

BRANDON ROLFE



THE
ANALYST

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Brandon Rolfe



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CHAPTER 1

London, September, 1887

The rain finally stopped. Then a coy sun dared peek through a torn patch in the brooding sky. Invitation enough for the twisting rivers of shiny black umbrellas and mackintoshes to dry up into brighter colours of coats and jackets. One such explosion of colour caught Adam Balchard's eye, at the corner of Billingsgate Market on Thames Street. It was the brown and yellow check suit of Sam Loofer, weaving in and out of the clamorous crowds of costermongers and oyster stalls like a two-legged chess-board. Complete with a brown felt hat rounding off his wooden stave head, and a short stubble of cigar just marginally longer than the stubble on his chisel wedge face. Sam was the natural born haggler; as much at ease bargaining between stall and street, as he was between dukes and donkeys. Forever the ready source of underworld information, or of goods that had fallen off the back of a cart, he was often useful to Balchard as informer and supplier. Despite being in a hurry, Balchard lingered back among the crowded stalls in order to let Loofer complete his transaction with the baked-potato man. As a study of human behaviour, Balchard liked to observe the moods and reactions of his contacts in their natural environment, prior to his confronting them.

While his mate up-ended his sack to tumble out a pile of potatoes beside the glowing iron stove-cart, Loofer held out a broad nicotine-stained hand to collect a pile of pennies that were dirtier than the delivered goods. "Ere, mate, what's yer bleedin' gyme, then?" cried his Cockney mate, frowning down at the minor 'equal' share of the money that Loofer had given him. "Ah thaht we were supposed ter be splittin' the loot dahn the middle?"

"That's right, so we 'ave; fifty, fifty. Summit wrong, then?" said Loofer.

"So 'ow come you've got more thahn my bleedin' share? We started aht

with thirty five bleedin' 'tytas; we threw away three rotten bleeders and lost one under the bus wheel.'

'That's right; them four was yours,' said Loofer, with matter-of-fact surety.

'Bleedin' 'ell, mate! There's summat wrong 'ere, or my nyme is Queen Vicki!'

'Leave it out, son! What do you know about right and wrong? You've as much chance o' findin' a brain in that 'ead o' yours as you would stirrin' a pot o' Bombay mince!' Placing a consoling arm round his dim-witted mate's shoulder, Loofer proceeded to quell the plaintive pleas with a smooth flow of devious logic that was as straight as a bent nail. Pausing to remove his unlit cigar, before launching into the final speech that would finally quench his mate's protests, Loofer suddenly stopped. He forgot all else as his eyes fell on the small figure in dark coat and hat, standing across the street, beside the cobbler stall, watching him. He recognised the pale face, with its cold fish-like expression sadder than a hooked cod. It was Mr B; come to spy out 'is own folk, like a fish, indeed, returnin' to its spawnin' waters. Licking his lips whilst collecting his wits, Loofer, the perpetual showman, prepared himself for a new audience, in the same way that the cardsharper shuffled the pack, or the thimble rigger reset the pea under the thimble. Signalling with a broad smile and a nod that it was safe for Balchard to come over, Loofer muttered askant at the same time to his mate: 'Look out, son, we got company. Watch what yer says an' does with this geezer. 'E's got eyes an' ears the back o' 'is knees, 'e 'as. Blink an' eye an' 'e can tell yer what colour o' shit yer last mouthful o' jellied eel laid, 'e can. So just watchit. I'll do the talkin'.'

Loofer sucked heavily on his unlit cigar and narrowed his eyes to slits as he watched the small figure approach them through the milling crowd. A right funny bloke this Mr B was, Loofer thought; a real mysterious crate o' fizz an' pop ale 'e was, right enough. After all, what bloke in 'is right mind would waste 'is time shilly-shallying around an 'ell 'ole like this, when 'e 'ad

the toff job an' money to do 'imself good up town? An' if that wasn't bad enough, when 'e is 'ere, 'e goes an' blinks not as much as a bleedin' eye at the pretty painted strumpet, but, instead, goes grabbin' the ugliest female bag to see what colour o' clay she 'as stickin' under 'er bloomin' shoes! On top o' that, 'e acts like a silent partner for bloomin' Burke an' 'Are, cuttin' an' bashin' bodies an' things in the 'ospital, 'e does. An' apart from 'is music-'all magician's tricks o' tellin' yer what yer does before yer damn well bleedin' does it, 'e does all sorts o' other funny things, like experimentin' an' fiddlin' with bottles an' tubes an' poisons an' things, in 'is own 'ouse, no less. Blimey, I bloomin' asks yer!

Balchard stepped up to Loofer and his awry companion, greeting them with a curt nod. He looked down for a moment at the appetising warm potatoes, and then at the surrounding sea of urchins' wan faces staring back at him, their eyes sharp as bayonets with the message of belly-wrenching hunger. To buy a potato for one only would be tantamount to starting a rush that could well end in both people and potatoes being crushed underfoot in a real 'bangers and mash' rumpus. He did the easiest, cowardly, thing and ignored them all. But however much he could shut off their hungry looks, he could not shut off their cries. Those not crying out for "Tytas", were demanding gin, not so much because they had much faith in their pleas being met, as venting a bitterness that stirred in them to ridicule the well- to-do for lamenting their woebegone poverty. Loofer took out his cigar and beamed his best smile for his next placatory piece. 'So 'ow's it goin', Mr B? Nice t' see yer again. I was just tellin' Charlie, 'ere, likes as 'ow yer can do mind readin' tricks. Go on, show 'im what I mean. Tell 'im 'ow many cock-eyed maggots 'e 'ad in 'is cheese for breakfast, then.'

Balchard found Loofer's streetwise humour contemptible, but did not stoop to showing it, knowing full well that it was his way of getting under one's skin. He also needed the man as a useful – valuable, if he would admit to it – informant, and contact, if not supplier of various 'goods'. His pallid

cheeks twitched a second, in customary non-smiling greeting to Loofer. He looked at Loofer's companion, seeing a form that was wretchedly twisted by a mal-formed spine, and as much torn in spirit as the rags crudely adorning it. If ever depression and despair could be called a ghost, it was that which haunted the miserable countenance before him, like those around him. 'Since I cannot put a name to that which is not there to begin with, I rather fancy that your friend has not eaten at all, for some time. But perhaps he could remedy the situation by attempting to return to his former employment at the match factory. If so, I would earnestly suggest that you try the Salvation Army factory in Wick Lane, in Bow, where the new technique is now to use the safe red form of phosphorus, rather than the deadly yellow form, for the production of slow-burning fusee wind-proof matches. If you wish, I can put in a complimentary word on your behalf to the superintendent at the at the factory, through the kind office of Dr Michaels, at the Institute, who is currently researching into such detrimental effects of industry on the social order.'

The Cockney drew back in open astonishment. 'Ere, 'alf a mo'; 'ow did you know thaht, guv? Is yer from the Law, or summit? I ain't dahn nahthin' wrong. Honest.'

Balchard made no mention of his instant diagnosis of the match-maker's killer disease, known as Phossy Jaw, that was written on the Cockney's face, with its solvent action on his teeth. Produced by an over exposure to the deadly fumes of yellow phosphorus, it was the occupational condition that chased many a victim to the grave. Loofer released a loud guffaw at his friend's bewilderment, and nudging Balchard's arm, nodded to signal that they should leave the Cockney in his daze so that they could go off and discuss some real business. He had the merchandise that Balchard had come to collect. It was a small cloth bag containing a set of steel skeleton-keys and a tiny .22 calibre revolver. Belgian make, Balchard noted. Although a mere four and a half inches long, with a folding trigger, it was still a reassuring four

and a half inches to carry in one's pocket. 'An' see 'ere,' said Loofer, pointing at the trigger, 'this ain't broken as such. It's supposed ter fol—'

'Yes I know. Both of us are very clever.' There was no mistaking the irritation flaring up in Balchard's voice and eyes.

Loofer handed the goods over discreetly. He didn't question their purpose. He did, however, make a point of stressing the astronomical price over which he had had to haggle with his supplier. 'Well, anyway, I'm smarter than 'im, 'cause I says to 'im: "Mr D'Arcy," I says, "if yer wants a buyer for them goods, yer can sell 'em t' me; but not for a penny more than the price we'd agreed on, no sooner than yer can spit in a dead cat's eye," I says.' Loofer spat at the cobble-stones to signify how the deal had been successfully concluded, the spittle landing on the trouser-leg of a passing fish vendor. Balchard put the bag in his pocket. Then changing his mind, he took the pistol out and put it in his other pocket by itself. More easily reached that way.

Balchard took Loofer's point concerning the high price, and paid the requisite sum plus the agreed percentage commission. Pleased with the outcome of another safe settlement, and the money secure in his pocket, Loofer took another heavy drag on his yet unlit cigar. 'Like I says, Mr B, any deals yer ever needs doin', yer can always trust me t' do 'em for yer. There ain't nothin' t' beat a wise old fish with two left feet, I always says.'

As it so happened, Balchard did, in fact, have another such mission for Loofer in mind. He explained how he was anxious to monitor the movements of a suspected hired killer, whom he had just recently traced to Pickle Herring Street, across the river. The man, between 'jobs', had the habit of taking his young son to the stables for riding lessons, and Balchard wanted to employ a small boy to get in close. To merge in and make friends, as children do, without arousing suspicion. The boy would be his eyes and ears, inconspicuous, whilst watching the man's daily movements. He would need to keep a sharp ear and a sharp wit about him. Balchard made no mention of

brutal murder and its associated treachery. He thought it better to leave that out. Sadistic killings, with all their lurid aspects, even in the domestic cases, were apt to upset people. To Balchard they were no more than commonplace statistics to be charted up in his work for Scotland Yard.

When Loofer tried to pry further into the matter, Balchard simply tapped his nose meaningfully with his finger. 'Say no more, Mr B,' returned Loofer, tapping his own nose, 'say no more. A nod's as good as a wink to a blind camel with three wooden 'umps. I know the very lad for yer. A right sparklin' little perisher 'e 'is, Mr B. Back at my place.'

From out of the blur of bleak faces blocking the entrance to Duck' Foot Lane, Loofer plucked a most rueful specimen of human that was different from gutter filth only by a morose whimper that was an attempted smile. The hollow eye sockets were redder than usual, where the boy had been crying over the death of his mother from consumption. Loofer stood the boy before Balchard for inspection, and stood back in open acclaim of his instant prodigy. 'By 'eck, 'e's sharp, I can tell yer, Mr B.' Loofer leaned near to Balchard, and winking, partitioned off his mouth with a broad conspiratorial palm. 'Listen, 'e's so sharp 'e could 'ear a bloomin' fly fart on the roof o' the Albert 'All, 'e could. Ain't yer, boy! Ain't yer!' To confirm the point, Loofer gave a friendly tug at the boy's ear so that the boy was in danger of rising off the ground, like a human plumb-line.

As if to question the boy's hearing, Balchard, much to Loofer's curiosity, stooped to examine the boy's other ear. The boy's mouth fell open with astonishment when Balchard's 'empty' hand now extracted a 'magic' sixpenny piece from the wax-filled cavity. Balchard watched the boy's eyes light up in wonder and smiled sadly. He, too, had been in awe at his pater first performing that 'magic' on him; his pater had taught him how to do it. But then his pater had always been good at tricks, 'shifting things' and other illusions – making things appear to be other than what they really were. Whether this had always been deliberate deceit, or a fool's optimism, was an

unresolved puzzle long left alone. His brief twitch of a smile that had shared the boy's pleasure, now hardened to bitterness. 'The long lost property of the young master, I do believe,' said Balchard, trying to keep the bitterness out of his voice for the boy's sake, while holding out the coin for him. Loofer laughed and protested that the boy would not know how to spend such a sum, and that he would keep it in trust for the lad. 'The damn hell, you will!' Great anger fired in Balchard's eyes as his savage outburst ripped through his facade of gentleman's eloquence. Loofer's eyebrows arched up, but his beaming smile remained in place, the cigar stump going up slowly to the mouth. Of course, he'd known all along that Balchard was not a proper-born thoroughbred toff, in spite of 'is fine outer trimmings and fancy bridling brasses. More like an old 'orse wiv new irons nailed to 'is 'oooves, so that 'e sounded proper. But they both knew their respective parts in the game they played, and they both played them well, keeping to their own side of the paddock rail. After all, if that was what the stupid bugger wanted, it was no skin off his nose, Loofer thought to himself, snuffling a snort of derision behind his cigar. But he could see the stupid bugger paying a high price in the end, for staying in his so called 'winners paddock'. Oh, yes, he could see that, all right, even if the bloody fool couldn't see it 'imself.

Balchard insisted on the boy keeping the money. It was either that, or no more little deals. Loofer backed down. With no more money passing his way, he was ready to go, shifting his feet and edging away. 'Right y'are, Mr B, if there's nowt more business to be doin', I'll be 'eadin' off. Better get back to Charlie, poor beggar, an' see 'e doesn't eat all the profit before we bloomin' makes it! Blimey, I asks yer! It's been good doin' business wiv yer, Mr B. Be seein' yer.'

Checking that the bag was secure in his inside pocket, Balchard hastened off along Thames Street in search of a cab. Prime importance required him to now seek out Detective Sergeant Dryson. A Kensington banker whose ingenious embezzlement scheme was causing much worry among private

investors, was also causing acute concern at the Yard. Two such investors, suddenly bereft of their entire financial stock, had met their deaths in unusual circumstances. On the surface, these were being explained away as freak accidents occurring at the same time. The Metropolitan Police suspected it to be 'otherwise', but were so far unable to provide the evidence to sustain these suspicions. Balchard had been called in as forensic advisor. His scientific tests had since shown that the two men had, indeed, been murdered. Dryson's presence was now required for official intervention. It had been said that the banker had a mercuric temper that all too often erupted in great violence. Balchard tested the strength of his malacca cane. There was greater comfort when he felt the cold steel of the pistol in his pocket. He hailed a passing hansom. On the heels of this official duty there was a three o'clock lecture and demonstration on natal clinical surgery by Professor Bowers-Moffat at the University. Balchard tapped the cab roof with his cane and urged the cabbie to hurry. As they sped off, he peered warily out the window, shaking off a shiver. A weird feeling that had haunted his instinct all day. A feeling that he was being stalked. He hadn't seen – couldn't see – anyone so far. But somewhere out there – eyes were watching him.

In fact, Professor Bowers-Moffat was late, a mite more than that of Balchard. No matter. The eminent surgeon had a reputation for lightning scalpel strokes. His swift flurry of the blade made up for lost time. As it was, time lost wasn't the only thing cut. The assistant surgeon's blood ran free when the wildly slashing blade sliced his hand. Both the patient and the assistant surgeon died of 'friendly' hospital gangrene two days later. Balchard found it most opportune that the patient had died. It readily provided material that he needed for his research. It saved his having to go looking for it further afield in the city's desolate areas. The deadline for handing in his report for the current phase of his doctoral project was closing in. A deadline, indeed, if it was not met. His very own life and death fling. The infection festering in that putrid body could well save his project from its expiry.

If indication at all, luck took a dive. That day saw Balchard's young sixpenny urchin fall ill, crying for his departed mama. Before the week ended, he too would die, before he could spend his newly acquired fortune. His frail constitution having given up its struggle against that dreadful condition otherwise known as life.

CHAPTER 2

The evening fog pressed up against the Institute's pathology lab window, trying to join the gloom inside. The room's heavy atmosphere was cut by the doleful beat of a dripping tap. A faint tinkling came from the front bench. A solitary lamp showed a figure in shirt-sleeves and rubber apron working diligently before a glittering array of test-tubes and beakers. Standing out aloof from the glassware was a gleaming brass binocular microscope perched up on its hind legs like a giant praying mantis with a triple turret proboscis. Balchard turned to the microscope. Snapping the lens turret round into its lowest power position, he then dropped staining solution onto the slide specimen. Placing the cover on the slide, he mounted the hair specimen under the lens. Turning the milled knob gently, Balchard raised the objective lens gradually, coaxing the bubble of blurred light to burst into a vivid circle of clarity. The hair held Balchard's interest, outlined against the bright circle like a tree frozen in a lunar landscape. Swivelling the turret round to high power, he adjusted the objective lens once more. The 'moon' had now taken on a sinister darkness and the 'tree' had shot up close to touching distance. Its rugged 'bark' revealing vile secrets.

Murder, in fact, was the applicable term. The poor wretch who had fallen mortally beneath this 'tree' had done so at the deliberate felling by another. In succinct tongue, the man had been poisoned. A quick scrutiny along the hair's axis past the sebaceous gland sufficed to show that the cortex and cuticle cells were blatantly ablaze with the fiery red pigment of murder. Plainly the guilty hand was that of the estranged wife. Her rage dually vented on the husband's betrayal and the younger woman's beauty.

Balchard lifted his head away slightly from the microscope, nodding in conclusion before straightening up. Nodding his head slowly, he reflected on the plight of the female poisoners up through the centuries. How they would

have stained the pages of history with the darker shade of their fair nature, had closer examination been permitted. Not until the fifteenth century was human dissection clearly sanctioned by the Pope. Before this, poisoning was the murderer's dream. Thus poison was the commonly preferred means of meting out death by the weaker sex. As sure as Cleopatra preferred the sting of the asp's tongue to that of Antony's steel blade. Prior to this papal ruling, the medical examiner had to go by the outward appearance of the body. A livid or mottled body indicated poison, though not acute poisoning. A rapid state of putrefaction was the supposed proof against this. But arsenic, alas, retards putrefaction so that considerable numbers of people must have perished by it. Diseases must have destroyed countless others with the false appearance of poisoning. But what hangman, given his pence, gnashed his teeth over a few wrong necks in the noose?

Little wonder then that arsenic's innocuous white oxide formed the murderer's favourite tool. Being both soluble and virtually tasteless, the powder could easily be mixed with food. An unsuspecting doctor could thus mistakenly diagnose the symptoms as gastroenteritis, and so prescribe the usual shilling box of Dr King's Dandelion and Quinine Liver Pills. A higher minded consultant would perhaps deem cholera as the ailment more fitting to the grace and dignity of his professional fee. To the unwary eye, then, the slow effect of arsenic was its user's trump-card, arousing no undue attention. Unlike the vegetable alkaloid atropine of belladonna which strikes suspiciously swift. Or strychnine, which arouses horror from its victim's convulsions.

Balchard broke off from his thoughts, to move to the bench's sink to wash the slide. Water cascaded off the slide, carrying the hair with it in a swirl down the sink hole. Many a previous poison had made its gurgling escape down there.

A sudden draught behind Balchard alerted him to a new presence in the room. From the deliberate cough announcing the new arrival, Balchard

concluded it to be Dryson. On time for once. Officially, they worked together, but neither of them had much respect for the other. Their opinions were poles apart and their methods for tackling problems invariably clashed. They simply didn't like each other. Balchard's low opinion of Detective Sergeant Dryson was not particularly guarded. So that when he turned around, the disdain had not quite slipped from his face before it was caught by the policeman's sharp eye. Dryson's square-jawed face gave off a hardness that went well with the job. His straight-trimmed side whiskers, once all ginger, were losing ground to whitening edges. The raglan overcoat was strictly 'regulation' with its dull iron grey weave. 'As I inferred earlier, Detective Sergeant, this man was poisoned. Arsenic, I would venture to say. We can ascertain this for sure once the full analysis has been carried out – if you will just bear with me a little longer.'

Dryson had to put up with Balchard, along with his cynical attitude. His superiors back at the Yard were finding the man's work, in forensic analysis, to be increasingly helpful to them. In spite of this, Dryson was instinctively wary of the man standing in front of him. He watched his every action, down to the smallest mannerisms, with a policeman's intuitive nose. There was something about the man – something he couldn't quite put words to – something that irked him – something? 'But I thought you said arsenic was undetectable; that it looked like natural death from disease? I remember you distinctly telling me that only yesterday.'

'Your second observation is correct, Detective Sergeant. I did, indeed, quote the ravages of disease as often providing camouflage for the more sinister dealings of arsenic poisoning. But as to your first observation, no, I did not say that arsenic poisoning was undetectable.'

Dryson made to speak, but Balchard waved him to silence so that he could continue. 'Even the most circuitous paths of poisons can be traced, where the pursuer is wary of his prey.' The Detective Sergeant still didn't understand. Balchard took a long exasperated sigh before going on. 'The one

disadvantage of arsenic as a poison is that it is metallic, and so remains in the body after death. If it is there to be found, it can be found. One simply requires to know how and where to look. The murderer may flee, but the murder weapon remains embedded in the victim's body.'

'Like the proverbial dagger in the back, you mean?'

'Splendid, Detective Sergeant! Now you comprehend. Though perhaps a chemical 'dagger' would be more appropriate.'

Dryson cocked a doubting eyebrow. 'And you think you know how to find this 'dagger', do you, Balchard?'

Balchard ignored the other's taunt, turning away to face the bench again. 'Observe!' He replaced the cleaned slide in its rack and then looked around to spy out the pieces of apparatus necessary for the next stage. He saw that Dryson could no more appreciate the evidence than he could see specs of soot in the fog. A solid body of proof was needed that even the most myopic policeman would blow his whistle to. This thought afforded Balchard a quick glance at Dryson. The policeman's vacant expression was convincing enough. A positive analysis was definitely needed to show that the deceased had been poisoned. Plainly nothing less would satisfy Dryson.

Balchard's eyes darted to and fro across the ill-arranged laboratory glassware and along the multiple rows of bottles and jars with their many hues of chemicals. Dryson tried to help by picking up the pieces that he thought Balchard was looking at; only to put them back again as Balchard's searching gaze shifted. He gave up with a resigned shrug. 'It beats me how you can tell one confounded piece from another. They all look much the same to me. I don't see the point of it all, really. As far as I'm concerned, good solid police work is what's needed to catch a criminal; not all this analysis nonsense.'

Balchard snatched out twice from the wall rack. He returned briskly to the front bench with a jar of copper reagent and a bottle of concentrated hydrochloric acid. From amid the glassware cluttering the bench, he drew forth a Bunsen burner. Pushing a tripod over this, he then topped the tripod

with an empty beaker. Pouring out a measured volume of distilled water into the beaker, followed by an equal volume of concentrated hydrochloric acid, Balchard then held a flaming Bryant & May's Alpine Vesuvius match to the Bunsen's gaping mouth. The yellow sulphurous butterfly fluttered violently for a moment before the Bunsen burped and blew forth its white tongue to lick the beaker's bottom. Balchard tugged the Bunsen's brass collar and the mischievous flame disciplined itself into a hissing blue jet. Plucking a piggy-tail twirl of copper from the jar, he burnished it with a file and dropped it into the beaker. Taking out a gold hunter watch from beneath the rubber apron, he flipped it open to time the boiling. After fifteen minutes, the copper winked back brightly in unashamed purity. Balchard nodded in approval. The chemicals and apparatus were so far free of arsenic. Thus, any arsenic found in the analysis would have to come from the body. Balchard took up a small beaker containing the filtrate of the victim's stomach and plopped several drops of it into the boiling liquid. Noting the rapid disappearance of the dark drops in the burbling mass, he also noted the time. Sixteen minutes later, the copper still winked back defiantly. Rescuing the copper from the boiling mass with a pair of forceps, he examined its gleaming surface through a hand lens. No precipitate was apparent. Balchard frowned at the negative result, puckering his lips with forefinger and thumb. He turned off the Bunsen. Balchard's puzzled expression prompted a smirk from Dryson. Straightening up smartly, he stepped over to Balchard's side to look down at the failed test. 'Not quite what you expected, was it, Balchard? Well, I can't say that I'm at all surprised, really. All this so-called -- no, no, spare me, please!' He threw up a hand to cut off Balchard's attempt to reply. 'No more long-winded explanations for these new-fangled theories and principles of yours, Balchard. I've heard enough of them to double fill the files in our Records Office, I have. As far as I'm concerned, a crime is solved by good old-fashioned police work. It's no use shaking your head, Balchard, it had to be said. I could say a lot more, but I can see that would be a waste of time.'

Balchard's lips twitched in annoyance but he refrained from commenting. It would, indeed, be a waste of time to mount his own argument against such a tirade of doubt, he agreed inwardly. As with that other doubting Thomas, Dryson wanted his proof in the flesh. Well, with a little further endeavour, he would have his proof soon enough. Wasting no more words on the policeman, Balchard turned back to his work. Feeling confident from Balchard's silent retreat, Dryson took a different approach as he spoke to the other's back. 'Why don't you stick to what you do best – you know, your own scientific research stuff, like you said you were doing, here in the hospital? I'm not saying as you wouldn't make a good go of it, career wise. Just leave the crime detection bit to us who do it proper.' Dryson waited for an answer, but got none. Feeling shut out by the silence now, he moved towards the door. 'Anyway, I haven't got any more time to spare. Got to go and do some real work. I've got responsibilities to honour, even if some of us haven't. See you later, Balchard.' Opening the door, Dryson stalled to turn and point randomly at Balchard and his work on the bench. 'I'll spare a minute for that when it lands on my desk – when and if it ever gets that far. Personally, I don't see it happening.'

The laboratory door swung shut behind Balchard, but not before letting in a string of Dryson's derisive 'compliments' and chuckles fading away down the corridor. Rolling up his sleeves, Balchard scanned the surrounding glassware for his next experimental piece. The flask avoided his eyes shyly before he at last espied it and snatched it down fiercely from the corner shelf. Returning triumphantly to the bench with his precious find, he inspected it just to be sure. It had a glass stopper with a thistle funnel and a glass tap. Beneath this, another glass tube curved out of the stopper, to enter a long horizontal tube that contained calcium chloride for the purpose of drying gasses passing through it. This tube joined a finer tube toughened to withstand the Bunsen flame. Murmuring his approval, Balchard stepped sharply over to the chemical balance, a jar of zinc and a spatula in hand. The

glistening spatula snaked deftly to and fro, between jar and balance pan, in a swift flurry of precision. He paused to raise the balance. Watching the needle quiver to its central equilibrium point, Balchard lowered the balance with a bump betraying his impatience. Seizing up the pan, he tipped the zinc into the flask. A pipette grew out of his hand, releasing a dribble of dilute sulphuric acid onto the zinc in the flask. Replacing the stopper with its funnel and tube arrangement, Balchard paused to watch the mixture churn up its bubbles of hydrogen gas. He then poured some of the filtrate in through the thistle funnel.

Balchard lit the Bunsen once more, placing it under the fine end of the tube. With half an hour to wait before confirmation, he decided to light a cigarette as well. Pacing the length of the room many times until his nervous energy eventually subsided, he at last plumped his lean frame down on a stool at the adjacent bench. Slouching back against the bench and folding his arms, he inhaled and exhaled his smoke in heavy thought, all the while watching the bubbling flask. With the flask quietly turning its contents over before him, he could afford to pour over his many thoughts on the general subject of poisons.

He had not yet been born into the world with all its madness when, in 1856, Dr William Palmer of Rugeley had been found guilty of murder and sentenced to death at the Central Criminal Court; the first known poisoner to have used strychnine. A mixture of wry amusement and pain crossed Balchard's grey face as he recalled next the sensational affair. It had shocked the nation some seventeen years later, in 1873, when the news of the Durham Assizes had caught all and sundry across the land aghast. The modest and somewhat naive Mrs Mary Cotton, nee Robson, had been found guilty of poisoning no less than twenty-four victims with arsenic. She had obtained her ready supply of deathly despatch from no more devious a source than the common soft soap used for killing vermin. Perhaps the stirrings of the trial had stirred something in him to mould his future career? He wondered on

this. One thing was certain – it had also been in that same year that his pater, in one of his drunken rages, had punched his mama senseless – not long after which the household was reunited with long-forgotten peace when the man walked out of the house for the last time, to go and live with another woman. In the heat of his departure, his pater had called his mama ‘a bloody whore’. Being only ten years old himself, he had been too naive to understand the dire implication of the word, or to fathom the reason for its scathing application to his dearest mama. Rumour since had it that his pater’s continued generous beatings of female partners and his disturbances of the peace earned him periodic reprimands from equally generous magistrates.

Balchard looked around himself at his surroundings, taking in the prestigious significance of his official position in the Institute. It was all hard to believe. A giant leap of social transmogrification, from frog to prince. From a colourless backwater nonentity, to this. Only months away from the honourable title of Dr Balchard and currently bent under the heavy office of research assistant to Professor Felsham in the Institute’s Morbid Anatomy Department. Whilst trying to squeeze in time for his own research for his doctoral thesis on post-natal genital disease and putrefaction in the ‘fallen’ female, under the auspices of Professor Radcliffe at the University. All this under a critical time schedule that was catching up on him. An arduous task, without question. So he had good reason to be nervous. The presentation of his work before the almighty Senatus Academicus was a nightmare on a not too far away horizon – without even considering the many postprandial ports giving possible sway to the examiners’ decision. They would have deemed it as totally improper for his dissertation to have used the word prostitutes, never mind his openly admitting to associating with women of such depravity. But from what other source could they possibly imagine he was gathering his research material? “Damned old stuffed-shirts,” muttered Balchard resentfully, breaking a spent matchstick across his finger.

The muffled peal of St Paul’s clock-tower bells sounded from outside,

reminding Balchard of other church bells, other things, back home. His mood darkened sharply. He reflected morosely on how it had all started. How his mama had forbidden him to play with her, the mill-owner's daughter. "Silly little girl" – his mama had called her. But he had sensed his mama's uneasiness deep down inside her, in spite of her mocking dismissal of the girl. She had been most ardent on his getting his head down to study for the Belvedere Scholarship. As Adam Balchard, he had been her first son – named appropriately after that Adam, the first son. She had intended more in her roost. But things – something – had gone amiss there. Perhaps it was only to be expected that, with that name, his life's voyage should first become unsettled on account of a woman, or girl, disturbing the waters. The scandal was supposed to pass away after a penitential period of morbid seclusion. In fact, his social banishment had made it easier to study for this higher goal of scholastic enlightenment. It was the beginning of his dark ascent into a higher social sphere. Away from there to here. Balchard ground his knuckles against the bench edge in grim memory of the hard fire-and-brimstone faces of teachers and aldermen glaring at him from across the table of the scholarship's award committee. But the scholarship was granted, nevertheless, albeit with reluctance. He liked to think that he had won the scholarship against great prejudice. There again, perhaps it was their ploy to be rid of him. To have him move on out of their area. To somewhere, anywhere, so long as it was a far distance from their puny little God-fearing community. He was made to visit her grave with flowers frequently, under the escort of his austere mama. In deliberate timing of the girl's parents not being there at the same time. Daffodils. She had always loved her daffodils. Just like those beautiful golden locks on her head. Now her grave was surrounded by her very own Praetorian guard of black iron daffodils. A futile protection against what had already been damnably done. When the pathologists had been satisfied in their examination of her, a satisfactory coroner's report was drawn up. It had been solemnly declared that she, 'a mere child, herself', had been

with child. As for the cause of her death, all decisions were strained in a unanimous agreement of an absence of any action on her body, “foreign to her person”. His mama had forcibly made him kneel before her grave and pray. As if he did not have his own anguish of remorse burning within. Funny how sin and sanctity always went together, side by side, like two eternal twins. Like the two shades of squares on the harlequin’s tunic. He saw that oval harlequin mask sinking into the water – her pale oval face. Those oval eyes, with their surprised fright. That oval mouth with its pleading cry, silently screaming, echoing in his head. Was it her screams scraping the inside of his skull? Or was it he who was screaming silently in his own head?

With the edge of his outer awareness monitoring the flask’s progress, Balchard allowed his mind to come back up slowly from the past. Checking the time, he dangled the watch on its golden chain. Spinning it round and round, he drew on his cigarette for the final minutes in quiet reflection. Stubbing out his cigarette in a crucible, he leaned over to pick up a metal spatula. Striking an empty beaker with the spatula, he matched the resounding ‘p-i-n-g’ with a drawn-out whisper of: ‘Daff-o-dils.’

Rising from the stool, he approached the apparatus and bent down to inspect the tube just beyond the edge of the flame. No deposit had formed. Sliding the Bunsen away, he lit a wax taper from it and ignited the gas escaping from the end of the tube. It gave off a lavender tint. Splendid. Now a small piece of porcelain held to the jet grew a small patch of greyish ‘skin’. Balchard added a drop of nitric acid to the deposit and warmed it near the Bunsen flame. Holding a dropper just over the stain, he delicately released a drop of silver nitrate onto it. The grey ‘skin’ blushed a definite brick red. Positive. One more test for certainty. With a fresh piece of porcelain and this time touching the stain with mercuric bromide paper, the test was once more clearly positive. The stain had turned yellow this time from the halogen reagent. Arsenic was definitely present in the body. Reaching out and pulling over a notepad and pen, Balchard hurriedly scratched up a forensic report

that even the stolid Detective Sergeant Dryson could understand and act upon.

CHAPTER 3

Balchard had barely stepped out from the Institute's dark shrouded entrance, when the familiar footsteps sounded from the shadows across the street, bringing out an acid smile on his face. The same steps had preyed upon his heels the previous two evenings, from this very point, annoyingly dogging his progress all the way along High Holborn, as far as Bloomsbury Way. From there he had eluded his pursuer by a series of twists and turns before snatching a cab travelling along Oxford Street in the opposite direction from Montague Street. And yet, no sooner had he returned to his rooms in Montague Street, than the lam-post outside had grown an extra shadow. It had to be concluded that the man was not a casual thief or pickpocket. Not only did he know the prey's address, but no sooner than being led off course, had reappeared upon the scene with the resilience of a rubber ball bounced off a wall. In the same way that one could measure the strength of the ball's return, so also could one gauge the kindred sense of determination of the stalker. Something sinister was out there, and it made him uneasy.

A myriad of names and indexed notes flashed through Balchard's mind in an attempt to mark and file this new entry in its proper case place. All to no avail. Even allowing for a complicated cross reference of common factors, there was no indication that this new development should be connected to any of the current cases at the Yard. That irritated him. He liked his facts and figures to fit logically into place. That bugger out there, whoever he was, was doing a good job at undermining his nerve. Damnedest luck of all, Balchard wasn't carrying his pistol. He only took it with him when he went on police work. He never carried it with him when he went to the laboratory. Tapping his pursed lips with the silver top of his cane, Balchard tried to match his wits against how his dark prowler would make his move. He nervously quickened his pace. The footsteps quickened after him.

Punctual to the minute, as Balchard had predicted, the policeman was there, at the corner of Smithfield market, sheltering in the shop doorway, beneath the Old Gold Cigarettes sign. 'Good evening, Constable,' said Balchard, handing the policeman the buff envelope addressed to Detective Sergeant Dryson.

'Evening, sir. So what's this we 'ave 'ere, then? Somethin' important is it, sir?' The rank on the envelope did nothing to dispel the constable's fear that he was going to have to move from his comfortable shelter in the doorway, in the name of duty of some form or other. Balchard's request to have the envelope, with its important chemical analysis, delivered without further ado to the Detective Sergeant, didn't help the uneasiness, either.

Biting his lip, the policeman glanced at the gentleman, resplendent like all bloomin' toffs in his dress coat, silk hat and cane, and wondered why the bloomin' bugger couldn't deliver the bloomin' note 'imself. He also felt that his own presence seemed to be of secondary importance the moment the envelope changed hands, the gentleman's attention being elsewhere, up the street, it seemed. He looked up the street, saw nothing, and so turned back to the gentleman. A jewel thief in flight, perhaps? Balchard certainly looked the part. But, alas, there was no bag or cape for hiding the loot. The policeman's eyes wandered up to Balchard's silk hat. Spacious enough for not only a doctor's stethopoke thingummy, but also the repose of many a diamond sparkler in the past.

Balchard read the other's mind in an instant and a cold smile creased his face. Doffing his hat, he displayed the disappointingly empty interior to the policeman. 'Not one solitary diamond, as you can see, Constable. But if I could assist you in this matter, I would endeavour to give it the best of my attention. However, time being of somewhat pressing urgency —' Balchard trailed off, affecting a hurried glance at his time-piece and looking back up the street with deliberate openness. It was his ploy to be seen talking to the policeman, to see just how bold his stalker's brass was.

The policeman could only scratch his ear. He was puzzled by the gentleman's insistence for the envelope to be delivered to the Yard, without needing to come along himself for further questioning. 'Seein' as I don't know if I should, --' He broke off in search of words and logic. 'Seein' as p'r'aps you should come down to the station an' speak to the Detective Sergeant --' He broke off again as a sixpence glinted in the gentleman's palm. Tugging nervously at his collar with his finger, he waited to see if the offer would increase. But it didn't.

Taking the coin, the policeman relaxed. He knew in which direction his duty lay. So he could settle once more into the comfort of his personal nook in the shuttered doorway. Balchard found it tiresome having to deal with the stupid policeman. He didn't give a toss if Dryson, or whoever, got his report, or if it got lost on the way. He'd had his satisfaction in analysing the problem for them. What they decided to do with his findings wasn't his greatest concern at this particular moment. More immediate matters of personal safety were bugging him. He assured the policeman that the envelope's contents were self-explanatory. No further mental effort was needed from the constable to enlighten his superiors at the station. 'And the name, sir?' said the constable, trying to choose the proper pocket to suit the envelope's importance. 'What name shall I say, sir?'

'That should also be reasonably explicit to the recipient, Constable,' replied Balchard, smiling inwardly at Dryson's imbecilic slowness, 'but for your sake, I think Balchard should suffice.'

'Mr Blanchard. I see, sir. Well --'

'Balchard!' Balchard's anger rose up inside him. It always did when people made mistakes over his name or other personal background details. It embarrassed him so that anger came as an instant cover for it. His self esteem wavered on such instances. He had almost said: 'Doctor Balchard', but had held back, in spite of the title having already been printed prematurely on the professional cards he carried in his pocket.

‘Good night, Mr Balchard. I’ll see that your message gets delivered, all right.’

Balchard walked off briskly without responding. He was noting the timing for the follower’s footsteps to start up again. If they did. They did. And surprisingly soon at that. Balchard found this very significant. His episode with the policeman had also served another purpose, totally separate from that of delivering the envelope. It had served as a simple means of weighing up the follower’s spirit. Normally, the ruffian intent on robbery or bodily assault would be put off at the sight of the intended victim conversing with a law officer and looking back in the direction of his would-be attacker. The ruffian’s fears would be heightened by his being out of earshot and not knowing what measures of arrest were about to be sprung on him. Most ruffians would have felt their spirits quelled somewhat. With strength on the wane, the resumption of footsteps would have been delayed. The wiser stalker would have fled altogether.

But these footsteps still came on after him. Unhidden, undaunted, ringing out in resolute strides on the cobblestones behind him. Chasing him. Goading him, even. Balchard stopped abruptly. The footsteps stopped. He started off again. The footsteps rang out again. So was that the game? It was his spirit that was being measured by whoever was back there! The thought jarred Balchard’s stomach.

Ignoring the passing stream of hansom and broughams as a means of escape, Balchard let each cab hasten past in a flurry of clattering hooves and glistening wheel spokes. He was curious to test his follower’s measure of stretch a little further. The opportunity he sought came to ear long before he set eye on its source. A faint syncopated jingle drifting softly over the rooftops gradually sorted itself out into the heavier metallic jangle of a piano-organ’s rendering of Champagne Charlie and Villikins and His Dinah.

The dark Italian, in dark coat and dark rounded felt hat, cranked away morosely at his black piano-organ. The signora, in flamboyant striped dress

of her national colours, cat-called in complete disharmony, while roasting chestnuts over a brazier: 'Castagna! Castagna! Chesta-nut! Chesta-nut!' But the Italians' joint effort was mostly wasted on deaf ears, a stronger rival enticement of Romford & Burton Ales and loud licentious revelry coming from the King Lud tavern behind them, beneath the Ludgate Circus railway viaduct.

'Buona sera, signore,' said Balchard, stepping up to the organist and tapping him on the shoulder with his cane. The Italian, somewhat surprised by the gentleman's direct approach, managed to crack a yellow ivory smile across his swarthy face. He touched the brim of his hat. 'Gooda-evening, sir.' He threw a questioning glance at his wife. The woman turned away in scorn, to tend her chestnuts, while muttering: 'Pazzo; povero pazzo.' Balchard feigned an ignorant look whilst fully comprehending the foreign mutterings of 'Idiot; poor idiot'. Offering to buy the Italian a drink, on top of some business, Balchard led the way into the noisy tavern. The Italian followed, pausing on the doorstep to look back at his wife, shrugging his shoulders and screwing his forefinger significantly into his temple.

'Pazzo; povero pazzo,' repeated the brooding spouse, more sure than before of her judgement. The gentleman was an idiot. How else did one classify an idler, or poltrone, who went around buying drinks for workmen below their own lofty social station?. The man watching all this from the depth of the shadows up the street was a little more reserved in his judgement of Balchard's actions.

Balchard reappeared in the doorway with the Italian. They both stood there, their backs to the street, tankards to their lips. The man in the shadows looked on intently. When a solitary cab approached slowly, the man shifted uneasily, afraid that his prey would bolt. But nothing like that happened. However, when two cabs came along together, Balchard suddenly dashed out, waving down the first one and leaping into it. The man darted out from his cover, stopping the second cab, to climb aboard and order the cabbie to

follow the cab in front. Why Balchard had not used the earlier cab to foil any chance of being pursued puzzled the man for moment. But he dismissed the thought, determined not to let go of his quarry's tail. The Italian watched the two cabs rattle off down Fleet Street into the mist. Then, pushing his felt hat back, he turned and walked up to the brooding wife. 'Buona notte, signora,' he said in a clear English voice. Laying down two pence on the piano top, Balchard walked off, musing over his secret joke. His ardent stalker was now chasing a decoy to the outlying borough of Lewisham. The woman, stone-faced with astonishment, crossed herself and put the money in her apron pocket, watching the gentleman go off in her husband's hat and coat. Too numbed now to remember her pigeon English, she mouthed a limp: 'Castagna; castagna,' while the chestnuts frizzled away unattended in the pan. Balchard turned north along St Bride Street, heading for Holborn Circus, and thereafter for Montague Street. He didn't believe that his stalker would be fooled for long with the little switch-around trick. It sufficed to have him off his back for the moment. There was a second point to be observed in the trick, but the result of that would have to wait until he got back to his rooms. For the moment, though, his nerves were a little more settled.

The rancid fumes of burnt mushrooms rankled Balchard's nostrils as he entered the hallway at Montague Street. A painful reminder that this was Thursday, otherwise mushroom and cabbage day. Considering the burnt platefuls that Mrs Wallamsby, his landlady, served up as her establishment's 'homely cuisine', it was a wonder that she didn't tender her services to the Egyptian Room in the British Museum, round the corner. The ancient gods there would have appreciated her burnt offerings. Balchard winced at the odour and shook his head. He really had to make a positive effort to seek accommodation elsewhere. But pennies weighed none too heavily in the pocket and opportunities were scarce. Hopefully there would be something suitable in *The Times*. A chance for a swift, permanent departure from these lodgings. Taking up the newspaper, along with his evening delivery mail,

from the hall table, he mounted the stairs silently and entered his rooms.

If the same tiny rooms had been let out to a flea circus, those agile insect performers may well have been induced to ride piggy-back as a counter-measure to claustrophobia. Furniture and sundries may well have been eyed in horror by others as a flood-tide of chaos. But in Balchard's eye the room's contents had the ascetic discipline of a monastic cell. It secluded him from the nuisance of people outside. The very close cramped-in walls were ideal for deep concentration when he was engrossed in the logistics of his own research, or that of Professor Felsham. Most of the work in folders piled high on the shelves and furniture around him was, in fact, Felsham's. Its schedule for completion was a pressing worry on Balchard's mind. It was pushing his own research to one side, giving him a second mental burden to carry. Many things seemed to be having a crushing effect on his clear thinking of late. Some of these he could not readily identify. Balchard frowned at this last admission, with an inexplicable quiver of nausea passing through him for a moment. That moment, brief as it was, had a great effect in unsettling him further. He looked around at the massive work task surrounding him and reflected again on Dryson's remark earlier, concerning his choice of career.

A guttural sound that was neither laugh nor groan escaped from him as he remembered his distant boyhood ambitions. Long-lost memories. Rosy images swam up into his conscious mind. They had been more fanciful in their colouring than they had been realistically suitable. He shied away from the thought of his once aspiring to be a Jesuit-style theologian. His mama would not have been displeased at his taking holy orders. Not from religious fervour, but for only to get her son into a special placing, away from ordinary people. His pater wouldn't have cared. He never had. Except that he would have seen it as a 'job' where beer-money would have been lamentably scarce. If there was a 'confession' that he had to make, it was that he had been more inspired by the aura of being a bearded scholar in privileged isolation, looking down on society. With the power to affect holy wrath and chide the

ungodly. Now that science, and not religion, was spearheading his personal crusade, he wondered what it was that he was crusading against – pulling away from. He wondered, in turn, why he had posed that question. The thought suffered him a strange attack of nervous restlessness, so that he meandered around the room, reviewing all his scientific paraphernalia. Going along the shelves and touching the many volumes, bulging files, chemicals and scientific instruments gave him a measure of solace. A beacon in his mind, allowing him to see beyond some vague sense of incarceration. But solace from what? His pater had risen no higher than a lowly horse-shit shoveller in the stables of the Great Northern Canal Haulage Company, where the horses for towing the barges were kept. He had been thrown out of his job, to no surprise, for his continued drunkenness, and violence and finally for not turning up for work. His mama still laboured on in her secure employment as latrine cleaner in the town hall offices. But when rumours of pilfering had circulated through those municipal corridors, she had given off odd mutterings of ‘another job’ and worn a deathly grey expression on her face.

Shedding the Italian’s hat and coat to don a brown dressing gown, Balchard sat down at the desk to tend to the mail. Sliding a Cossack silver mounted kindjal dagger from its wooden sheath, he set about slitting the envelopes open. A female voice cawed like a crow after his name from the bottom of the stairs. Arching an eyebrow at the door, he ignored the call, carrying on with his business. He had opened all the letters on the desk top when Mrs Wallamsby’s knock sounded on the door. It was not too brilliant a mental feat to interpret the knock’s tone as that of an offended party. Truly, the woman was hurt. If she managed to conceal her sulk, it was only because her expression matched the dark shade of her domestic tunic. However, before she could let loose her wrath, she paused to sniff around in different directions. A new smell was intruding upon all the other weird odours from Balchard’s ‘medical pieces’, all of which her olfactory senses had now become familiar with. The source of the heavy aroma of Italian tobacco eluded her for

a moment. Until her eyes settled on the coat bundled up untidily on the sofa. The woman was deriving much annoyance from the borrowed garment's scruffy appearance. This afforded Balchard a morose look of inner acid glee. Pulling her ample bosom up in solemn disdain, she turned on Balchard. 'Really, Mr Balchard; that was most inconsiderate of you to neglect to inform me that you would be coming in so late as to miss supper. You know the house rules as well as all the other members of this establishment. All those attending for supper must do so at the regular appointed hour. All those not intending to have supper in the house must let me know by early evening.' She broke off to turn on her softening tactic of emotional sniffing. 'And after me cooking all those lovely mushrooms for you, Mr Balchard. And now they've all gone off.'

Letting things 'go off' was not quite how Balchard defined the woman's pyromania with edibles. He kept a straight face, nodding in sympathy. 'Yes, I really am most sorry about any distress I may have caused you, Mrs Wallamsby. It really was quite remiss of me not to have given you fair warning. However, with my work being somewhat complicated and time-consuming, dinner rules seem to have eluded my recollection.' Mollified by Balchard's 'gentleman's words', the woman made a new offer of meatloaf and carrots. Blotting out the very idea, Balchard hastily declined. Her hackles up now, the woman surged back stubbornly with an offer of cold potato salad. Dreading a repeat sermon, Balchard lowered his resistance a little. 'Very well, then, Mrs Wallamsby, perhaps a small portion of potato salad. But only a very small portion.'

'And rice pudding for dessert?'

'No, really, Mrs Wallamsby. I can hardly envisage my alimentary tract engulfing such a quantity.' Politeness, of course. He refrained from saying it was the quality that turned his stomach.

But his manners were wearing thin. His restraint on a mounting inner rage was almost exhausted.

The woman could sense this, as he impatiently tapped out a tattoo on the back of his chair. She was nervous of the storm of agitation building up, a mere step away from her. The polite words were there, but something else, something more violent was simmering behind all that, trying to find its way to the surface. And he was struggling to hold it back. Like a boiler with faulty riveting, it would explode when the time came. He had not always been like this. He had seemed to be a decent young gentleman when he had first come to stay in her establishment. But never show your fear to an angry lion, and never turn your back on it. She stepped back, searching in her mind for an ingratiating offer to make, and so retire calmly, still in charge, as landlady of the establishment. ‘If it’s your insides you’re worried about, I’ve a new bottle of Pepper’s Iron Tonic downstairs in the pantry. And you being a medical man, an’ all.’ She shook her head at her lodger’s spare frame. ‘I can go downstairs and fetch it now, if you want?’

‘No, please; I must insist that you do not put yourself to such inconvenience solely on my behalf. A plate of potato salad will suffice in itself, thank you.’ The woman having gone, Balchard decided that an additional problem required urgent attention. That of his leaving the house permanently without offending the woman and his dear mama. His mama was acquainted with Mrs Wallamsby, and her influence had been instrumental in acquiring the rooms for him in the first place. Even mothers erred in their good intentions. He turned back to his correspondence.

There were three letters altogether. The first of these was from Dr Muir, assistant to Professor Radcliffe, at the University, on the pressing matter of “Mr Adam Balchard providing a requisite verification of progress in his research programme, prior to entering the final phase of his doctoral dissertation”. The official date for submission of his work, stamped out in bold red, so that only a blind man could have missed it, was only ten days away. Balchard’s stomach leaped. He could barely have submitted the work, given twenty days, never mind ten! ‘Damn the man! Damn Felsham! Damn

them all!’ he cursed, crumpling the paper in his hand and casting it across the room. The second letter was from the Yard. A pink Expenses & Claims form for him to fill in, following the last forensic test he had carried out for them. Balchard’s rampant temper subsided a little at the thought of some money coming his way. Not that he would get it immediately. They were always slow with that; slow to pay but fast to ask. His interest in the first two letters dissolved instantly when his attention passed to the third missive – attached to a parcel. Intrigue flew straight at his eyes when he saw that the parcel had already been opened, re-wrapped, the cut string re-tied, with original knots remaining, and the letter, with its Scotland Yard rubber stamp mark, placed under the string and held secure with red sealing wax. No address, no postage mark on the envelope; only his name. Hand-delivered by a bobby, of course. Another conundrum that Dryson’s superiors believed could only be solved by ‘extra mural effort of ancillary personnel’. Dryson had either forgotten to mention this earlier at the Institute, or had been too reluctant to concede to needing his assistance. Whichever one it was, his superiors had seen fit to send it straight here.

Sweeping the other letter and two envelopes off the desk, he pulled the package over and slit it open with the silver dagger. Out of the brown paper tumbled three segments of brass tubing. The envelope contained another envelope. This contained a letter from the Bridport Constabulary, Dorset, asking for the Yard’s intervention in finding a Mr Harlech’s son, who had gone missing. The son had disappeared nine days ago without explanation, leaving behind these mysterious metals on the bed in his room, which had needed breaking into. Its door having been bolted on the inside. There was nobody in the room when the forceful entry was made.

Balchard examined the brass pieces. Two of the tube sections measured three inches; the third section was two inches in length. All three were of three-quarter inch diameter. The fine precision cutting was the work of an expert craftsman, but not one who placed faith in the lathe, the tooling being

co-linear with the longitudinal axes. Careful examination of the interior scratches with a hand lens revealed that the pieces had been carried on a chain of large linkage. Whilst each tube bore grease deposits around the rim at one end, only the two three-inch segments were sullied around their rims by the carbon deposits of soft flames. Careful application of a delicate powder, produced a discouraging confusion of overlapping fingerprints. Balchard singled out the fragments of whorls that formed a recurrent pattern of symmetry. Using a fine pin to scratch a line perpendicular to the parallel ridges of the prints, he then counted the number of intersections of ridges along this line, between a distance of five millimetres. The number was twelve. So the print was that of a twelve, to fourteen, year old child. By similar method, all the other prints were those of adults. Two of the child's prints bore scars of cuts incised by a sharp instrument, supposedly the same instrument, at identical angles.

Those were the facts. So now for their usage as solid rational bricks of construction. Balchard sat back in his chair, twirling the dagger on its blade point on the desk as he thought. The same instrument for two incisions suggested that the incisions had been made one after the other. This bespoke of deliberation, as did the identical angles. The instrument's sharpness suggested an infrequent, delicate, usage, such as for ceremonial or religious acts. Religion pointed to candles, which would explain the grease deposits and flames marks. If candles were put in the tubes, and two of the tubes were held horizontally, the flames would stand vertical, and so mark the rims. If the third tube was held vertically, the flame would also stand vertically, and so would not mark the rim. What had been random positions of fingerprints now resolved themselves into specific positions in Balchard's mind. He now saw the tubes having been held with three sets of two fingers pointing at the apices of a tetrahedron.

The pieces now clicked together like a Chinese puzzle in Balchard's mind. He recalled reading somewhere of a sinister secret society of Hindu

origin which employed this three- candle ceremony. The priest conducting the ceremony would be assisted by a young boy who held the candles, and was marked for the priesthood by cuts across his thumbs. After the ceremony, the brass tubes, removed of their candles, would be carried on a sacred chain round the priest's neck. Formerly confined to solely religious matters, the cult had since strayed, on its Western meanderings, into the devious dealings of political subversion. Assassinations being one of its finer points. He would check up on this in the Reading Room of the British Museum. Should this prove to be of no avail, then he could always consult the many smaller libraries around the city that specialised in Asian and Oriental subcultures. Balchard wrote up his notes quickly. Filing them away accordingly, he drafted a telegram for a meeting with Mr Harlech. To be posted in the morning, along with his claim form to the Yard's expenses department. With that business behind him, Balchard tried to relax. His ugly mood had faded a little, like an animal lain down, only purring quietly now. But the pain in his temple throbbed on solemnly in seeming foreboding.

Balchard finished the salad with a generous glass of Medoc to relieve his taste-buds of their anguish. He decided that he would attend the Beethoven concert in St James's Hall, advertised in The Times for next Monday evening. There would also be a performance of Bach's sonata in B minor and Haydn's quartet in G major, as well as Schumann's sonata in G minor. With Zerbini as conductor, Balchard reckoned that he could afford the five shilling ticket. He turned to the newspaper's Apartments & Offices section. Most of the apartments were priced beyond his meagre income. Or else were as inconveniently situated as the far- flung corners of the Empire, so to speak, in the outlying districts of the City. However, there was one at 26 Westbourne Terrace Road: 'handsomely Furnished, for two professional gentleman, consisting of dining room and two bedrooms, with good cooking and attendance. Close to Bishop's-road Station.' . The cooking services offered could hardly be worse than that of his present circumstances. But he could

not endure sharing his living space with another. He could not allow anyone to intrude upon his privacy. Irritated, he lowered the paper with a crumpling thrust upon his lap. With his head lowered, he thought back on another newspaper article that had upset him.

When her death was reported in the local newspapers. She was no sooner mentioned, than forgotten again. Like a leaf swept over the angry weir and along the fast flowing waters, to disappear under the rushes and the overhanging bank. Just like that very weir near to where she had perished. Shame could have hung his, and his mama's heads lower, had the newspapers gone further. Beyond a mere mention of reckless youth throwing away precious God-given life by swimming in treacherous waters. The ever present hazards to human life, posed by the millwheel and its perilous weir were dwelt upon. Along with a stinging editorial on the wealthy miller's failure to provide safety measures against these dangers to his workers and the general public. This was countered by the rich merchant aldermen's plea of ever rising costs making it 'uneconomical' to provide such measures. Totally out of the question, considering the amount of expenditure already put into providing facilities for mill workers and their families.

But the miller had paid a price. It was his own daughter who had drowned. Balchard had also paid his price. A double price. She had died, and he had lived. She had left him, leaving him to grieve and fret. He fretted that his contrition could never compensate for what had passed. His hands fell open listlessly, letting the newspaper slide to the floor, where he stared at it for a long time through sightless eyes.

His mind jolted back into the room with Mrs Wallamsby's voice seemingly coming through a loudhailer in a foreign tongue. With his brain re-orientated on his surroundings again, Balchard understood Mrs Wallamsby to have come to collect his tray. She was offering him a pot of her special brew tea. He preferred, instead, a pot of warm water for making up his nightcap. Dipping the spoon into the tin-lined packet of Epps cocoa,

Balchard reflected on the evening's earlier cat-and-mouse episode. It was now time to check the result of that little ploy. Taking the cup of cocoa over to the window, he pulled the curtain aside, to look out at the lamp-post. Sure enough, there was now a second shadow stemming out from it. Electric sensation surged in his chest for an instant. Excitement from anticipation? Or fear? He wasn't sure. He continued to stare out openly at it until he was understood. The 'shadow' comprehended, and breaking away from the mother-stalk of the lamp-post, walked towards Number 20. Balchard timed the pace until there would be a resounding thud of the iron knocker, or a modest rap of the letter-box. It was the latter. The man, whoever he was, certainly had an interesting balance between boldness and diffidence.

Mrs Wallamsby brought the note. It stated curtly, that Balchard's presence would be expected in the British Museum, at 10a.m. tomorrow. Balchard sensed the hair's-breadth divider between polite invitation and direct imperative, in the very sparseness of words. There was nothing else written in the note. But Balchard read the additional information by detailed scrutiny of the paper through his hand lens. It was convenient that he was already going to the Museum in the morning. That way he could do two jobs at the same time. Satisfied, he put the paper and lens down on the desk, and turned back to his cocoa and *The Times*. He settled back in his chair to enjoy his cocoa and read in the quiet of the room. The only thing disturbing this was the pulsing pain in his head.

CHAPTER 4

Clearly, what had been of compelling interest to scholars for centuries had now waned in drawing power with the two men in the ancient manuscripts room of the British Museum. Neither Balchard nor the fair-haired gentleman in russet Norfolk jacket was giving any real attention to the manuscripts in the glass cases, over which they stooped, shifting and turning like dissatisfied blood-hounds. Both of them were acutely vigilant of all that was happening around them. Their senses were tuned to every creak of the floor-boards, to every voice or whisper that filtered in from the surrounding rooms of the museum. Both of them were acutely aware of each other. Balchard bent closer to the glass case, his nose almost touching it, all the while watching the man's angled reflection on its surface. When the reflection turned its back on him, Balchard stole a glance at the man across the room. The man's height and broad, robustly filled frame, were the first two factors which Balchard linked with his mysterious follower of the night before. The gleaming military boots, with their cocksure steel spurs, grew proudly out of the hirsute tweed breeches, and could well have been those that had strode resolutely after him last night, although they sounded differently today. Where last night's resolve had rung out stridently on cold stone from the shrouded depth of an ominous mist, this morning's caution paused and scraped on the polished floor in the decent manner of a gentleman of leisure passing his while in a public gallery. Thus did the light of day blow away the night's gossamer phantoms of the mind, like a child's nightmare dissolved with the coming of morn. All in all, the man was of the active outdoors breed. A cavalry-man most surely, from his confident rolling gait and dark weathered face and toughened hands, the latter now spread open-fingered around the corners of the display case with a firmness that threatened to splinter the seemingly fragile structure. Balchard reckoned the gentleman to be roughly his own age.

But he could not envisage his sort idling away his time indoors, as like now. No, much more was afoot than met the eye.

The man moved to another case so that he was once more facing Balchard. Balchard smiled inwardly, and straightening up, went over to the same case. Standing over the glass panel, Balchard looked down at the faded yellow decomposition that was the brittle remains of the sixteenth century Goteborg Treaty. One touch of a finger, and the entire scroll would disintegrate. 'Truly a remarkable specimen of preservation,' said Balchard, his eyes remaining fixed on the scroll.

'Indeed, sir; indeed.' The tone was that of one who didn't care a damn about decaying scrolls, but only about those who stooped over them pretending to care.

'One would imagine,' continued Balchard, 'that it would not sustain too many prodding fingers. Like a poor party mask; finger it too fretfully, and it falls away, so revealing the face and the game is ended.' Balchard stood up straight to stare the other in the eye. The message was clear that he was more than a little peeved at being kept waiting. 'Is the game ended?'

'Sir?' A lesser person challenged so would have shifted uneasily, or fidgeted a nervous finger, under Balchard's steely stare. But this one didn't twitch as much as a single hair of his blond moustache or eyebrows. His blue eyes twinkled with open amusement, whilst awaiting Balchard's next move, like a child dangling a frog or spider by its leg, watching its frantic wriggling, before deciding on letting it run free or dashing it underfoot. If undecided, the child often sought advice from an elder brother or companion.

Balchard pondered on the whereabouts of the 'elder' in the building. He handed the man the note from the previous evening. 'Yours, I believe?' The man barely glanced at the paper before engulfing it in a magician's twirl of fingers and putting it away promptly in his pocket. With equal brevity, Balchard affected a frown at his golden hunter time-piece, whilst tapping impatiently on its glass panel. 'Hopefully, we are to be joined soon?'

Preferably before we become parched so.’ Balchard cocked an eye pointedly at the ancient scroll. The man glanced round the room. A young governess, in green dress and velveteen bustle, and her three young charges, in sailor suits and boater hats, were the only other occupants of the room.

‘You came alone?’ said the man at last.

‘You have not already ascertained this for yourself, then?’ Balchard smiled wickedly, tilting his head slightly to one side and tapping his upper lip with his fingers, whilst reading the man’s eyes. A brief smile was allowed to touch the man’s cheek. His blond eyebrow arched momentarily to emit a sparkling acknowledgement of Balchard’s observational astuteness. Still spare in his words, the man moved off, pausing only to turn and beckon Balchard with a casual flick of the finger, to follow him.

The ‘elder’ was long in body, and dark in his apparel, just like the Rosetta Stone, along which he was casting a measuring squint; but the Stone, alas, did not possess a flowing black beard. Putting his eye to the corner of the Stone, and stretching his arms out along its edges, like a billiards player assessing his table, the ‘elder’ sized up Balchard for his opening shot. He looked for a signal from his man. The blond eyebrow gave a barely discernible twitch, and the ‘elder’ straightened his posture, coming round to Balchard’s side of the Stone, patting the surface as he did so. ‘To the layman, Mr Balchard, this is a mere three feet of stone; to the experts, it is a truly colossal gateway to a hitherto forbidden territory; that being, of course, the field of hieroglyphics, where our people had been quite unable, for far too long, to decipher the basic semantic key. Now, because of these inscriptions in the three tongues of hieroglyphics, demotic characters and Greek characters, our people can make considerable progress in converting former skull-cracking symbols into Queen’s English. And all because, for the first time, we know what the other side is thinking, so to speak. A fundamental lesson in the strategy of communication.’

‘Very interesting,’ said Balchard, ‘but presumably the honourable