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A Harrogate Mystery

by Laura Urness

Honors 402H
Spring Quarter
May 29, 1990

I.

"Aggie, I want a divorce."

The words still screamed in my ears long hours after Archie had left. It had been such a beautiful, sunny morning, incredibly rare in December. I thought it an omen that my depression was finally beginning to lift, after the pain of mother's death and the uproar over my book.* Archie had come home from London in time for morning tea. I wanted to discuss a vacation, some sort of celebration for my release. In one blunt, despicable sentence he destroyed all my hopes. Then, in his normal fashion, Archie fled from my emotional outburst. I'd known my marriage was in trouble, and even about the affair Archie was having with Nancy Neele, but I always thought we could save the marriage if I could break through my depression. Archie didn't even want to try.

In shock I followed my daily routine and eventually found myself staring blindly at the pages of the newspaper. My eyes automatically scanned it, looking for an unusual new plot that I might be able to incorporate in a book. Suddenly a phrase broke through my daze. It was on one of the inside pages, just an insignificant notice from Harrogate, in one of the North Counties. "Unusual Suicide--Victim Shoots Self Under Chin with Rook Rifle." The article was no more than a long paragraph, but the details appeared surprisingly close to the plot from one of my Hercule Poirot stories, The Tragedy at Marsdon Manor.

*The Murder of Roger Ackroyd

I don't suppose I was thinking quite rationally. I suspect my mind simply grabbed at anything that might help it hold on to sanity. I needed time to be alone, time to discover whether I could still function by myself. I'd lived for Archie for so long that I couldn't remember how to be me, not Agatha-the-way-Archie-likes-her-to-be, just *Agatha*. Perhaps the trip to Harrogate would provide the answer to that, I thought.

That's when I realized that my vague desire to get away, to escape, had transformed into a definite decision to investigate the strange suicide that was so like my story.

II.

Arranging my trip seemed simple. Carlo already had Rosalind with her in London, so I wouldn't need to worry about my daughter while I traveled. A small royalty check, which arrived in the morning post, gave me money for the excursion. If I kept my expenditures to essentials, it would be sufficient. I researched Harrogate in a gazetteer and discovered its renown for mineral springs and health spas. In the off season it would be no problem to find a room in one of the resort hotels.

I didn't pack any luggage, just dumped some night clothes and toiletries in an attache case. I could buy whatever seemed necessary in Harrogate--it would be easier than hauling a heavy suitcase with me. Then I wrote a letter to Carlo and one to Archie's brother, pleading with them to talk to Archie for me, and telling them that I was going to Yorkshire. One last note to

Archie, begging him to reconsider, then I left, almost frantic in my need to be *doing* something--perhaps afraid to think about life without Archie.

I got into my two-seater Morris and drove away. I drove much too quickly and ran the car off the road at the top of a hill at Newlands Cross. I tried for twenty minutes to push the gears into reverse but they utterly refused to re-engage. Finally, I gave up and decided to walk to the nearest train station, at Guildford. Guildford was nearly four miles further and my left leg was already swollen and sore from the accident. My heavy fur coat stayed in the car; the added weight would wear me down. Walking to the station took the remainder of the night.

From Guildford, a milk train carried me to Waterloo Station. While in London, I mailed my letters and bought another coat, having found my cardigan too light for December. A cab took me to King's Cross Station in time for the 11:15 to Harrogate.

The train ride ate most of the day. It didn't arrive in Harrogate until early that evening. I walked along the long platform to the station exit, where several taxis and horse-drawn buses were waiting. One of the buses brandished an advertisement for the Hydropathic Hotel. Considering all the aches that the accident and a day's travel had pounded into my body the name sounded very appealing. I entered the bus and took a seat in its dark interior. No other passengers joined me.

I had no trouble obtaining a room at the Hydro, which was almost empty so close to Christmas. I signed the register with the first name that came to me--Teresa Neele of South Africa.

Nancy still occupied many of my thoughts and my last book was set in Cape Town. I don't know why I chose Teresa. Or why I chose to use an assumed name then. The clerk gave me number 5, a small room on the first floor, containing a bed, washbasin, and easy chair. Though the bed was uncomfortably hard, my exhausted body soon submitted to sleep.

III.

A maid brought a light breakfast of tea and split toast to my room at eight the next morning. After I washed and put on the gray cardigan and green knitted skirt I noticed that they looked dusty, battered, and wilted. People stared after me in the halls. I brushed the dust off as much as possible, but obviously my apparel needed further attention. As it was Sunday, and the stores therefore closed, shopping would have to wait.

I decided to spend the day exploring my immediate surroundings. The Hydro was an imposing Victorian building composed of grey stone blocks. In addition to the reception desk, the lobby contained several benches along its perimeter and a telephone booth by the stairs. Several archways led off in various directions.

The huge Edwardian dining room sported an intricately carved ceiling, outlined by colored bits of glass arranged in geometric patterns. Wide sliding doors opened onto a ballroom. It in turn was divided by a band podium from the hotel's conservatory. This was my favorite part of the resort--a glass-roofed winter garden with ornamental iron columns, wicker furniture, and a tall

fountain at its center.

Entrances to a small library and several drawing rooms were also positioned around the lobby. The hotel's library was devoted to local history, specifically that of the spa. I finished my exploration of the Hydro in time for tea in the red drawing room.

Reinforced by that light snack, I extended my investigation into Harrogate. The Hydro perched on a hill about 10 minutes' walk from the spa's center, the Royal Baths. The treatments offered by the Baths--douches, aeration baths, Scotch baths, and electro-therapy--were not available on Sundays but the entrance hall remained open. Built along the same massive proportions as the hotel, the vast hall boasted a dome supported by Corinthian columns. An octagonal counter, decorated with blue china mermaids, normally housed a clerk who took the appointments for special treatments. Potted palms carved the room into private nooks.

Farther down the hill the Pump Room, containing the sulphur well which made Harrogate famous, stood among flower-filled gardens. In addition to water from the sulphur well, the Pump Room dispensers provided waters from 30 other mineral springs in and around Harrogate.

Harrogate's other major attraction, the Stray, provided a wonderful place to relax. Originally known as the Two Hundred Acres, this grassy expanse was saved as public common land during the enclosures of the 18th century. Although the Stray was supposedly at its best in early spring, when acres of crocuses bloomed, it still vaunted a light covering of the small flowers.

Its openness in the midst of the massive architecture presented a welcome change.

I walked around the Stray and the magnificent town gardens until driven by hunger back to the hotel. I dined in near solitude due to the early hour and retired, still fatigued from the journey.

IV.

I ate in my room again the next morning. Finished, I set out to locate a clothing store and the local newspaper office. When I claimed that my luggage had been lost in transit, the clerk at the reservation desk directed me to MacConall's, a posh dress shop near the Pump House. My "idle" desire to catch up on the local news also elicited a profitable response.

After I purchased some clothing and a small suitcase, to be delivered to my room at the Hotel, I searched for the newspaper office. Harrogate had, in fact, two newspapers, the Harrogate Herald and the Yorkshire Post. Since the Herald primarily published society news, I felt back issues of the Post would be more likely to contain a full account of the suicide.

The clerk in the Post's office was very helpful when I explained that I had just arrived and wished to learn all the local news for the past week. He showed me to a quiet room with several long tables and slatted wooden chairs, leaving me to choose between them while he retrieved the papers. For privacy, I picked one in a corner away from the door.

After the clerk delivered the papers and left, I began my

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search. The article I needed appeared in the December 3rd edition. Apparently the "suicide" occurred on the 2nd but wasn't considered important enough to warrant a special edition. Indeed, this piece provided little more flesh than the other. It did contain the coroner's reported opinion that, while it would have been possible for Jack Skrimpton to pull the trigger, he (the coroner) felt that it would have been extremely awkward. The rifle found at the scene had a barrel 36 inches long, with the trigger an additional 2 inches from the muzzle--a long reach even for a large man. After reading the article, the idea formed--no one really believed Skrimpton's death a suicide, but, just as unanimously, had decided not to look too closely for another explanation. Jack Skrimpton certainly hadn't left many friends.

The paper did mention one important detail missing from the other report. Jack Skrimpton had not lived and died in Harrogate. The victim had been the most prosperous small-holder around Harrogate; his successful, family-run farm lay just off the small town of Wetherby, some 8 miles to the southeast. That might make my investigation more difficult if the weather turned nasty.

As I stacked the newspapers together, preparing to leave, a notice in the last one caught my eye. According to the paper, I was missing! The article said that the police had been notified of my disappearance and were conducting a search of the area around Newlands Cross.

I didn't know what to think. Hadn't Archie's brother shown them my letter? I debated about contacting the local police but eventually rejected the idea. The publicity would make it totally

impossible to conduct a discreet investigation. Certainly the murderer (if it *was* murder) would be more wary. My "disappearance" had to stand.

I left the Post with only a small sense of accomplishment. Buying clothes and searching through the papers exhausted most of the morning--I finished at the newspaper office only a few minutes before noon. Famished, I stopped to eat at a small tea room called Betty's, at a table with a view of the grass and crocus-carpeted Stray.

V.

Since it was too late for a walk to Wetherby, I went straight to the Royal Baths after lunch. It seemed a perfect time to engage in some normal spa activity, so I registered for a full course of treatments to relieve tension and sore muscles. I almost quit after 15 minutes of "boiling" in a steam bath, but the massage afterward more than redeemed my therapist. I departed well pleased with the results, strolling with ease to the Hydro. A maid helped me dress for dinner in a new evening gown the color of young maple leaves. I filled the remaining time before dinner reading a Sherlock Holmes mystery, borrowed from Harrogate's lending library. By dinnertime I eagerly abandoned the book. Sherlock Holmes' arrogance annoyed me almost as much as that of my Belgian creation.

I enjoyed the meal and stayed to listen to the band. At first I was absorbed by the music, but then began to think about

Archie and Rosalind again. Abruptly I became chillingly homesick, though I knew the home I pictured no longer existed. I fled to my room and the safe darkness of the bed.

VI.

Sick of my company and my thoughts, I arose early and ate in the dining room. Then I asked the receptionist for a map of the area. The map he supplied showed a good road connecting Harrogate to Wetherby.

I thought about my plans during the walk. I needed an explanation for my questions about Jack Skrimpton's death. Perhaps pretending interest in buying the property would suffice. It might even give me a reasonable excuse for looking around the estate. The local shopkeepers would probably know if the farm were up for sale. They could also tell me quite a bit about the victim and his family, and, most likely, about any recent arguments he might have had.

The walk took much less time than I expected, possibly because of the therapy in the Royal Baths. I arrived shortly after 9 a.m., only slightly out of breath. Although three moderately important roads passed through the village, it had never expanded past one general-goods store, a small church, and the pub (the Bell and Bottle). Its proximity to Harrogate and its famous spas had apparently stunted the growth of Wetherby over a century before. The size of the town could act as both an advantage and disadvantage--the townspeople would know almost every detail of each other's lives but might hesitate to talk to

an outsider like me.

The general store was my first stop. A wooden sign over the door read "Dodd's General Merchandise." The door itself was propped open by a brick. I stood in the doorway while my eyes adjusted to the gloomy interior. The floors were covered with scarred, bare boards. By the door a braided rag rug (quite filthy from mud tracked in by farmers' boots) hid the boards. Dimly lit corners overflowed with odd stacks of merchandise. A fragile desk by the door contained the cash box and the tablet on which a white-haired woman (presumably Mrs. Dodd) was writing her receipts with an old, blotchy fountain pen. She looked up as I entered.

"Can I help ye, dearie?"

"I need to buy some hand cream. This wind is drying my skin horribly." (A valid excuse. My skin chapped at the slightest hint of a breeze, and the wind had been fairly stiff.) I looked around, "But where do you keep your cream?"

She chuckled. "As me Henry once said, 'we've never been robbed 'cause no thief could find what he were after!' He'll get it for ye. Henry!"

He emerged from one of the corners, a shriveled little man I guessed to be in his seventies. Apprised of my request, he shrugged and moved to one of the piles. He plowed through it for a few moments and returned with the cream. Depositing it on the desk, he retreated to his corner. Mrs. Dodd continued to chat about the store and Wetherby while she wrote a receipt. A perfect library of information!

"This is such a beautiful area, so much nicer than London. I

always feel healthier away from the city. I'd really love to find a small farm and move back into the country. I grew up in a village like this, you see. You wouldn't know if anyone around here is selling their land, would you?"

"Oh, aye. I heard Jack's son were thinking o' selling his piece now't his father's gone. He never did like farmin'. I were *that* surprised when I found out Jack left his farm to Bob, even if he were the oldest. Bob never had no use for farmin'. I'd o' thought Frank were a better choice. He were always the farmer in the family. Been wantin' his own piece for a spell, he has."

"Where is this farm?"

"Heavens, I near fergot, ye wouldn't know 'bout Jack Skrimpton. Been a wonder 'round these parts. He were the richest man in the district--got that way by pinchin' every tuppence. Tightest man I ever knew. Nasty, too. Anyway, I'd never o' believed Jack'd shoot himself. Did though, with an old rook rifle. He left everything to his son, Bob. Hit Frank hard, that did. He always thought the farm'd be his one day, specially after his father opened that joint account at the bank for farm expenses."

"Jack trusted him with money? Isn't that unusual?"

"Oh, aye. Frank paid for their last order just the day before his father died, poor boy. In a powerful hurry to get home, he were. Frank were the only one in the family Jack did trust with his cash. *I* appreciated the move, let me tell ye! *Frank* didn't grumble over the price on every item."

"Why isn't he buying the land from his brother?"

"Frank? He hasn't a farthing o' his own and Bob can't afford to give him the place. Neither o' the boys had time for paying jobs whiles Jack were alive. Slave driver, he were."

"Who do I ask about buying the farm? Of course, I'd like to see it first. Say, Jack Skrimpton didn't shoot himself in the *house*, did he? I wouldn't want to live in a suicide's house."

"Oh, my lord, no! Jack shot himself out by the shed in the home garden. That's a couple o' acres from the cottage. I'm not sure who ye should talk to--probably the solicitor in Harrogate. Michael Mason, over at the pub, knows, I'm sure. He always does. That'll be 10 p., dearie."

I thanked Mrs. Dodd for her help and the information as I handed her the money. The pub sounded like an excellent idea. The brisk walk stimulated my appetite and the publican could also satisfy my curiosity.

The Bell and Bottle was a white stucco building with dark wooden beams and shingles. The front room was bright, lit by the sun shining through two floor-to-ceiling bay windows. The back room had all the hazy charm of the traditional pub, with ancient oak walls blackened by generations of tobacco and oil lamp smoke. The massive bar extended across the back wall, while booths and tables were squeezed into the remainder of the space.

I ate in the pleasant front room before seeking Mason, who presided at the bar. After ordering a pint of ale, I told him about my conversation with Mrs. Dodd and asked if he could tell me about the solicitor. He confirmed Mrs. Dodd's supposition. He also gave me some information about Jack's last day.

"Well, ye see, Matt Thompson (he's the Dodd's delivery man) came in't other day, jus' before noon, swearin' fit ter make the divil blush. Seems he'd been deliverin' some supplies over't Jack's place and stopped ter see Sarah (that's Jack's lass). Ol' Jack caught 'im with her. Ran 'im right of't place with that rook rifle, an' told 'im not t' come back. Said Matt weren't good enough for his lass. Matt were snarlin' that if Jack really wanted ter rid the world o' pests he'd use that gun on somethin' other than birds. Funny, that. Never thought Jack'd cooperate with anyone, specially not Matt."

Just then a laughing young couple entered the front room.

"Will ye look at that, eh? Them's Matt and Sarah. There's another one as is happy Jack's gone. Treated her like dirt, he did. Ol' Jack never saw much good in a daughter. Many's the time I heard him complain as how he could o' used another lad 'bout the place but the Lord only give him a girl. Said it to her more'n once. Cold beggar!"

The couple certainly didn't appear to be grieving. They still laughed at their table by one of the bay windows. Matt had grey eyes, auburn hair and a modest build, a little over average height. His teeth, I noted, were excellent. Sarah Skrimpton matched him in height. While her brown hair was unremarkable, she possessed eyes the unusual pale green of a cat's. I jumped as the bartender interrupted my evaluation.

"I can't understand why Skrimpton were so set against Matt. Sure he's poor, but the Dodds dote on that boy. He'll get the store when they go, since they never had no kids. Everyone knows

it, they've said it often enough."

I'd gathered ample information for one day. I'd contact the solicitor in Harrogate next. My need to get away from that happy couple cancelled the remainder of the afternoon's investigation in Wetherby. They stirred too many memories of Archie and the early part of our marriage.

The walk back took hours longer, as I pondered the information I'd received. It looked like the entire village wanted Skrimpton dead, including his own children. They all appeared to have cause.

I glanced at my watch upon reaching Harrogate. The hands rested at a little after 5 o'clock. The solicitor, following the universal pattern of bankers and clerks, no doubt locked his door at 5 p.m. Another task set aside for tomorrow. A few drops of rain fell on me as I entered the Hydro.

I picked up the evening papers and sat reading in the blue drawing room. They contained front-page stories about my disappearance, with rather fuzzy publicity shots of me. Luckily, the blurred prints made identification by the staff and guests unlikely. Still, the search was becoming serious and worrisome. If the public discovered that I remained in hiding on purpose, it would never forgive me. I'd never manage to sell another story, but I simply could not come forward. More convinced than ever that Jack Skrimpton had been murdered, publicity frightened me. If the real story made the papers, the killer might plan a new murder to protect himself. Mine.

VII.

The rain was falling steadily when I woke on Wednesday morning. I realized immediately that it postponed any expedition to Wetherby. Trying to walk sixteen miles in wet slop begged for a bout with pneumonia. I still intended to visit the solicitor, however. Hopefully he wouldn't require any credentials or bank statements before giving me information. How much he'd agree to tell me about Jack Skrimpton's will troubled me. Was Mrs. Dodd correct? Had the victim left everything to his oldest son--and, if so, had Bob known in advance?

Perched on Crescent Road next to MacConall's, the solicitor's office occupied the upper floor of yet another Victorian building. Though constructed of the same stone as the Hydro, the structure failed to impress. The blocks tilted slightly, giving the whole a skewed stance. Wrought-iron stairs, flaked with orange rust, twisted up to the solicitor's office. A brass plate bolted to the door read "James Morgan, Solicitor."

Showing unusual foresight, I'd telephoned from the hotel lobby. Mr. Mason was waiting in his office for me. He stood and offered his hand.

"Miss Neele. Please have a seat." He waved at a pair of leather chairs facing his desk. "How may I help you?"

"I was told in Wetherby that you were handling the sale of a farm I may be interested in buying. According to the publican you are Jack Skrimpton's executor. I've heard that he left everything to his oldest son, who wants to sell the place. Is this correct?"

He laughed. "I wish I knew how Mason gets his information."

Yes, it's all true. Bob Skrimpton has asked me to handle the sale."

"Could you describe the farm? How large is it? Are there any outstanding loans on it? And would I have any trouble with other family members? I heard Frank didn't want his brother to sell."

He pulled out a map and pointed to various sections of it as he spoke. "The property is rather extensive. It starts about one mile to the north of Wetherby. It's bound on the north by the road between York and Knaresborough, and on the west by a minor track." He showed me where the path to the house cut off the track about a mile short of Wetherby. "There's one large river running through the property--the east boundary starts where the river crosses under the York road. The estate is the largest freehold around Harrogate. And" (he quoted what surely must have been an inflated price), "so reasonably priced. Jack Skrimpton knew his trade--he actually made a profit off the land. There are no mortgages on the property."

"And the family members?"

He rubbed a hand through his hair. "That might be a problem, I must admit. Frank made some silly threats in this office last week when Bob asked me to sell. He's vehemently opposed to the sale, but I can't really see him carrying out his threats. He'll come around. It was just shock over the contents of his father's will."

"May I ask what was so shocking about his father's will? It isn't something that raises doubts about Mr. Skrimpton's sanity,

is it? Could Frank dispute it in court? I don't want to be involved in any legal tangles."

"I don't see any harm in showing it to you. I have a copy on file. I rather expected that question, since Mr. Skrimpton committed suicide. Here it is." He handed me a single handwritten sheet.

It plainly stated, without any legal phrasing, that he, Jack Skrimpton, bequeathed all property in his possession to his oldest son, Bob Skrimpton "in the hopes that it might make him grow up and show some gumption for once." He noted in his will that the arrangement wasn't fair, but he felt "confident" that Frank would manage to do all right for himself.

"Did Bob know about the terms before you read this to them? You said it came as a shock to Frank. I don't imagine he took it well."

"I think Bob may have guessed. It certainly didn't seem to surprise him much. It took Frank by surprise, right enough. I thought he was going to literally explode at first, especially when Bob asked me to sell. He was still fuming when they left."

"I hope he doesn't cause any trouble. I think I've heard enough for now. I'd like to see the property before I go any further. Can you arrange that with the family?"

"I'll call them immediately. If you'll tell me where you're staying I'll send you a message."

"I'm at the Hydro, room 5." I rose. "Thank you for your help."

The rain turned to drizzle as I trudged up the hill to the

hotel. I spent the rest of the day reading and solving crossword puzzles in one of the drawing rooms. The evening papers carried more wildly inaccurate theories about my absence. Some of the reporters felt it a mere publicity stunt. How idiotic! This mess came far closer to destroying my career than enhancing it.

As I turned out the light, I prayed for an end to the rain. This involuntary inactivity allowed me to think too long about all of my personal problems. And time was running out for me. Eventually someone would recognize me from the newspaper photos. I *had* to work quickly.

VIII.

Sally Potts, the maid assigned to my floor, brought a message from Mr. Morgan to my room during breakfast. She puttered about a bit afterward, snooping and asking questions.

"Are you feeling all right, mum? You've been looking awfully tired. I hope you slept well."

"I am tired. I have some troubles but I'll have to sort them out myself. Thank you for your concern, but you needn't worry about me."

"Ring me if you need anything, mum." With that she finally left. A nice enough girl, but a little nosey.

The solicitor's note encouraged me. The family agreed to meet me on the property at 11 a.m. They even sent apologies because no one had time to show me around. I would have to make any lengthy inspection of the farm alone. Perfect, absolutely perfect. Even the weather cooperated with sunny skies and

unseasonably warm temperatures. I set out immediately after breakfast.

The farmhouse sat nearly a mile in from the west boundary. A woman in her late forties answered my knock and led me into a small living room. The house had only one story, and the living room opened straight off the front yard, with no entryway or hall between. A short hallway extended toward the back of the house.

I introduced myself to the woman, who in turn informed me that she was Jack Skrimpton's widow, Emily. She was a small woman, with the same striking green eyes I'd noticed in her daughter, although her hair was blonde, lightly streaked with silver. Her face showed little expression, but I noticed a sudden, slight hunch to her shoulders when she mentioned her husband. She motioned toward a chair. I sat, noticing as I did that the furnishings were of good quality, but a little shabby. Exactly what I'd expect from Jack Skrimpton. A man of his character would buy furniture to last, but refuse to pay for expensive reupholstering until absolutely unavoidable.

The only unnecessary item the room contained was a framed photograph of the Skrimptons. A date penciled into the bottom right corner proclaimed it quite a recent portrait. It showed that Jack Skrimpton had been an extremely large man, well over six feet tall--a full foot taller than any of his children. His musculature matched his substantial height.

Emily reacted with discomfort to my silence. "Um, could I show you around the house while we wait for my children? Bob and Frank should be here soon. I can't say as Frank's happy about

the sale, but Bob talked to him. He won't give you trouble."

I allowed her to distract me. She led me to the kitchen. Approximately double the size of the living room, it held all of the usual accoutrements, plus a gun rack on the east wall. The rack contained several small rifles.

Emily's tour included the well-stocked pantry and the three bedrooms that made up the rest of the house. Bob and Frank shared a room hardly large enough for two beds. I easily understood Bob's desire for new surroundings.

Bob and Frank were washing in the the kitchen when we finished the tour. Sarah was also there, brewing tea and making sandwiches. Bob had straw-colored hair and green eyes which focused only partially on the objects around him. He looked like he was daydreaming. His body was very thin, almost an exact opposite to his father's bulk. Frank, though two inches shorter than his brother, resembled his father closely, a copy in miniature. At the moment, a rather sulky copy. Bob may have talked to Frank but he certainly hadn't changed Frank's attitude.

Emily and her sons sat down at the table with me. Bob described the outbuildings and improvements his family had installed in their tenure. Then Sarah joined us, bringing the tea. I used the opportunity to shift the conversation.

"Didn't I see you in town a couple of days ago? At the pub, sitting with a good-looking young man?"

Emily interrupted. "Sarah! You know your Da disapproved of Matt. Why, he argued with that boy the day he died! How could you go against your Da's wishes that way?"

"Oh, Ma. Da never liked any of my friends. And it weren't just Matt that Da were after that day. He yelled at Frank later for takin' so long at the shop. And he ordered Bob to 'stop daydreaming an' get back to work' when Bob tried to calm him down. I thought he was taking that rifle out to work out his temper on the birds." Her chin rose and her green eyes glinted.

Emily dithered. Both boys looked embarrassed. I finally ended the uncomfortable scene, requesting permission to walk about the property. Bob granted it with alacrity. Indeed, the whole family jumped at an excuse to get me away.

Mr. Morgan had drawn me a rough sketch of the property. I headed north, in the general direction of the river, until well hidden from the house. Then I turned east, toward the murder site. The ground squished under my feet. Ankle-deep mud marked the garden's edge.

The place where Jack's body had been found offered few clues. Several people had trampled the dirt recently. Water lined their prints. The shed held only gardening tools and a healthy family of rooks. I was about to leave when the sun broke from a cloudbank. The light flashed off a bit of metal near the bottom of one footprint. I dug into the slippery mud and pulled out a woman's expensive silver chain. If not for the recent rain washing the chain partially free of the mud, I never would have noticed it.

The chain showed no wear, not even tarnish. I had to believe it a clue, dropped by Jack or his murderer. I eliminated the coroner's men from the list, since none of the men had come back

for it. In my judgement, Jack's character left scant room for expensive frivolities. The murderer *must* have dropped it!

I fished in the mud a few seconds longer, but, as expected, found nothing more. Time for my return to Harrogate.

IX.

I arrived at the spa late in the afternoon. It felt like the appropriate time to make a character sketch, starting with the victim. I settled, with a pad and pencil, into one of the comfortable chairs in the red drawing room. The finished list looked something like this.

Jack Skrimpton: Tight with money. Would probably order an underling to carry his gun and ammunition, but wouldn't trust Matt or Sarah with them. Might trust wife to "fetch and carry" though.

Emily Skrimpton: Basically a non-entity. Flinches when husband mentioned, but loyal enough to defend him. No apparent motive for murder.

Bob Skrimpton: Escapes unpleasantness by daydreaming. Hates farm (selling out over brother's strong objections). Criticized frequently by father. Enormous financial gain from father's death.

Frank Skrimpton: Wants land badly (didn't know about father's will?). Hard worker. Father thought him most dependable. Has bad temper. No apparent financial or personal gain.

Sarah Skrimpton: Relationship with Matt against father's wishes. Shows no grief, flaunting new independence. No apparent financial gain but some personal ones.

Matt Thompson: Resented Jack's harsh treatment. Shows signs of violent temper and actively hated Jack. Strange coincidence(?) between murder method and his comments in pub. No apparent financial gain but several personal advances.

There was still something missing, one vital fragment of information that would tell me *why*. By all accounts Jack Skrimpton had been a prime candidate for murder for nearly 58 years. What finally drove his murderer over the edge? A visit to the Harrogate jeweler might supply the answer. I planned to find out shortly after the store opened on Friday.

X.

"I didn't sell this particular piece. Try Dalby at Knaresborough. He might have something in this line." He pointed to a tiny etching on the clasp. "That looks like his mark."

Disappointed, I thanked the jeweler for his time. More delay. I checked my map for Knaresborough. Luckily, the town was only three miles to the east. I didn't know what I would do if Dalby couldn't help me.

I covered the distance in (for me) record time. A passerby directed me down a Georgian-style street, with its attached string of rowhouses and narrow, cobbled walks. A prominent sign announced Dalby's occupation. Dalby glanced up as I entered and set aside a watch he'd been mending.

"May I be of service, Miss?"

I gave the same story used on the other jeweler--that I had found the chain in the road, and wished to return it to the owner. Could he tell me if he had sold it to someone recently, and, if so, who?

"A man came in for that piece about a week ago. He said it was a gift for his girl. The man signed a draft for it. I've got

a copy right here. Just a moment . . ." He thumbed through his book. ". . . Ah, here it is! Dec. 2. See, here's his signature." The clerk turned the book to face me. It provided the last bit of evidence I needed. I thanked Mr. Dalby for his extreme helpfulness and promised to visit his shop again.

Even hurrying as I had, it was too late in the day for me to walk to Wetherby. Chafing at the delay, I contemplated hiring a taxi, but balked at the expense. My money supply was nearly exhausted. The hotel bill already claimed most of the remaining funds. Waiting one more day couldn't hurt, anyway.

I explored the city and its castle briefly before returning to Harrogate. The castle had been reduced to a shell, with only the dungeon in good repair. The townspeople sold tickets, at a minimal fee, for tours of those subterranean passages. I managed to catch the final tour of the day, but regretted it. The guide dwelt far too lovingly on descriptions of grisly torture devices. I must confess gratitude for the brevity of the tour. I left, determined *not* to go back, despite my promise to Mr. Dalby.

XI.

I stopped at the pub before walking to the farm. I wanted to ask Mr. Mason a couple of minor questions, just to satisfy my curiosity. While the answers might prove to be useful, they weren't a necessity. I received the response I'd expected.

"Oh, aye. He were here that day. I told you that, didn't I? And o' course he were seein' someone regular, like. Spendin' a

lot o' money on her, too."

I'd called the family and ask them to meet me at the house, then called Mr. Morgan and Matt Thompson to request their presence. They were all waiting when I arrived.

"The reason I asked for this meeting has nothing to do with the sale of this farm. I must confess, I never intended to purchase it. I came here to investigate the strange circumstances surrounding Jack Skrimpton's death. I was entirely unsatisfied with the suicide verdict. And I was right. Someone murdered him. He'd discovered that someone was stealing his money. The thief killed him to cover it up."

I took a deep breath and turned to the murderer. "That was why you did it, wasn't it? Because your father found out about all the money you drained from his account. And because you got tired of waiting for your share of the farm. You didn't know about the will. Mr. Morgan can testify to that." Morgan nodded.

"I found the chain you bought for your girl at the murder site. The jeweler in Knaresborough will testify that you are the one who bought it. In addition, he has a copy of the bank draft you signed. That's the real clincher. You were the *only* one with access to that account. I would be willing to bet that an examination of the bank records will show that you've made several large withdrawals lately. And not for farm supplies."

"Mr. Mason commented on an odd "coincidence" the first time I went to the pub. Matt made a rather rash statement before the murder about a 'better use' for Mr. Skrimpton's rifle. You overheard it, didn't you? I asked Mason today. You *were* in the

pub when Matt suggested a method for murder."

"Two other small points led me to you. The first concerned the length of the rifle and the heights of everyone involved. Jack was a tall man, but even so, it would have been difficult for most of the other suspects to shoot him under his chin. Except for your mother, they're too tall. The second point relates to timing. Mrs. Dodd and Mr. Mason insisted you spent very little time in their establishments, yet your father criticized you for taking so long. I thought that suspicious even before I found the chain and discovered the reason for your delay."

I'd half expected Frank to attack me during my presentation, but nothing happened. He seemed to wilt in his chair, silent even after his mother begged him to deny my charges. Bob stared at me for almost a minute, then nodded, rose, and went to the phone. His call to the police was brief, after which he asked me to talk with him outside.

He delivered a monstrous shock.

"I knew all along that you weren't interested in the farm, Mrs. Christie. You asked the wrong sort o' questions. Bein' who you are, an' having my own suspicions about Da's death, it weren't too hard to figure out."

"Do you think anyone else recognized me?" I spoke quietly.

"Morgan probably did, and maybe Mason. Neither one o' them thought much o' the verdict, either. Probably gave you more information than you requested because o' that, too."

"Is there any way to keep me free of the trial? Or at least use my assumed name? I don't want this to reach the papers. I'm

in enough trouble with the press now. That's why I won't be able to stay. If you really need my testimony, you'll have to write to me in Berkshire."

"Let's ask Morgan about it. He'll understand, and his brother's a barrister, so he knows what to expect in a trial."

He went back into the house, and came out with Morgan. While we were making arrangements and discussing strategy, the local police arrived.

The sergeant took my deposition, which I signed "Teresa Neele, Cape Town, South Africa." As a tourist from another country, Morgan had informed me, I could not be forced to remain for the trial. My alias became uniquely useful.

When the police left with Frank, I was relieved to sink back into my role of vacationing tourist. I'd earned a few days of rest. I went for more treatment at the Royal Baths, slept late the next morning and quietly enjoyed myself around Harrogate. I even attended a High Church service in St. Wilfred's chapel. On Monday I noticed a change in the staff's treatment. They stared at me frequently and I noticed that they never left me entirely alone. My "vacation" was nearing its end.

On Tuesday morning it became obvious that the staff had notified the Harrogate police, luckily not the same group that arrested Frank. Two officers lurked around the entrances when I came down for breakfast and followed me discreetly to the Baths. Apparently, they weren't sure enough of my identity to approach me directly. No doubt they waited for Archie to arrive to identify me. I spent most of the afternoon debating about what Archie

should be told, finally deciding to let the amnesia story stand.

He appeared as I left the dining room that night. With some difficulty I showed no recognition, and even walked past him. He grasped my arm as I passed, pulling me around to face him.

"Aggie, I don't know what game you're playing but it's gone on quite long enough," he said, furiously. "Get your things together; we're leaving as soon as I talk to the police."

After that speech, any guilt over my planned deceit evaporated. Archie had just shown that he possessed an unexpected vindictive streak. At that moment I quit accepting the blame for all the problems in our relationship. I suddenly realized that more than a few arose from flaws in *his* character, not mine. It was a most satisfying and liberating revelation.

"Do I know you? I don't recall meeting you. Please take your hand off my arm." I shook free of him.