



One

Sequel to a Nine Days' Wonder

'I find it shocking,' said Clarissa Webster. 'Shocking, and, if you must know, rather frightening.'

She pushed back the papers on her roll-top desk, put down an empty glass and lit a cigarette. The back room of the shop called appropriately The Medley, once the kitchen of a Tudor cottage, was part office, part store. Canvases, framed and unframed, lined one wall; cardboard cartons of artists' materials, convex mirrors, bookends and tourist souvenirs were stacked in that curious disarray which suggests that it is part of a system understood only by its creator.

She was past fifty but still handsome and well aware of her sex, with an easy charm that beckoned and comforted. Her customers, particularly if they were male, found her as irresistible and as memorable as the setting which had attracted them into her net. Sweet, sly, pretty Mrs Webster, a natural saleswoman who could convince any buyer that he had acquired a bargain – a future family heirloom – rather than an overpriced painting of a scene better left to coloured postcards.

'Shocking?'

The girl who had been engulfed in an armchair too low to the floor pulled herself out of it and straddled one of the squat square arms. Despite jeans and the painter's smock worn for practical reasons, the results of which were smeared all over it, she merited more than a casual glance. Everything about her, from the short, almost cropped dark hair about a face which was just too rounded for classic beauty, to the tips of her small spatulate fingers suggested an expert in her choice of work whatever it might be.

'Shocking?' she repeated. 'Frightening? Putting it a bit high, aren't you? You might say it's crackingly silly publicity hunting. I'd call it a load of old codswallop myself.'

Mrs Webster picked a thin paperback book from one of the

heaps on her desk. The cover, a pale puce, swore violently with strident orange and green lettering. She held it at arm's length.

'*Get with the Psalms,*' she read aloud, 'by the Rev. Leslie Trump, vicar of Lindsay Carfax.' She opened a page at random. 'Get a load of this. "I was chuffed when they said let's make the God-bothering shop." That's the kick-off of Psalm 122, in case you don't know – according to Trump, the silly little ape.'

'I shouldn't have thought,' said her companion, 'that you were the religious type. You certainly never go to church. What makes you so hot and bothered?'

The proprietress of The Medley poured herself two fingers of gin, adding water from a lustre jug.

'How long have you been here, Eliza Jane?' she asked. 'Just over a year since you first appeared, I think. You're the wrong generation – miles too young. History doesn't mean a thing to you unless it repeats itself and bobs up to fetch you one across the chops. I couldn't care less about Trump – I don't even know him well enough to dislike him. What I don't want just now is trouble. We can all do without another Nine Days' Wonder which is what he's asking for. Have a drink.'

'Gobbledy-gook,' said Eliza Jane. 'Who gives a damn about what Trump says or does? He could blow till he burst without anyone paying attention. *What* Nine Days' Wonder?'

Mrs Webster moistened her lips from her glass and considered the slim figure perched on the chair through her convincing artificial eyelashes. She appeared to change the subject.

'Ben Judd,' she said after a pause. 'I suppose you sleep with him from time to time – I would if I were your age – but are you thinking of shacking up with him? I mean do you intend to stay here for keeps?'

The girl was clearly not embarrassed by the question.

'I might. Ben is rather too fierce for me just now. He's a real painter and my stuff drives him up the wall. Why do you ask?'

'Not out of bitchy curiosity.' Mrs Webster was thoughtful as she sipped her gin. 'I'm going to tell you something and you can believe it or not as you choose. It's always been unlucky to stick your neck out if you live here. That may sound completely mad to you, but it's true. People who do anything which might tend to destroy our image have a pretty parrotty time. Perhaps you haven't been here long enough to notice that.'

'You mean those deadbeats, the drop-out crowd, who thought they'd move in last summer?'

'Them – and others. They weren't the first.'

'The Nine Days' Wonder, then?'

Mrs Webster blew a smoke ring into the air and poked a plump forefinger through it.

'This village,' she said, 'as you very well know, is not a village at all – it's a very nicely organised money-making machine. You're part of it with your blissful trick of turning out old-world paintings of it by the dozen. I'm part of it with my arty-crafty racket. So is every man, woman and child in the place. We all live in and on Lindsay Carfax the unspoiled beauty spot of Merrie England as it never bloody well was except in Cloud Cuckooland. We could just as well be working in a film set and the drains would be less smelly.'

'We've been a carefully preserved gold mine for at least seventy years and it has never paid anyone to step out of line. People who do become accident-prone. One of Trump's predecessors found that out in 1910 or thereabouts. He was the original Nine Days' Wonder – or one of them.'

'The dreaded elders of the village fixed him? The Gestapo in the form of Gus Marchant's grandfather? What was he up to anyhow?'

'My Aunt Thisbe, who raised me, always said he was a very dull earnest man with theories above his pocket. His name was Austin Bonus – it's on the roll of clergy in the church – and he had an idea to establish a children's home here: East End slum children, waifs and strays and so on. There was a lot of opposition to the scheme on account of it might be noisy and dirty, and bad for the Lindsay Carfax image as a haunt of ancient peace. Bonus fought for a bit and even raised some cash for his scheme – not from the village, I promise you, but from distant do-gooders.'

'Then one day he disappeared. It was just after Christmas and he was last seen at an old folks' party at the Carders Hall. He was gone for nine days and when he turned up again he dropped the children's home like a hot potato and carried on as if nothing had happened.'

'No explanation?'

'Nary a word. His wife was furious for a bit, they say, and some of the Church council weren't entirely pleased but it all blew over.'

They restored the church roof instead and bought a very good organ. No one explained where the money had come from, but it must have cost a packet. Johnnie Sirrah wasn't so lucky.'

'Who was he?'

Mrs Webster's eyes became soft. She smiled like a cat remembering a dish of cream.

'He was by way of being a boyfriend of mine – my first now I come to think of it. It was just before the war when everyone was clamouring for peace and yet doing nothing about it except going to Spain to join in the shooting there. Communism, pacifism, anti-bloodsportism, anti-clericalism, anti-vivisectionalism – you name it, we had it. He tried to organise the whole thing into one vast wail of anger, starting from here because this was supposed to be the deep heart of England, and he had just begun to get himself noticed in quite a big way by the press. I was only eighteen then and quite a dish, though I say it myself. I didn't love him but I thought he'd do very nicely to begin with – he was a sort of challenge to any girl with growing pains. He taught me a thing or two and I never regretted it. Poor Johnnie.'

She emptied her glass to his memory.

'What happened to him?'

'He was found in the gravel pit at Saxon Mills with his head in the water and his neck broken. It's quite a fall from the top and they said he'd been drinking, which was probably true. What nobody knows is why he went there at all. The odd thing was that it took them nine days to find him. We seem to like that number hereabouts.'

'The ghastly Nine Day Festival of the Crafts?'

Mrs Webster sighed. She had not thought about Johnnie Sirrah for many years and the sudden re-appearance of memory brought a twinge of emotion: not pain but surprise.

'Nine oaks by the church, nine acres of the Common, nine steps to the Carders Hall. They used to say there were nine ways to Carfax but it's not true any longer – there's only one. The rest are just lanes leading nowhere in particular.'

She stood up and closed the bottle. 'If you're not going to have one I shall put this away before I get a taste for it. By the way, could you knock me up a sort of Constable's *Haywain* job? About thirty by twenty? Make it a Morland if you feel like it. The pond, the church and the Prentice House. You know the

sort of thing – plenty of thick dark varnish. I've got a very good prospect in mind who won't be over here for a month.'

The girl made a mental calculation before answering.

'It would take that long,' she said. 'Varnishes have to dry properly and then it has to be baked till it cracks nicely. I've got about four half-finished but they're all what I call quickies. They wouldn't suit.' She flicked a direct glance at the other woman. 'You wouldn't try passing it for real?'

'Just a sucker's price, my dear,' she said. 'I never guarantee anything as genuine except the wood carvings and anyone can see they're hand done. I shall get what I can for this one when I see how he shapes up as a buyer. I'll come clean about it with you: fifty-fifty and nothing to be agreed in advance. OK? Are you off now?'

Eliza Jane hesitated. 'Well, I was,' she said, 'but you've just reminded me of something I heard out of the corner of my ear this morning when I was talking to Ben in the Woolpack. Someone has been missing from home for a couple of days and his landlady is wondering if he's gone off on the toot and should she do anything about it. Or so they say.'

Mrs Webster turned her head sharply.

'Not little Trump, then. So who?'

'Someone I've never heard of. His name is Walker – Lemmy Walker, I think they said – and he teaches at the Carders' school for Juniors. Has he been bobbing his head up, or speaking out of turn?'

'Now that is news,' said Mrs Webster.

The two men who were sitting in the hazy morning sunlight on the terrace of the Hôtel de Paris in Monte Carlo appeared to have nothing in common except for the fact that they were both English. The older, a shrivelled bird-like figure wearing a linen jacket and a discoloured panama hat which had evidently been preserved at the back of a wardrobe against the owner's return to the south of France, might have been a clergyman on holiday or the senior partner of a legal firm. Mr Marcus Fuller was in fact a house agent and a dealer in property.

His companion, a lump of flesh, solid as a sack of sand, favoured an overbright blazer and fawn trousers. An unkind guess would have placed him as a North Country man, possibly a butcher,

but although Augustine Marchant owned several shops, including a butcher's, he had never handled a carcass in his life, and his voice in moments of stress betrayed his native Suffolk. He sat now, an arm on the balustrade, a John Collins in his hand, with his back to the hotel scanning the morning trickle of tourists into the Casino.

'As mad as a flaming coot,' he said. 'I've always known it. And now you can see it for yourself.'

The older man sniffed. He spoke in the dry clipped tones of the true pedant.

'The Redcars have always enjoyed that reputation. They cultivate it, so to speak, as if it were a rare cactus or a special breed of Siamese cat. Her ladyship is no exception. Eccentric, if you like. But not mad – or only nor' nor' east in my opinion. There's method in it, Gus, if you take the trouble to look for it.'

Marchant grunted dismissively.

'Trotting into that clip joint at this hour in the morning regular as clockwork is mad if you ask me. Stark staring raving nuts. Why does she do it?'

'Because she wins. Housekeeping money, you know – nothing very much, but enough for the morning shopping.'

'If she's got a system why doesn't she clean up with it? I spent a packet trying to get my own off the ground and came away with a hole in my pocket. That proves she's mad – if it needed proving. She's a fairly rich woman yet she spends her mornings – her *mornings*, not her evenings, you realise – in that dreary hole. Round the bend, like I said.'

Mr Marcus Fuller did not reply until his friend had turned back towards their table.

'Her system is almost infallible,' he observed casually. 'A lot of people here – mostly English women – live by it. It is extremely dull, foolproof, and tolerated by the authorities because it dresses the house – keeps a table going in the mornings when the coach parties come in and want to see real gamblers in action.'

'You back on the column – a two-to-one chance – and go on doubling your stake until you make a win. Then you come away with enough money – just – for the groceries or your hair-do or whatever your needs for the day are. All it requires is patience, a little capital and a total lack of interest in gambling. It wouldn't suit *you*.'

Mr Fuller sipped thoughtfully at his *paradis terrestre*, the brightly coloured fruit drink of the hotel.

'It's her health that interests me, if you recall, not her mental state.'

'Well?'

'I've made some enquiries whilst you've been disporting yourself. At eighty, you wouldn't expect her to be strong on the wing. She's frail, but still quite active, her concierge says. Sees a doctor regularly – a man who specialises in heart conditions, I'm told. A shock, I suppose, would be more dangerous than a chill. That fact may become important in certain eventualities.'

Marchant's full-blooded complexion deepened under his newly acquired sunburn. He looked back towards the steps of the casino where a fresh coach load of tourists was streaming towards the avenue of fruit machines which flanked the entrance to the gaming rooms. He shook himself, emptied his glass, and, after a pause, produced a sheet of folded paper from a notecase.

'This came yesterday,' he remarked. 'I didn't happen to use my room last night or I'd have had it sooner. As it is, I'd only just read it before you appeared. I don't like the sound of it.'

He skimmed the letter across the table.

'From Clarissa. She's a good girl – on the sharp side. I like 'em like that. In business, that is.'

Mr Fuller changed his glasses from a leather case in his breast pocket. He picked up the sheet and examined it with a professionalism which mysteriously transmuted it from a mere letter into a document. It was dated but without preamble.

I think you should know that Lemmy Walker the school-master has just re-appeared here after being missing for nine days. There was no wild fuss about this because of the school holidays and he mostly looks after himself though he lodges, in two private rooms, with the Thorntons – the one who used to work in the store. Said goodnight to them on the Friday at about ten and told them he was going for a walk. *Very* strange, I thought. No toothbrush or pyjamas, says Mrs T., and didn't turn up to two meetings – Ratepayers Protection and Free Youth Club, who are a bunch of commies anyhow. Usually he shoots his mouth off at both, they say. Mrs T. says he walked in just before breakfast

yesterday, unshaven and clothes torn, she thinks brambles, and face scratched. Not a word could she get out of him. *Nine days*. If you can take time off from being a dirty old man, do tell Mr F senior about it. He might know something, which is more than I do. Have fun.

C.

P.S. My favourite scent is *Ma Griffè*.

Marchant waited ponderously, allowing the information time to be digested. His voice had a belligerent edge.

‘Well, what do you know about that?’

The older man doubled the paper precisely and unfolded it for a second reading.

‘A question I might have asked you in other circumstances. If it is significant at all, it is rather disturbing.’

‘Not you, then. Not me. Not Simon, surely? Who else? The new boy?’

Marcus Fuller considered the question and gave it unconditional discharge.

‘More than improbable. He has no interest in the subject and even less information. We have all seen to that. But if Mrs Webster has her facts correctly co-ordinated – and despite her pulchritude I would describe her as an astute creature – then we are presented with a most peculiar alternative.’

‘Meaning what? Take five from five and the answer is nothing, or it was when I was at school.’

‘In that case,’ said Mr Fuller, tilting his panama so far forward that it appeared to rest on his eyebrows, ‘the original premise has been inaccurately stated.’

He peered through narrowed eyes beyond the line of American cars lounging opulently under the palm trees.

‘Lady Prunella is leaving already after her morning stint. A single throw must have been productive. As you say, or infer, we can rule her out. You have no suggestion to make – no more of an idea?’

‘I just don’t like it. It’s as simple as that.’

Mr Fuller consulted the slim golden watch on his wrist and a page of notes in microscopic writing at the back of a diary which he produced from his hip pocket.

'I could be back in Lindsay Carfax in time for dinner if I stirred myself. One of us at least should keep an eye open. Simon will have all the facts but he will not have gone further. He will feel guilty because he should have written to me, or called me, rather than leaving it to an inquisitive woman. My young brother is an idle man in some ways – he lacks my initiative.'

'You take it all that seriously? I do myself, but . . .'

'Yes,' said the elder Fuller. 'On reflection, I do. We're all getting old, Gus – reaching the tricky age when our guard is down and we are inclined to doze. Just the time for fresh blood to appear, and from an unexpected direction. If someone else is starting to play at *Nine Days' Wonders* then it must be taken very seriously indeed.'

He stood up.

'The delectable Miss Annabelle – I think I recall the name correctly – will have exhausted you and your pocket by the end of the week, unless you have a most improbable run of luck at the tables. By then I will know a little more about Walker's escapade. I may even persuade him to discuss it.'

'And supposing he shuts up like a clam? Others did in their time.'

'Then there is a new factor. If you were a mathematician instead of a grocer you would call it X. We can't afford it, Gus, as you should know better than anyone. It will have to be identified and cut off before it develops. I shall catch the afternoon Caravelle. Give your inamorata my kindest regards.'

'I don't go for mysteries. You do. That's the difference between a policeman and a nosey parker in one word – well, say seven.'

Superintendent Charles Luke of the Criminal Investigation Department was indulging himself in a favourite relaxation, a perennial attempt to take a rise out of an old friend. He was sitting in the private bar of the *Platelayers Arms*, a cabin perched above the saloon with a long window looking down upon the general customers. The hostelry itself had survived destruction by a quirk of town planning and reconstruction. Outside there was devastation. Mechanical dinosaurs chewed vast caverns out of the London clay, drills rattled mercilessly and concrete pylons which would soon support an arterial flyover were already dwarfing the little triangle of Victorian dwellings which included the public

house. By day, the whole area symbolised progress at its most repulsive; but by seven in the evening, the Platelayers Arms, as peaceful as it had been in 1898 when it was first opened, contained only a handful of regulars.

Mr Albert Campion provided a contrast to the dynamic energy of the superintendent. Few heads turned when he came into a room and his eyes, behind his large horn-rimmed spectacles, suggested that whatever thought was in process it was nothing of immediate importance. Grey hair had brought a certain distinction to his thin face but those who did not know him dismissed him, sometimes to their cost, as a vague nonentity.

‘A mystery to me,’ said Luke, conjuring an amorphous shape into the air by fluttering his hands, ‘is a pain in the neck, meaning leg-work; reporting in triplicate and prodding strangers until they don’t know if it’s Wappity Goorie night in Peru or the wife’s birthday. Quite different for you. For you it’s like a fat brown trout’ – he made a cast with an imaginary rod – ‘or a rare species of butterfly. If they get away, well, too bad. There’s always the chance of better luck next time.’

Mr Campion smiled. ‘I thought,’ he said apologetically, ‘that you didn’t deal in mysteries as a rule. Safe-breaking, racketeering, swindling, confidence trickery – these things may be complicated but they’re not mysteries to you?’

‘Try telling that to the A.C.’ Luke pulled down the corners of his mouth and ran a finger along an invisible but well-clipped moustache. ‘You’d find yourself top of the list for retirement. The only mysteries I like are those I hear about second-hand – nothing to do with me. Then I can sit back and let the next man do the worrying. Like the item I’m bringing you right now with a large Scotch and as sure as I’m riding this giraffe.’

‘I thought you were leading up to something.’

‘I was. None of my business, thank you, but it concerns you in a way.’

‘How?’

‘We’ll come to that. This is a piece of local gossip I picked up last week from an old pal called Bill Bailey who’s head of regional crime, East Anglia. We were talking shop, or he was, after a conference of some sort at Cambridge. You know that area – we both do, come to that. He was talking about Lindsay Carfax. Ever been there?’

Mr Campion cast his mind back. 'In my youth,' he said. 'It's a show place, all old oak. Shakespeare's birthplace, Anne Hathaway's cottage and Cockington Forges by the dozen. Once a flourishing wool town in the days when monopolies were first invented, which is why it's nearly all Elizabethan rather than Tudor or earlier. Picture postcards and dainty cottage teas for the tourist trade. Have I missed anything?'

'Quite a packet.' Luke assumed the tone of a guide rattling out the phrases as if they had been worn smooth by parrot repetition. 'Birthplace of Esther Wickham, 1821 to 1872, bracketed by many critics with Charlotte Bronte and Jane Austen, author of *Jonathan Prentice* whose fictional home may be seen on our left as we drive by the Carders' Hall, central architectural gem of the village containing many unique features. On our right the residence and workshop of Josiah Humble, died 1794, inventor of Humble's Box, admission two shillings. The tour will be resumed after a short interval for refreshment. I thank you one and all for your kind attention.'

He paused to empty his glass. 'You get the picture? You should. I went there myself to take it.'

'Vividly,' said Mr Campion. 'There must have been a strong magnet to draw you there. Not a mystery by any chance? I thought you didn't go for them.'

Luke eased the inside of his collar and shrugged his formidable shoulders.

'Not when they're dumped on my plate,' he admitted. 'But I had a couple of hours free after the conference, so I drove back that way. Bill Bailey made me curious – like a gossip old woman.' He parted invisible curtains and peered through the gap with avaricious eyes. 'I couldn't resist looking over the other chap's fence. Not that he's preserving the game there, if you follow me. If I must come clean, I'm interested because he isn't – he's only got two pairs of hands he says and they're both full.'

'And what did you find?'

'Quite a basinful.' Luke carried two glasses to the little bar where Mrs Chubb, the landlady, was presiding and refilled them. 'This isn't classified information, you know. Nothing that anyone couldn't discover in a good morning session at the Woolpack, which is the name of the local at Carfax. Ancient history most of it.'

He sat down as if he were chairing a meeting, opening a folio and straightening an imaginary paper with the flat of his hand.

‘Carfax isn’t run by the parish council, the rating authority, the sanitary inspector and the local rozzer as you might suppose. They’re there all right and consider themselves pretty fancy.’ His cheeks inflated to create a multi-chinned worthy. ‘The real bosses are the Carders – something to do with wool, four hundred years back. They wound stuff on cards, I suppose; hence the Carders’ Hall and the Carders’ School, now a primary. All tied up with heredity and tradition and no doubt enough mumbo-jumbo to keep the Antediluvian Order of Emus happy for a year. Turn to the East, bang your head on the floor and repeat “Ichabod is my Uncle” three times after me.

‘All very comical if you’ve a mind to it but these boys are very fly customers – they’re right on the ball. Boiled down, it comes to this: they’re a syndicate who run this place – which makes a packet – with their own rules. One way or another they probably own most of it. You couldn’t sell a twopenny postcard in Carfax without their written authority. Any undesirable publicity, anything to spoil the image and you’re out – bingo – slap on your backside.’

‘You destroy my fondest illusion, Charles. Sordidly commercial, perhaps; but not criminal.’

‘Wait for it.’ Luke was beginning to glow. ‘Listen to this little lot. Apart from old wives’ tales and a little item thirty years or so back I’d have treated as murder if it had cropped up in my manor, they’re still active – or so the locals think. Last year there was a summer invasion of longhaired deadbeats, and not the best of the species. There’s an arty colony down there and it started innocently enough with a group of swinging Morris dances, pop versions of “Blind Man’s Turnip” – that sort of thing. What with it being fine weather for sleeping rough and the group being quite well known in their way, the real hippy locusts descended and began to make the place look like Piccadilly Circus on a Saturday night. Not quite demanding with menaces from the innocent tourists but as near as a toucher. Damned bad for business, according to the Woolpack.

‘They say in Carfax – or they did in the couple of hours I was there – that things in those parts go by nines. Nine acres, nine crows, nine pins I shouldn’t wonder. Say a word out of turn

and you vanish for nine days and come back not knowing what year it is. The tale is that the word got round that those layabouts had been given nine days to clear out – or else. None of them took the slightest notice until the ninth day when a couple of them were found dead in a barn. Overdose of drugs apparently. They were most of them on LSD or pot or stronger stuff but this was something very strong indeed and no one knew who had peddled it. Three more were carted off to hospital. Bill Bailey's boys came down in strength, and within a week there wasn't a hippy for miles. It didn't make headlines because some other tale was getting all the silly season billing – a two-headed monster in the Serpentine or a flying saucer seen over Tunbridge Wells.'

'The Carders got the credit?'

'That's the idea – or it was Bill Bailey's anyhow – but he didn't get to first base with it. For a start, they don't really know who the present Carders are. They were always a secretive lot, doing quite a bit of good in their heyday – the school for example – but as autocratic as the bosses of a closed shop in the Censors' Union. The only figure they are sure about is Lady Prunella Redcar, over eighty, reputed to be bonkers and living in the south of France.'

'All the Redcars are mad,' said Mr Campion unemotionally. 'I'm distantly related to them.'

'Are you, chum?' Luke was unabashed. 'I can't say I'm surprised. I haven't finished yet.'

'Some stop press news?'

'That's just about the size of it. A chap by the name of Lemuel Walker, a schoolmaster who sounds a right chip-on-the-shoulder merchant, had started to shoot his mouth off. "Get with it, boys! The twentieth century is nearly over!" Not a popular message in Lindsay Carfax. He disappeared through a trap door as if he was being shaved by Sweeney Todd.'

'For nine days?'

Luke snapped his fingers.

'Give the gentleman a coconut. Exactly nine days. He turned up last Monday week looking as if he'd been dragged through a hedge backwards, resigned from a couple of trouble-mongering societies where he'd been a ball of fire and refused a blind word of explanation. Bill Bailey who got the story from the local copper

sent a lad to see him. He stuck to it that he'd decided at ten o'clock one night to go off on a walking tour and he reasoned that a man over twenty-one and a taxpayer was entitled to do as he bloody well pleased. He'd a black eye and sticking plasters all over his face to prove it.

'Now that, chum, is what I'd call a mystery. By all the rules there's an ordinary little anti-establishment runt – an issue job – who's been presented with a solid-gold hallmarked 25-carat grievance on a plate. A perfect chance to scream blue murder and "Follow me, comrades! To the barricades!" What does he do? Tells someone he's very sorry, sir, and he'll never break bounds again. It's funny . . . not ha-ha but super-peculiar.'

Mr Campion pushed his spectacles back on to the bridge of his nose and took a long drink as an aid to rumination.

'The Hooded Brotherhood descended on him with their black grabbers, held him in a secret dungeon until he'd seen the error of his way and then returned him to his landlady not quite as good as new? An old-fashioned suggestion, but it fits. Do you have a better one?'

'If I – or Bill Bailey come to that – could improve on it I wouldn't be telling tales out of school. As it is, there's no complaint, nothing to make a song and dance about and will the arm of the law kindly keep its long nose off the private footpath. Message ends.'

'Not quite,' said Mr Campion. 'At the start of this gothic rigmarole you said it concerned me in a way. Apart from Prunella Redcar, who I think is my great aunt thrice removed and hasn't seen me since my Christening so far as I know, I can't see any connection.'

Luke laughed. 'You've got too many relations to keep track of them all. There's a girl living down there earning a comfortable living by turning out paintings of the place by the dozen. A very choice little item for anyone's notebook.' He sketched a well-curved figure in the air. 'Her name is Eliza Jane Fitton. Do you know her?'

Mr Campion raised his eyebrows and stared blankly into the saloon bar. 'Eliza Jane,' he said at length. 'My wife's – Amanda's – niece. She left home to seek her fortune about three years ago and nobody thought she'd have the slightest difficulty about it, whatever she decided to do. As I recall she is that sort of girl.'

Superintendent Luke looked at his watch and indicated that he would accept a final drink. 'I'm glad about that,' he said. 'Her boyfriend, Ben Judd, is the only other name I was given as a chap who might be a Carder.'