

25. Murder in Crown Passage

Viscount Vyvan Harmsworth Northcliffe, a severe looking man with a high forehead and a thick shock of white hair, received LaRue in a vast sitting room on the fifth floor of Devon House, a seven storey townhouse overlooking St. James Park, which his family let on a ninety-nine year lease from the Crown.

“My Lord, it’s good to see you well,” said LaRue, as the butler, who had lead him from the vestibule to the small elevator, accompanied him to where Northcliffe was waiting. The servant retreated to a sideboard to fetch goblets of Pimm’s, the bottled, citrus flavored barley water, so favored as a mixer in upper-class British houses, which he then splashed liberally with gin.

“Nonsense,” answered Lord Northcliffe, shifting uncomfortably in his armchair. “I’m not well at all. I’m eighty-three years old. I’m like an old tree, and I’m about to fall.”

Like Perceval Plumber, LaRue thought, perfunctorily comparing the appearances of men with whom he was meeting so closely in time, Lord Northcliffe was tall, hence the simile of the tree. However, as LaRue could see, Lord Northcliffe, as he reached to take the glass from his servant, sat stooped; for, unlike Plumber, he had lost some of his height on account of his age.

“I beg to differ with you, my Lord,” answered LaRue, also accepting a glass of the cloudy beverage in hand. “In fact, you’re about to become a young man again. You’d better get used to it. You’re going to become twenty years old!”

“Yes,” said Lord Northcliffe, “so you tell me. I admit, your evidence was impressive. But I’ve been lead down the primrose path enough times to know, dear boy, that dreams like this one rarely come true.”

“Should I be alarmed?” asked LaRue. “You’re not wavering, are you, my Lord? We made a deal. We’re counting on your support.”

“We made a deal,” repeated Lord Northcliffe. “Fine, fine! That doesn’t mean you can’t talk to me, does it? Or does it? I want to know something about your little putsch.

“You know,” Lord Northcliffe mused, with the conspiratorial air of imparting a confidence, holding his cloudy beverage glass up and looking within it, as if he saw something transpiring there, “my family has a long history of alliances from the wrong side of the street.” Looking up, Lord Northcliffe locked LaRue’s eyes with his own and continued, “My grandfather was a great friend of Adolph Hitler—yes, that’s right—and, before the war broke out, he argued that Hitler wanted peace. Grandfather and his newspapers called for Hitler to be given back land in Africa that had been taken as a result of the Versailles Treaty and supported Neville Chamberlain’s policy of appeasement. Poor fellow was devastated when war broke out between Britain and Germany in 1939! I think it might have killed him. Anyway, he died shortly after.”

“It’s hardly fair to compare our cause with Nazi Germany!” clamored LaRue.

“Don’t be so quick to judge, young fellow!” Lord Northcliffe snapped. “Anyway, I didn’t call you here to argue about history. It’s details! I want some details! Tell me what you’re planning!”

“You know I can’t reveal the details of our plans,” argued LaRue. “That wouldn’t make any sense. Each person knows what he has to know. That’s the way things like this work.”

“And I don’t have to know anything,” answered Lord Northcliffe. “Is that it?”

“I wouldn’t say that,” said LaRue. “You know that in a couple of weeks, more or less, a leader of the Catholic Church is going to issue an ultimatum to the Vatican and to the world. You know that his purpose is to save both the Church and the entire world from the destructive

course on which they are headed. You further know that he controls the secret of life, and that, when he has succeeded in establishing his power, you will become one of the chosen few to be given back his youth.”

“Generalities! Promises!” shouted Lord Northcliffe. “Poppycock! I woke up this morning and realized that I didn’t even know whom I was doing business with, much less what he was supposed to be doing! Who is this ‘leader of the Catholic Church’? Why can’t you say his name?”

“You’ll hear his name soon enough,” LaRue told him. “Look, it wouldn’t really make any difference to you if you heard his name today. You’re just getting fidgety. And I can’t say I blame you. It’s a tense business, and working partly in the dark doesn’t make it any more comfortable. But that’s part of the bargain we made, my Lord. I’m sure you understand that. The important thing for you to keep in mind is that you’ll be getting your youth back again.”

“Blast you!” Lord Northcliffe exclaimed, quietly. “It always comes back to that bribe! So, you’ve got me, Antoine. I see I have no leverage here. So, good luck to you, then! You know how to get in touch with me.”

It was a dismissal. LaRue rose from his chair, took his leave, and rode the elevator down to the ground floor.

Well, nothing was lost, thought LaRue, as the butler opened the front door for him, and he strutted down the short stoop into the courtyard, if nothing was gained!

But Lord Northcliffe had been right, LaRue knew. It always came back to that bribe. LaRue recognized that this was part of the diabolical genius of Donnelly’s strategy. The world’s leaders were a motley group. You couldn’t get them to agree or get together on anything. In fact, there was only one thing that almost all of them had in common: They were almost all

aging, truly elderly, or even near death on account of advancing years. This meant that each was vulnerable, in his heart of hearts, to the enticement of the promise of renewed youth. Of course, though each was vulnerable, not every one would succumb to the temptation. Therefore, Donnelly had personally studied the abundant field of potential targets carefully, searching out those with the greatest hunger for life, the greatest fear of death, and the fewest scruples to interfere with accepting his offer. The result, LaRue meditated, had been a rogues' gallery of world vice presidents, petty potentates, high ranking military officers, captains of industry and finance, media moguls, and other men of power and influence, sworn to support Donnelly's assumption to the Papacy—without actually knowing the identity of the candidate they were backing!—and the corresponding global alterations Donnelly envisioned, in exchange for the promise to become young again.

LaRue could not know, as he turned from St. James onto Pall Mall and headed for Crown Passage, the dark, upscale alleyway where the Red Lion's Head Tavern was found, that the photograph of him, which had been adventitiously snapped by an Oxford student, was being circulated in police stations around the United Kingdom and that he had been named the most wanted man in the nation. Donnelly's security team, however, had received urgent word of this manhunt, from the Deputy Director of Scotland Yard, a man near retirement age, who had been recruited to Donnelly's side some two months before by none other than LaRue himself. The Deputy Director, of course, recognized LaRue's name and picture as soon as they popped up on the police blotter. Obviously, it wouldn't do for Donnelly's people to allow LaRue to fall into the hands of the British authorities.

LaRue stopped and stood in the shadows of Crown Passage. The tiny street, closed to vehicular travel by four black iron posts with horses' heads standing at either end, was virtually

deserted in the off hours between lunchtime traffic and the after work crowd. LaRue was planning a trip to Scotland that night, to call on yet another of the men he had recently subverted on Donnelley's behalf. He had thought he wouldn't talk to Penelope until he returned. But, damn it, he thought, the gin and Pimm's still swimming in his brain, he couldn't get her face or the feel of her delicate hand in his out of his mind!

"Penelope?" he said into his phone.

"Antoine!" Penelope answered. "What a surprise! I thought you had to go away this afternoon."

"I had a meeting," LaRue answered, "with Lord Northcliffe. You probably know him, too!"

"Well, I know him," answered Penelope. "I can't say I care for how he talks, much."

"Anyway, the meeting is over," LaRue, no longer surprised by Penelope's social ubiquity, continued, "but I'm still in London. I still have to go away tonight. I just couldn't resist calling you again. Silly, isn't it? Anyway, sweetheart, I hope I'm not annoying you! How did your interview go?"

"It wasn't really an interview," Penelope explained. "I just stopped in to get information about the business and introduce myself. I did make an appointment for an interview, though."

LaRue, thinking he heard a noise, abruptly turned and looked over his shoulder and back down the street but saw nothing but the four black horse headed posts and the long shadows they cast on the road as the sun was falling.

"It's strange," LaRue said, turning forward again. "I've had the weirdest sensation that someone's been following me."

"Following you?" Penelope asked. "Why would anyone be following you?"

“That’s just it,” answered LaRue. “I don’t know who could be. Except my employers. They’re the only ones who even know I’m here.”

“But why would they be following you?” asked Penelope. “They know where you are. You report to them all the time.”

LaRue was silent for a moment.

“You don’t know these people,” he said, finally. “They’re a pretty high-handed crowd. I tell you, Penelope, I’ll be so happy when this business is over. When I get the money, and you and I—”

At that moment, two men stepped quickly forward, out from the doorway behind LaRue, in which they had been concealed in recessed darkness. One of them cupped his left hand around LaRue’s mouth and, with his right hand, in a coordinated, simultaneous stroke, inserted a stiletto through LaRue’s back and into his heart, killing him instantly. The man then released LaRue, pushing him gently, until LaRue fell face forward onto the pavement, the hilt still protruding from his back, without uttering a cry. The murderer scanned the length of Crown Passage in both directions, as, without a word, his companion kneeled and checked LaRue’s pulse at his neck. Then he walked a few steps, and bent to pick up the telephone from where LaRue had dropped it.

“Hello?” the man said into the mouthpiece.

“Hello? Hello?” said Penelope, breathless with fear because of the abrupt way in which LaRue’s words had terminated, midsentence, but somewhat relieved to hear some voice, at last, at the other end of the line. “Is Antoine there?” she asked. “What’s going on over there? May I speak to Antoine, please?”

“Who is this speaking, please?” said the man.

Penelope felt a sense of foreboding.

“I was talking to Mr. LaRue!” she said. “May I please speak to Mr. LaRue?”

The man clicked off, breaking the connection.

“We’ll try getting the number, later,” he told his companion, dropping the telephone into his coat pocket. “Let’s get going.”

Then, quickly but not hurriedly, they walked out of the alleyway. No one, for the few seconds it had required, had been present to witness the end of Antoine LaRue.

LaRue’s body was soon discovered by pedestrians coming from the Bank of England, who had been heading into Crown Passage for an after work drink at the Red Lion’s Head. Identification was made at the morgue, and Lieutenant Balder received a courtesy telephone message from Scotland Yard to inform him that the manhunt had been called on account of murder.

“Wheels within wheels,” Lieutenant Balder said to himself, as he put away his telephone and continued his walk to the Hawk and Buckle, a pub whose name was drawn from falconry, under the sign of a hawk en bouclé, that is, tethered by a leash attached to a ring, where he intended to have a dinner of roast beef carved on a board, boiled potatoes, and ale.

Lieutenant Balder hefted his pint to his lips and downed fairly half a glass of the thickly foaming, tawny liquid, before replacing it on the table.

I should have thought of this, he thought. Once LaRue was compromised, his days were numbered! Scotland Yard had known, after all, that they were dealing with murderers who hadn’t hesitated to take the lives of Professor Englemeyer, Professor Kinmore, and two young Oxford scientists. And yet, what choice had the police had but to search for LaRue and pick him up for questioning?

When you considered it, though, thought Lieutenant Balder, ideas beginning to percolate as he downed his strong, black mug of after dinner coffee, what were the odds that their adversaries should have gotten wind of the manhunt so quickly that they'd have been able to get their hands on LaRue before Scotland Yard did? Lieutenant Balder knew London, and he knew that the upscale district in which Crown Passage was situated was heavily patrolled. It was a near certainty that, if LaRue had come to Crown Passage for a drink or for dinner, he'd have been picked up before he left the vicinity. No, there was something about the swiftness of this murder that sent a shiver up Lieutenant Balder's spine. It almost seemed as if the murderers had been sent by the police themselves!

Lieutenant Balder finished up his coffee sullenly. Things were heating up. A lot more heat. But not much light. He thought back to the early days of the investigation. He remembered Major Galahad "Gil" Jones, standing like a Greek hero in Professor Englemeyer's study, his powerful jaw set with determination, his blue eyes blazing with the light of an awesome intelligence, and wondered what Jones was doing, right at that moment. Pondering a conceit, Lieutenant Balder mused if Jones was the tethered hawk, about to be released, to soar to dizzy heights, to take his sights, to swoop down and sink his terrible talons into their adversaries? Or was the tethered hawk their foe, soon to be set free to whirl up into the skies, before plunging and striking like a thunderbolt, to tear at the throat of an innocent world?

Counting out a few bills and leaving them with the check to cover the charges, pushing back his chair, and standing, before turning to head out the door, Lieutenant Balder could only hope that Jones was off somewhere, bravely cutting a swathe toward the hidden heart of the mystery.

He had one more idea, he suddenly realized, turning down the quiet Oxford street onto which the darkness of evening had fallen, and he was going to follow it up, directly. The murders in the New Biological Sciences Laboratory had occurred when all three staff members were present, with all of their materials in the room with them. It was a little too convenient to be a coincidence. In fact, it suggested an inside job. And, other than Professor Kinmore, the two lab assistants were the only people who knew about the secret work that was going on in that laboratory, and only they would have been in position to target the laboratory when everything the murderers wanted was at hand. Of course, both lab assistants had been murdered; which meant that, if Lieutenant Balder's suspicions were correct, the killers had sacrificed their informant in order to cover their tracks. Perhaps, thought Lieutenant Balder, there was some way in which traces of those tracks might be uncovered.

Perhaps. As a police constable, he had done, and would continue to do, his best. But he had the ominous suspicion that, without the timely intervention of a greater champion than he, the world's respite from the nightmare to come—and the terrible awakening that might follow—was about to expire.