flipping hat.’

Gently pocketed his pipe and paused in the cobbled centre of the square. Such a quiet, quiet town. The bells of St Margaret’s sounded like a complacent benediction, the pigeons had settled finally on the roost on the tower of a little church.

It might have been an artist’s picture of provincial peace and lawfulness.

‘We’ll check the hotels though ... you can do it tomorrow. There’s an outside chance of a lead on Ames and Roscoe.’

‘Yessir. But if I don’t find nothink?’

Gently shrugged. ‘You know as well as I do. We’re here to scrape the barrel. After that it’s just a question of waiting for those two to turn up ... it’s difficult to hide for ever in a country as small as this.’

CHAPTER THREE

THE ST GEORGE Hotel was one of those modest paragons of innkeeping virtue which, where they occur, are usually played down and kept quiet about; it was unmistakably a good thing.

Another example of the coaching inn, it had an unimpressive plastered front no larger than the average public house. But when you went through into the courtyard you saw the extent of the facilities, and heard without surprise that there were forty rooms available.

Gently lingered at the desk as he and Dutt booked in.

‘Did you have any guests who left hurriedly on Good Friday ... they would probably have been here a fortnight or so?’

The receptionist, a dark, strong-faced woman, looked thoughtful and then shook her head.

‘As you see from the book, sir, we had nobody leave over the weekend.’

‘What about these people?’

He showed her the photographs.

‘I can’t be certain, but I don’t think we’ve ever had them here.’

They had roast pork for supper and after it a liqueur brandy with a cigar. Gently leafed through Griffin’s file while they sat in the lounge. It gave chapter and verse for everything the inspector had told him, but added nothing which struck one as being the least bit suggestive.

‘All well – we’ll sleep on it!’

That was often a good recipe. One’s mind sometimes sorted things out during the dark hours.

They retired to spacious rooms with enormous sash windows, and beds so large that you hardly knew where to start on them. And after London, the quietness seemed almost uncanny.

The morning showed grey with a chilling east wind. Gently had ordered three papers and he had given a press notice in each of them. At breakfast he was warned that there were reporters waiting in the hall, and he put on his most wooden expression when he went down with Dutt.

‘Are you expecting to make quick progress?’

‘I can’t say at this stage.’

‘Do you think Ames and Roscoe are in Lynton?’

‘We have no indication.’

‘Taylor double-crossed them, did he?’

‘On the facts the theory is feasible.’

They took some photographs which he knew would portray him villainously, and hastened away to catch the lunchtime editions.

‘Phew!’ Dutt scratched his head and made an expression of comical disgust. ‘They aren’t half keen on this one, sir – we’re going to be in the flipping headlines.’

He despatched Dutt to Headquarters to get a list of the hotels and himself set off in the direction of the mill. It was Wednesday, one of the two market days, which brought an influx of country people. There were more stalls in the square than had been there on the previous evening.

In the Abbey Gardens the east wind was chopping off the cherry blossom, scattering it in drifts about the gravel walks. The dull sky made the town seem frigid and unfriendly. People went about with faces which were glum and set.

An exception was the mill itself, which somehow exerted an air of benevolence. It may have been

the jolly thumping of the naphtha engine or the sweet, warm smell of grain; and then there were whiffs of new bread from the bakehouse, and the general disreputable appearance of the whole.

Gently tapped at the door of the office and entered.

The man with the dark bushy hair was standing at the door of the screen talking, but he broke off and closed it as his visitor came in.

‘Can I do something for you?’

‘I’d like to have a talk ...’

‘Oh – you’re from the police, are you?’

‘Chief Inspector Gently, C.I.D., Central Office.’

Griffin was right again, the man impressed one unfavourably. A quick flush had come over his bold features and his brown eyes darted away uneasily.

He was not unhandsome; he was about fifty. Without being tall he looked muscular, his shoulders broad and a little rounded.

He had a tenor voice with a careless provincial accent.

‘I heard they’d called the Yard in, but I thought they’d have finished with this side of it.’

‘We always like to make our own check ... Mr Fuller, is it?’

‘That’s right – I’m the boss here.’

‘I’d like you to show me round the mill, Mr Fuller. But first I wanted to have a private talk with you.’

‘Mary!’

Fuller turned his head and jerked out the word. The rather pretty girl whom Gently had seen from the café came to the door of the screen.

‘Mary, be a sport and fetch my *Mills and Milling* from the bookstall ... I’d have a tea break, too, shan’t be wanting you for half an hour.’

Mary took the hint and departed, not daring to throw a glance at Gently. Fuller watched her disappear round the corner before motioning Gently towards a chair.

‘You’ve talked to Inspector Griffin, of course?’

Gently nodded and seated himself.

‘Well, I don’t know what else I can tell you, though I’ll be happy to help all I can.’

He was putting a bold front on it, but a child could see that he was nervous. He was having to stifle his mouth from twitching and his eyes moved restlessly from object to object. Instead of sitting he remained leaning awkwardly against the screen.

‘With regard to keys, Mr Fuller ...’

‘They’re with me and Mr Blythely – oh, and Mr Pershore, he could have a set.’

‘You mean the owner of the property?’

‘Yes – he might have some, don’t you think?’

‘Mmn.’ Gently didn’t sound impressed. ‘But they wouldn’t be strictly necessary?’

‘Not to get into the mill. There’s three or four busted windows ... we’ve had kids roaming round there before. The engine-room needs a key, but that’s about all, I reckon.’

‘Isn’t it rather tempting providence?’

‘It’s the same with every mill.’

‘Do you close the gates, for instance?’

‘There’s no point in it. You can get in through the drying-ground at the back.’

So the mill had been wide open, beckoning to any passer-by. Late at night you could have run a cart into the yard, provided Blythely didn’t hear you from the bakehouse.

‘You don’t remember any strangers about the place?’

‘I can’t say I do.’

‘It seems credible to you that a stranger could have got in and dumped that body in the hopper?’

‘If they could get into the place what was to stop them dumping the body?’

Nothing, of course. Nothing at all. But why then was Fuller nervous? Was it just a natural reaction towards being questioned by a policeman, or was it something other and more interesting?

‘They tell me you’ve got quite a good Midland League side at Lynton.’

Fuller’s eyes found him quickly, alarmed at a question the drift of which he couldn’t fathom.

‘Yes, it’s not bad. They won the East Counties Cup on Friday.’

‘You didn’t see the match, naturally.’

‘How could I, with all this business going on? In any case, we work on Good Fridays.’

‘You follow them, though, do you?’

‘I suppose so, when I get the chance.’

‘Do you have a flutter sometimes?’

‘A flutter?’

Fuller could sense a danger which he was unable to identify.

‘I don’t bet a lot, if that’s what you mean. Just a quid now and then on something I fancy.’

‘You prefer to watch them, I expect.’

‘I do, as a matter of fact.’

‘Were you at Newmarket, for example, when they ran the Spring Handicap three weeks ago?’

‘I – no – yes, yes, I was! But what the devil has that got to do with it?’

Gently shook his head indifferently. ‘Nothing, I dare say. Unless you chanced to meet up with Taylor and his pals on the racetrack.’

Fuller didn’t do what he expected, jumping in with protestations of innocence. Instead he remained quite silent, his flush deepening and his lips tightened to control their quivering.

The pounding of the engine across the yard seemed to be vibrating the whole universe.

‘Would you believe me if I said I didn’t?’

‘Why not?’ Gently shrugged. ‘I’ve got no evidence.’

‘I didn’t, you know – I was there with my wife! She’ll swear I was with her every damned minute.’

‘Then I won’t press the point.’

‘But you don’t believe me, do you?’

‘It is immaterial for me to believe what I can’t prove, Mr Fuller.’

Again he was expecting an outburst and again it failed to come. The miller relapsed into an angry silence and stood digging with his nail at a crack in the varnished screen. Outside, two men in dusty denim jackets went lurching across the yard with a coomb sack of grain between them.

‘Can we go over your statement, perhaps?’

‘It’s been gone over – time and time again.’

‘All the same, I’d like my personal impression.’

‘I tell you they’ve had it all – Griffin’s never stopped getting at me.’

‘Wasn’t it at six p.m. when you locked the mill up?’

There was something there, and Gently went after it pitilessly. Griffin had smelt it with his conscientious nostrils, and now Gently had caught the selfsame odour. It was unlikely but it was there – and in the first instance one simply took up the pursuit.

‘What happened when you arrived at The Spreading?’

‘I had some beer and played a game of darts.’

‘And after that?’

‘~~We had our dinner. It went on till midnight. A lot of people made speeches – you know the sort of~~ thing. A bit near the knuckle, and smuttier as they went on.’

‘You were at table till midnight?’

‘I won’t swear to the hour.’

‘You were not absent, I mean?’

‘I – well, I may have gone to the toilet.’

After dinner the affair became a little more muddled. Almost everyone was drunk or well on the way. There had been more speeches and songs and somebody danced on a table-top. Two revellers passed out and several were being sick in the toilet.

‘You didn’t pass out, though?’

‘No, but I was sick. We had lobster at dinner and it sometimes disagrees with me. I had to go out into the yard to retch and get some fresh air.’

‘What time was this?’

‘Oh – when we got up from dinner. It was all right when I was sitting but it hit me when I got up.’

‘You were out there alone?’

‘Is it usual to retch in pairs?’

‘How long were you out there, Mr Fuller?’

‘My God, you don’t think I timed it! I was there half an hour, perhaps – longer, it might have been. When I came back in I had a glass of tonic water. If you don’t believe me you’d better ask the waiter.’

‘So it was approximately from twelve to half past, was it?’

‘I said before that I couldn’t swear to the time.’

‘According to the proprietor the dinner was over by half past eleven. Would that mean that you were absent for an hour?’

‘Nothing of the sort! It was half an hour at the most.’

‘The Spreadeagle is only five minutes’ walk from here.’

It was a chink, but a narrow one. Fuller could easily have got to the mill and back. But with only twenty minutes to spare – his account checked well with Griffin’s findings – he would need to have been lucky to have murdered and disposed of Taylor.

‘The waiter thinks it was later than midnight when he served you with the tonic water.’

‘I didn’t say it was midnight – that’s what you tell me.’

‘We know you went outside after the dinner, but not when you came back.’

‘If the dinner ended at eleven thirty then I was back by midnight.’

Like Griffin, he found that the chink wouldn’t open. He was getting all the same replies, and it was long odds that they were true.

Unless Fuller had a motive, what was the significance of opportunity? He might have been in Newmarket, but who could swear that Taylor had been there?

As for the vomit, Griffin had duly inspected the yard and noted some ...

‘You went home at three a.m., didn’t you?’

‘So the wife says. I went home when it broke up.’

‘You walked, I believe?’

‘In that condition I would hardly have driven.’

‘There are taxis, Mr Fuller.’

‘At that hour in Lynton it’s simpler to walk.’

‘Why did you empty the hopper the next morning?’

About that he talked freely. It had clearly no anxieties for him. Omitting nothing in the report, he described how the consignment of grain had been delayed, how he had put the men on the hopper, and how one of them, Fred Salmon, had fetched him out of the office.

‘We thought it was an accident ... a long time ago the same thing had happened. What we couldn’t make out was who the bloke was and what he’d been doing in the mill.’

‘Did anyone act queerly?’

‘We didn’t none of us think much of it. There were a few pale gills about, but what were you going to expect?’

Just that of course, and no other. The phrase summed it up consummately. One saw the silent group of mill workers standing near their grim discovery, the un-reckoned danger of the flour-hopper brought suddenly and unanswerably home to them.

But for the grace of God ...

‘What did they say?’

‘It was me who did the talking.’

‘You’re sure nobody recognized him?’

‘I asked them and that’s what they told me.’

‘What happened then?’

‘I had him put in the sack-store out of the way. Then I phoned the police and sat trying to figure out what he’d been after in the mill. The men knocked off for a cup of tea. I didn’t find them another job until they came back after lunch.’

Now Fuller seemed uneasy again, though heavens knew why he should be. As though the straightforward discovery of the body was a little island of blame-free certitude in an anxious sea.

‘I still thought it was an accident, of course. It wasn’t till later they came in ...’

‘It must have been a grave shock, Mr Fuller.’

The brown eyes jumped up to him. ‘Yes ... but in a way ...’

They remained looking at each other for a long moment, the miller unable to disengage from the treacherous rapport he had established.

‘You understand ... I’d been thinking! There are two ways, and naturally ...’

‘You mean that you suspected foul play?’

‘No! But it was so odd, his being there. We didn’t know him, we’d never seen him ... his clothes and everything. It simply wasn’t natural. I couldn’t help feeling ...’

Gently held his eyes mercilessly and let him stumble on.

‘It was a premonition, don’t you see? I suddenly felt I was in ... no, not that ... but it was going to make trouble. Mr Pershore wouldn’t like it, you see? He hates any scandal! And then the reputation ... wouldn’t do the business any good. Altogether I had an idea ... you understand me?’

He faltered to a stop, and Gently hunched a careless shoulder. So it hadn’t been a shock to Fuller when he had heard that Taylor was murdered! But then, who wouldn’t have thought about it and had his premonitions? Good Friday, as a matter of interest, had occurred on the thirteenth.

‘You were right, weren’t you? It’s made a bit of trouble.’

Fuller nodded in relief. ‘Yes ... that’s what I was trying to say.’

‘Everyone was suspect even though they were in the clear.’

‘God, yes! That’s the feeling. And I could sense it coming on.’

‘But you had seen nothing to substantiate that feeling?’

‘No, not a thing.’

‘You didn’t know Taylor and you’ve never met any of these people?’

Gently displayed half a dozen photographs among which were those of Ames and Roscoe.

Fuller examined them and shook his head.

‘I don’t know any of them from Adam.’

‘Then that’s all for the moment. But now I should like to see over the mill.’

There was no help for it, he was plodding in Griffin’s footsteps. He hadn’t got an inch further than the Lynton man’s report. Fuller had roused both their interests only to lull them both to sleep again. He impressed one unfavourably, but on the balance one could attach no importance to it.

‘That’s the sack-store in there if you want to take a look at it.’

The surface of the mill yard was uneven and broken by decades of lorries. A dozen plump pigeons ran on it – Lynton was a great place for pigeons.

‘The engine-room doesn’t connect with anywhere. As I told you, we keep it locked.’

An elderly man in oil-stained dungarees came to the door, wiping his hands. Behind him the huge fly-wheel quivered as it spun. A smaller wheel drove the strap which connected to some overhead shafting. A twirling governor kept the whole amazing contraption in order.

‘The kids come and look at it – they take a short cut through the drying-ground. If you go down the passage there you’ll see what I mean.’

The passage was the division between the biggest mill building and the bakehouse block. The layout was a rough square of which the passage opened an inside corner.

Between the two blocks ran a narrow bridge at first-floor level, beneath which was one of the doors to the mill.

‘Does Mr Blythely have the key of the door across the bridge?’

‘That’s right, we both have one. I use the back of his place as a store. The blokes keep their bikes in the room underneath – Inspector Griffin went over it, but I don’t think he found anything.’

He didn’t, it was in his report. He had ransacked the entire premises and found nothing except floor dust.

‘What’s this drying-ground you talk about?’

‘Keep going and you’ll come to it.’

The passage turned a corner and then ended in an open space hemmed in by a high wall and the backs of uninhabited cottages. It was about sixty yards by fifty, part cinder, part grass, with two or three overgrown pear trees grouped at one spot. A few old posts for drying-lines still formed a triangle in the middle. At the corner against the bakehouse stood a dilapidated stable with a hayloft over it.

‘There’s a blasted right-of-way through here ... you come in from Cosford Street by that other passage in the far corner. It’s not a short cut at all, but the kids always use it. And of course they make this a playground ... that’s how our windows get broken.’

‘It looks ideal for kids.’

‘They’re into everywhere.’

‘Is that stable in use or is it just falling down?’

Fuller looked at it frowningly. ‘It belongs to Blythely ... he hasn’t used it for years. I keep some hay in the loft to sell to odd customers.’

‘And the kids romp in there?’

‘Yes – I suppose so.’

Gently’s eyebrow lifted imperceptibly at the abruptness in the other’s tone. Fuller looked discomposd and was feeling for a cigarette.

‘Of course, neither of you keeps a horse ...?’

‘Not since Blythely bought a van – and that was before the war.’

With a sort of violence Fuller crossed to the stable and threw open the doors. Inside was a collection of rubbish which plainly precluded recent equine occupation. The horse-collars and harness hanging from pegs were gaping and perished with age.

‘No horses – you see?’

Gently nodded gravely.

‘I watch them and bet on them, but I was never fool enough to own one ... now if it’s all the same to you, I’d like to get on with showing you the mill.’

Gently followed him back into the passage and through the door beneath the bridge. Inside the smell of grain and flour was so strong as to be almost overpowering.

‘It’s just shafting down here – watch yourself as you go under! On the next floor are the rollers then the purifiers. The bolters are right at the top.’

All the building was a-shudder with the thud of the engine. Hidden machinery murmured and rumbled about them. On a wide wooden floor, polished smooth by the passage of grain, lay a spreading pile of reddish wheat; two men with wooden shovels were feeding it into a shute.

‘This stuff’s Canadian.’

Fuller was having to raise his voice.

‘We mix it with the English to get a proper blend. People talk about the home-grown product, but they’d soon complain if they got it unblended.’

They kept going up by means of heavy wooden steps. It was not until the third floor that they came to the open mouths of the flour-hoppers. Four in line, protected by a single wooden rail, they descended like tapering wells to the sacking-room on the first floor.

One of them was full, one of them half-full. For a moment the snowy contents amazed one with their innocence ...

‘Drop anything in there and it simply keeps going. It’s not like water. There’s no support at all.’

‘Which one did you find him in?’

‘That one at the end. Some diseased grain had gone through, and it turned the whole hopper foisty. We were busy at the time, so I left it just then.’

‘Wouldn’t you say the person who dropped him in there had some idea about mills?’

Fuller flushed as he said: ‘He knew where to find the hoppers, didn’t he?’

They went down past the rolling machinery to the sacking-room with its dust-hazy atmosphere. Here the mouths of the hoppers, each provided with a damper, were extended by sleeves of canvas to a convenient level. Four men were filling sacks from the two charged hoppers. A fifth, a tallish, heavily boned fellow, was leaning against an upright and smoking a cigarette.

‘This is Blacker, my foreman.’

Fuller scowled at the cigarette.

‘This is Chief Inspector Gently of the Yard, Blacker. He’s in charge of the case now, so you’ll no doubt be seeing more of him.’

Blacker eased himself off the upright and slowly stubbed out his cigarette. He had a long, humourless face with green-grey eyes, a wide, weak mouth and stick-out ears. When he spoke his voice sounded harsh and clumsy.

‘I thought they’d finished with us ...’

‘Well, they haven’t, it seems.’

‘Shouldn’t think there’s much left here to find out.’

‘Let’s hope there isn’t. We’ve had enough trouble.’

What was it between them, the master and his foreman? Gently sensed it directly, that slight

fraying edginess.

Blacker stared at him insolently as though he were some odd exhibit. The fellow had an expression of cunning mixed with derision in his eyes. He kept his cigarette in his hand, ready to light it when their backs were turned.

‘I want the whole of this lot sacked up before lunch.’

‘Daresay you’ll get it if we aren’t held up.’

‘After lunch you can start putting the oats through.’

‘So you told me when I came in.’

Fuller turned on his heel and went down the steps into the yard. The pigeons, scattered for a moment, settled again with a soft music of wings.

At the bakehouse door a blond-haired youngster in a white apron was filling a bucket from a tap. He looked up curiously as the miller went by with Gently.

‘Your foreman been with you long?’

‘Yes ... no, not as a foreman, that is.’

‘You mean you’ve just made him up?’

‘Yes, I suppose so. Though it was probably a mistake.’

‘When would he have been appointed, Mr Fuller?’

The miller made a gesture of exasperation. ‘Does it really matter? I gave him the job on Good Friday. Some time or other I’d like to forget that day!’

Gently nodded his mandarin nod and fumbled for his pipe. Fuller was standing by grimly with his hand on the door to the office.

‘One point more ... touching those hoppers. Did any of the others have flour in them on Thursday night?’

‘Number one at this end had flour in.’

‘That’s the one nearest the steps?’

‘Yes. It was three-quarters full.’

‘Thank you for being so helpful, Mr Fuller.’

The miller banged into his office, letting the door slam behind him. The pigeons made to rise again but then thought better of it. Each one, nevertheless, kept a bright eye fixed on Gently.

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