

Chapter 1 An Indigestible Christmas

Amelia Chaytor looked at the table in consternation, and made a swift survey of the room for places of concealment. Heavens above, she thought. I knew Christmas dinner would be an ordeal, but my imagination never prepared me for this. For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful . . .

She had accepted the invitation to spend this Christmas Day of 1796 with her friends Miss Godfrey and Miss Roper with some reluctance; only her genuine affection for the ladies had overcome her experience of their cooking. She just hoped that their servant had been able to make some of the food, and at least part of the meal would be as enjoyable as the ladies' company. If not; well, she had spotted several handy pots and a vase which might serve as receptacles for the more inedible items.

A groaning board is not usually a literal statement, she thought, as she studied the elderly, sloping dining table. She moved quickly towards the uphill end of the board and chose a seat as close as was polite to the struggling fire. Miss Roper's two nieces followed her, wrapping their shawls more tightly across their shoulders as they entered the room. Both had recently returned to England after several years in India; one was a widow whose husband had died in Calcutta, the other had returned in advance of her husband, who had been posted back to the East India Company's offices in London. Both felt the winter weather keenly.

Their hostesses fluttered in after them, Miss Roper moving to stand at the higher end of the table and Miss Godfrey at the lower. Mrs Chaytor wondered if the more robust Miss Godfrey had chosen this place in order to catch anything that slid off the table.

A tureen of soup, redolent of burnt onions, stood at the higher end of the board. The other end was occupied by a fish covered in green artificial scales and surrounded by what looked like seaweed. Various things encased in pastry marched down each side of the table, its centre commanded by a boar's head – more likely, that of a pig – whose rather collapsed visage was crowned with holly, ivy and crab-apples.

'How festive it all looks,' exclaimed one of the nieces. The other guests murmured similar sentiments, gazing at the quantities of greenery and ribbon festooning the pictures and hanging perilously close to burning candles.

'We do like to decorate for Christmas,' said Miss Roper, 'and of course everything stays up until Twelfth Night so we have a lovely long time to enjoy our festive house. So much more cheerful in winter; particularly with all the cold and ice. It has been a terrible winter, has it not?'

Everyone agreed. The winter had indeed been bitterly cold. Down here on Romney Marsh they had been largely free of the snow that lay thick and white on the downs further inland, but even at midday the land was still covered with ice and frost. 'We can be snug inside with reminders that the green leaves *will* come again in spring,' said Miss Godfrey. 'Reverend Braithwaite, who was with us here in St Mary in the Marsh before Reverend Hardcastle, said that our decorations were pagan, but we are pleased our present rector does not share such Quakerish views.'

'No one could accuse the rector of being Quakerish,' said Mrs Chaytor.

'And it is a very particular pleasure to have our dear visitors from the East Indies to share our celebrations,' said Miss Roper to her nieces. 'So very different for you, my dears; we are eager to hear about what decorations and food you had for festivities in India. I suppose it must have been hot? How strange to have Christmas when it is warm; no snow and ice for you! And we have been truly grateful for your advising us about the *currey* sauce for

the eggs. You must try some, Mrs Chaytor, for it is most delicious, and invigorating. We were quite surprised that we could obtain the necessary spices from Rye.'

'Perhaps we should be seated now, dear,' said Miss Godfrey, drily.

'Oh, yes, yes, we must have the soup before it cools or it will lose its savour.'

When tasted, the soup bore out all the promise of its odour. Mrs Chaytor drank the generous portion served out by Miss Roper as quickly as possible, keen to move on to something more palatable. The fish, surprisingly, proved quite tasty once its dressings had been removed, and the eggs with currey sauce were also good, although Mrs Chaytor noticed Miss Godfrey's eyes water as she tasted them; chilli and Indian spices were a novelty here on Romney Marsh.

'To be sure,' said Mary, Miss Roper's younger niece, 'I have not cooked a *currey* sauce myself, but I had the receipt from our cook in Calcutta. Most of our servants there were so willing and helpful.'

Her remark sparked the inevitable discussion at all middle-class dinner tables about servants and the quality, or otherwise, of their work. The nieces told some amusing tales about the difficulty of directing servants when there is no common language, and Mrs Chaytor related some of her own experiences in managing diplomatic households in Paris and Rome. Despite the food, the evening was becoming enjoyable.

Miss Godfrey and Miss Roper praised the loyalty and hard work of their maid, Kate, and reminisced about the elderly gardener and general man-of-work whom they had suffered for many years until his death in the autumn. 'Our new lad is a great improvement,' said Miss Godfrey. 'He had been one of the Fanscombes' grooms, and came to us after old Albert died. Kate and he work together very well, and I must say that the garden is looking much better, even if we do have to check that he is digging up weeds and not plants. Still, he is a prodigious digger, and we shall set him to making a new sparrow-grass bed once the soil becomes workable.'

'Of course he misses the horses he worked with up at New Hall,' said Miss Roper. 'Our poor old Nellie is no match for the magnificent beasts that the Fanscombes had in their stables.'

'Speaking of New Hall,' said Mrs Chaytor, 'is it true that the two men who came to the village the day before yesterday are living there?'

'Kate and the lad Jed assure us that they do indeed appear to be staying in the Hall,' replied Miss Godfrey. 'Their horses are in the stables, although the house is still shuttered, and smoke has been seen issuing from at least one of the chimneys.'

'It must be a bleak place to live, given that the house has lain empty for so many months,' observed Mrs Chaytor.

'We sent them a little note asking if they would like to join us for our Christmas feast,' said Miss Roper, 'for certain there cannot be much comfort at the Hall. There are no servants since that dreadful caretaker went off to Lydd on Friday past. But sadly we have had no reply from the gentlemen. We must hope that they have some food and warmth at the Hall.'

'Yes, indeed,' said Miss Godfrey, 'for this is surely not the winter to be without sufficient fuel. Our own supplies are growing a little low, although Kate assures us that there is plenty to be had outside, if you know where to look.'

Mrs Chaytor glanced at the small, struggling fire beside her and hoped that Kate did indeed know where to look, for there was hardly enough wood in the hearth to last until the end of the meal. 'It is rather puzzling that anyone should come down to New Hall at this season,' she said, 'especially with the caretaker having gone, and no one there to look after them.'

This line of conversation was interrupted as Kate and Jed, the latter in a badly fitting suit of black coat and baggy breeches, entered the dining room to remove the first course and then bring in the second. As they departed, Miss Godfrey asked Jed to bring more wood for the dying fire. The lad mumbled something that seemed to be agreement.

An enormous plum pudding with a large sprig of holly sprouting from its top was perhaps the most unsurprising, though still startling, element of the next course. A formidable rib of beef provided balance at the other end of the table, and the rest of the space was filled with jellies both savoury and sweet, coloured orange and red and green, and what Mrs Chaytor recognised as the ladies' attempt at a *croque-en-bouche*. Where, she wondered, had they encountered this quintessentially French sweet dish?

Conversation paused while everyone sorted out their selection of the delights on offer. The beef proved to be quite burnt on the outside and frequently raw on the inside, while the *croque-en-bouche* illustrated the ladies' usual heavy hand with pastry. The savoury jellies helped to disguise the rawness of the beef, however, and the sweet ones were unexceptionable. Those must have been made by Kate, thought Mrs Chaytor.

As the company dealt with their food choices the conversation turned once again, in that particularly English way, to a combination of the weather and gossip about their neighbours. 'I do hope that last night's thaw lasted long enough to make the rector's early morning journey to Ashford an easy one,' said Miss Godfrey, 'for the cold has come down again this forenoon and it is frozen hard once more. For how long is he away, do you know, Mrs Chaytor?'

'For some days, I believe. I imagine he will return to St Mary to take service on Sunday morning.'

'Oh, I am certain that he will do that,' said Miss Roper. 'You know his strong views on rectors fobbing off awkward services onto poor curates, especially at this time of year.'

'He is pretty much alone in those views,' said Miss Godfrey, severely. 'The rector of Ivychurch has not taken a service in his parish for many, many months. That is why we churchgoers have to endure the vile odour of that old man from Brenzett, for he insists on what he calls a "proper priest" when he goes to church.'

'Well, at least he comes to church regularly, which is more than many do in St Mary,' said Miss Roper, ignoring the loud clearing of the throat from the opposite end of the table. 'Most only want the rector when there is someone to be buried, or to visit them when they are ill. Or, more rarely, to marry them or baptise their child; and they don't always wait for the marriage before having the baptism.'

'Not everyone who has faith chooses to go to church every Sunday, my dear,' said Miss Godfrey, gently but firmly.

Miss Roper looked up at Mrs Chaytor in sudden guilt. 'Oh, my dear Mrs Chaytor, I was not thinking of you at all! Please take no offence at my words. It is only that the rector has been so busy looking after people over the past month, making sure that no one goes cold or hungry. And then to have only six people at Christmas Eve midnight service! It did make me so cross on his behalf.'

'It was very cold, aunt,' one of her nieces murmured.

'Indeed it was,' said Mrs Chaytor, 'and Reverend Hardcastle appears to care little about the size of his congregation. I am certain that even if he found himself alone on Sunday, he would still say the services.'

'I am sure you are correct, Mrs Chaytor,' said Miss Godfrey. 'Mind, there have been times in the past when he did find it a struggle to concentrate on Sunday mornings, so bad was his head. But it seems to me that in recent months there has been less of that trouble.'

'Perhaps his new legal responsibilities have occasioned a more sober approach to life,' suggested Miss Roper. 'Being a justice of the peace is a serious matter.'

‘I am not certain that Reverend Hardcastle’s appointment as a temporary J. P. is the reason for his more measured manner of life,’ said Mrs Chaytor, ‘but whatever that reason may be, I think we must all agree that he is in much better health, despite the cold and the hard work he has been undertaking of late.’

‘And I think we are very fortunate to have him,’ said Miss Godfrey, firmly. ‘After the events of last spring, it is good to know there is someone *reliable* looking after the affairs of the district.’

‘I wonder if he has met the two gentlemen at New Hall,’ said Miss Roper, returning to their earlier conversation. ‘Has he said anything to you, Mrs Chaytor?’

Amelia shook her head. ‘No. But then I have not seen the reverend except in passing for several days.’

One of the nieces sneezed. Miss Godfrey apologised for the chill in the room. ‘I wonder what is taking Jed so long with that wood? Do you suppose that the fire in the drawing room will be any better? At least we can all sit closer to it. Shall we withdraw?’

As the noise of a banging door and running footsteps penetrated the room, she continued, ‘Ah, perhaps we shall have some warmth at last,’ but her words were cut off by loud cries from the corridor. The dining room door burst open and the maidservant tumbled in, staring in shock.

‘Oh, oh, oh, Miss Godfrey! Miss Godfrey! I saw someone trapped in the ice up at New Hall stables! I think he might be dead! Jed says he is dead! He must be dead, to be frozen into the ice like that, face down. For certain, he must be dead!’

The man was indeed face down in the horse pond next to the stables behind New Hall, and he was certainly dead. Mrs Chaytor looked at the body in the dim light of the lantern, and shivered in her fur-lined cloak; not from the cold, but from pity and sorrow at the death of the unknown man before her. Lifting the lantern higher, she saw marks on the frozen ground that suggested he had crawled here from the direction of the house. No mercifully swift death then, but one filled with pain and fear. She shivered again.

New Hall was silent and dark. No flicker of light showed from its windows. There was no obvious trace of the other man who had ridden into St Mary’s only two days ago. The silence around the house was complete.

Mrs Chaytor turned to Jed, who was standing and looking steadily at the body in the ice. He had said nothing since he and Kate burst into the dining room; Kate had done all the talking and exclaiming. ‘Jed, we must get Mr Stemp to see to this.’ Stemp was the parish constable, who would need to take charge until the rector’s return. ‘Please find him and bring him here as soon as you may.’

Miss Godfrey had insisted on accompanying Mrs Chaytor and Jed to New Hall. Now she put a gentle hand on the younger woman’s shoulders and said softly: ‘*Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace according to thy word.* I hope that the poor soul has found peace in death, for his last moments cannot have been quiet.’

Chapter 2 The Body in the Ice

In the cold, grey light of a December morning the scene had nothing of last night's remembered horror, only a certain bleak tragedy. The body lay face down, the torso frozen into the ice of the pond, the legs and hips resting on hard ground. The man's arms, so far as could be seen in the ice, were twisted around his head. He wore an overcoat, beneath which were a pair of shabby black worsted breeches and thick stockings. One of his black half-boots had been wrenched off and lay on the frozen ground at the edge of the pond; the exposed stockinged foot was stiff and rimed with ice. He had, thought Mrs Chaytor irrelevantly, quite small feet.

The wind that whistled around the eaves of the stable block was strengthening; overhead, the weather vane clattered uneasily on its iron mount. The wind had a tang of iron, laced with salt. Joshua Stemp, the parish constable, rubbed his mittened hands together and scowled at the body. 'I wish that doctor would hurry up.'

Mrs Chaytor turned to look at the house behind them. 'The caretaker has not returned?'

'He has family down in Lydd, ma'am,' said Stemp. 'He'll have gone down there for Christmas.'

His companion, a fisherman named Jack Hoad, grunted. 'If that's so, he'll be blind drunk 'til New Year and beyond.'

'We'll go down and drag him back, you and me.'

Mrs Chaytor held up a hand. 'I think that may be the doctor.'

They heard the sound of a pony and cart, clopping hooves and iron-rimmed wheels rattling against the hard ground, turning off the main New Romney road and up the drive to the house. A moment later the cart pulled up in the yard behind New Hall and halted, the pony shaking itself and blowing steam from its nostrils. Mrs Chaytor walked to meet the doctor as he stepped carefully down from the box, the yard icy beneath his feet.

'Dr Mackay. It is good of you to come out. I trust we have not ruined your Christmas.'

'Not at all,' said the doctor, bowing. He was a short, stocky Scot, heavily muffled like them all against the wind. He looked at the two men standing by the frozen horse pond, and then back to Mrs Chaytor. They were not well acquainted, but the doctor knew her for an unusual and intelligent person. 'Where is the body, then?'

She pointed, and turned to walk with him towards the horse pond. 'I imagined you would need help in moving him, so I have summoned the parish constable. I have also sent my groom to fetch Reverend Hardcastle from Ashford. I should think he will return directly, tomorrow or even tonight.'

'Hardcastle is in Ashford? I didn't know the man travelled anywhere. He's sedentary as a mollusc.'

'He went to spend Christmas with an old friend,' said Mrs Chaytor, patiently.

'Didn't know he had friends, either. Right, what have we here?'

The other three waited while the doctor circled the body, testing the ice once or twice with his boot. 'Frozen solid,' he said. 'Not surprised, given the cold last night. Any ideas as to who he might be?'

'We think he might be one of two men who arrived at the house three days ago,' said Mrs Chaytor. 'There is no sign of the other man,' she added, 'and their horses are missing from the stables.' She pointed to the stable doors, hanging open and swinging uneasily in the wind.

‘Ah,’ said the doctor. ‘Intriguing.’ He looked down at the body. ‘Well, we’ll need to cut him out of the ice, and then get him onto a table so I can examine him. Somewhere out of this blasted wind, for preference. Is there a place where we can take him?’

Hoad jerked his thumb at the house. ‘The doors are locked,’ said Mrs Chaytor. ‘All of them. I have tried them,’ she added.

The men looked at her, then back at the body at their feet. ‘Tim Luckhurst at the Star will have empty storerooms,’ said Stemp. ‘We could use one of those,’ and he shot Mrs Chaytor a meaningful look.

She sighed inwardly, knowing she was not wanted. ‘I will go and ask him,’ she said.

‘Thank you indeed, Mrs Chaytor,’ said the doctor. ‘Stemp, there should be axes in the wood store. Fetch a couple, and let’s cut this fellow out.’

She heard the sound of axes splintering the ice around the body as she walked down the drive, and shivered again; this time, she told herself firmly, it really was the cold. As she turned towards the village the wind increased again, keening over the flat Marsh and tugging at her hood and overcoat. Its cold hardness made her eyes water, and her nose was streaming by the time she reached the Star.

Luckhurst the landlord came out from the back, his eyebrows rising slightly at the sight of Mrs Chaytor; ordinarily she was not a frequenter of public houses. She explained her errand briefly in her light, slightly drawling voice, and his expression changed. He knew about the body, of course. Everyone in the village must know by now, or at least everyone who was awake; gossip was Kate’s one great talent in life, and she exercised it ceaselessly.

‘Of course, there are storerooms we use only at certain times,’ Luckhurst said guilelessly. ‘I’ll show them into one of those. Here, you are shivering, Mrs Chaytor! Sit you down by the fire and get warm. Bessie! Bring a cup of that coffee for the lady.’

Then there was nothing do but sit and wait. Bessie the landlord’s daughter, a lively and intelligent girl of sixteen, brought coffee and Mrs Chaytor thanked her with a smile; she knew Bessie well, and sometimes employed her as an extra maidservant.

‘How convenient that your father has an empty storeroom,’ she said drily. That prompted a conspiratorial laugh. Some of Luckhurst’s storerooms, as they both knew, were only in use on certain nights around the new moon, when boats came gliding over the sea from France thirty miles away, landing illicit cargoes of gin and brandy and wine, silk and scent, lace and tobacco. Those cargoes had many resting places before they continued their journey to the markets of London; the cellars and storerooms of the Star were one such place.

She heard the men arriving outside with the body. After what seemed a very long time, Dr Mackay came into the common room, blowing on his fingers. ‘That is the coldest work I have done in many a day,’ he said, sitting down. ‘Is that coffee? Bring me a cup, girl, and put some rum in it, if you have any. No? Brandy will do, then. Don’t tell me you haven’t any brandy,’ he added with a heavy attempt at humour.

‘What did you find?’ Mrs Chaytor asked directly.

‘Well, there’s a thing,’ said the doctor. He paused for a moment, looking into the flickering flames of the fire, and blew on his fingers again. ‘Or rather, there’s two things,’ he amended. ‘First, when we got him out of the ice, we found he was an African man.’

‘A black man?’ Mrs Chaytor raised her eyebrows. ‘How unusual. At least, how unusual for St Mary in the Marsh. Where do you suppose he came from? A sailor, perhaps, off a ship from Rye, or Deal?’ But even as she spoke she knew she was wrong; no sailor would ever have worn boots like those.

‘He was not a sailor,’ said Mackay. He glanced at Bessie, hovering behind the bar and eavesdropping shamelessly. Then Stemp and Hoad entered, and she moved away reluctantly to serve them. ‘No, not a sailor,’ the doctor repeated. ‘You see, Mrs Chaytor, when I

examined the body more closely – I don't quite know how to put this – I discovered *he* was not a *he* at all. The body we pulled from the ice was that of a woman.'

Very rarely was Amelia Chaytor lost for words. She was now. She stared at the doctor for a long time her eyes an intense blue as she considered the news. 'That explains the feet,' she said finally.

'I beg your pardon?'

'When I looked at the body lying in the pond, I thought the feet were quite small, for a man. Now I see why.' She looked up at Mackay. 'How did the poor thing die?' she asked.

Mackay regarded her as if he was not sure how much was appropriate to tell her. 'The cause of death was drowning,' he said finally. 'But she had also been struck a very heavy blow on the head. That blow fractured her skull, and I suspect also damaged the brain. It is possible that this blow might have proved fatal.'

'Then how on earth did she come to drown?'

'I cannot answer that, I am afraid. She either found her way to the pond, or was taken there. There was open water; I saw signs that someone had broken the ice earlier in the day, perhaps to water the horses. That is where she met her end.'

'You mean she fell in the water when she was stunned and could not move? Or someone took her to the water and held her under?' Her voice was grave, but quite calm.

Mackay looked at her, thinking again what an unusual woman she was. 'It could be either of those things,' he said at last, 'though I found no injuries on the body itself. Other, that is, than the blow to the head.'

He finished his coffee and rose to his feet. 'Apart from that, I fear there is little I can tell you. You may inform Reverend Hardcastle when he returns that I shall write a report in my capacity as assistant coroner, and forward it to the coroner's office in Maidstone. And of course, I shall send a copy to him.'

'Thank you, doctor.' Mrs Chaytor sat listening to the doctor's footsteps as he walked out into the cold road, and then the sound of hooves and rattling wheels fading away. It needed little effort to imagine those final moments; the woman stumbling and falling, or being pushed, into the icy water and drowning. Was she aware, as she fell, that she was dying? One hoped that the blow had stunned her so thoroughly that she was oblivious; the fear was that it had not.

'What a terrible way for the poor soul to die,' she said to herself.

'It surely is, ma'am,' said Bessie beside her, refilling her coffee cup.

'What would a woman be doing dressed as a man?' Mrs Chaytor wondered.

'Well, ma'am; she must have wanted to escape notice. She might have had a secret errand, or,' and Bessie, who had a fine ear for drama and romance, paused significantly, 'she might have been meeting a lover. New Hall is quiet and out of the way. It'd be a perfect place for a lover's tryst.'

'Bessie,' said Mrs Chaytor briskly, 'you have a very vivid imagination.' But, she thought, that did not necessarily mean the girl was wrong. The same thought had already occurred to her.

The Reverend Marcus Aurelius Hardcastle, rector of St Mary in the Marsh and justice of the peace, returned home late that afternoon, as a winter dusk began to fall over the frozen marsh. He was cold, tired from travelling on icy roads, and in a foul mood. He shouted for his housekeeper as he entered the hall of the rectory, throwing down his hat and stick on a side table, and she came out of the kitchens and snapped back at him. He glared at her, and demanded a pot of hot coffee.

'Coffee?' asked the housekeeper, with pretend incredulity. 'Not port?'

‘When I desire port, Mrs Kemp, I shall inform you. Once you have made the coffee, send John to find Joshua Stemp. Tell him I wish to see him as soon as possible.’

In his study, the rector removed the guard from the fire and blew on the embers, then added a fresh log. Little flames rose up at once, crackling, and the rector bent over them to warm his numbed hands. The journey down from Ashford, exposed to the freezing wind on the seat of a creaking dogcart, had been every bit as hellish as he had expected it would be; but it had been impossible to ignore the urgency in Mrs Chaytor’s letter. He would go and see her, he thought, as soon as he had heard Stemp’s report.

Straightening from the fire, he looked up to see his own reflection in a mirror, and scowled. He saw a thickset man of about forty with the beginnings of jowls, sandy hair that was growing thin on top, and features that were not much improved by his current glowering expression. Ignoring the mirror, he looked around the room, gazing at the bookshelves and worn carpet and noting that two of the chairs needed upholstering. Everything is shabby and falling to bits, he thought, rather like me. He glanced at the mahogany cabinet where, he knew, several bottles of extremely potable cognac rested among his account books, and looked away again.

The parish constable appeared half an hour later, just as the rector was finishing the last of his coffee. He was a small man with a face badly pitted by smallpox and bright, inquiring eyes. Standing before the desk he gave a stiff little bow and said, ‘Sorry if I’m late, reverend.’

‘Sit down,’ said Hardcastle. ‘Do you want some coffee? I can send for Mrs Kemp.’

‘Don’t trouble her on my account, reverend.’

‘Very well,’ said the rector, leaning back in his chair. ‘Now, tell me exactly what has happened.’

He listened in silence to the story of the discovery of the body, its removal to the Star and its examination by Dr Mackay. Only upon hearing that the body was that of a woman did his face change a little. Mrs Chaytor had not mentioned that; but of course, when she wrote to him, she had not known herself.

‘What about the other man who was at New Hall?’ he asked at the end.

‘No sign of him, reverend, and both horses are missing. I’ve spent most of the day knocking on doors up and down the roads to Dymchurch and New Romney, asking if anyone had seen a man with two horses go past yesterday evening.’

‘And had they?’

‘Nah,’ said Stemp with mild contempt. ‘It was Christmas Day. By evening most people were blind drunk, even the children. When I talked to them this afternoon, most were still so hungover they couldn’t remember their own names, let alone what might or might not have happened yesterday.’

Hardcastle frowned. ‘We need a description if we are to establish a search for this man. Did anyone see them the day they arrived? I suppose it is too much to hope that someone saw their faces.’

Stemp shook his head. ‘They arrived after dark, remember, and it was colder than charity. Not many folk were about, and those that were saw two cloaked-up figures on horseback, nothing more. They’d have been muffled up to the eyes anyway, in this weather.’

‘Where is the body now?’

Stemp reached into his pocket and produced a key.

‘Very well,’ said the rector, rising to his feet. ‘Let us go and take a look at her.’

The Star was quiet, most of the village still recovering in one way or another from Christmas. Stemp, carrying a lantern, let them into the storeroom and they approached the body lying on the plain oak table. Joshua Stemp was a kind man, and he had covered the body decently;

now, he held up the lantern and pulled the covering sheet away just enough to allow the rector to see the head and face. 'Here's the wound where she was hit, reverend,' he said, gently lifting the dead woman's head with his free hand.

The rector nodded absently. He looked down to see curling black hair matted with dried blood and some splinters which might have been wood but, by their shape, were more likely to be bone. Any blunt object, wielded with sufficient force, could have cracked her skull. As to what else might have been done to the body; well, Dr Mackay's report would tell him that in due course.

He stood for a while longer, looking at the dead woman. Her face was swollen and the skin dark and blotchy. 'In what position was the body when she was found?'

'Face down,' said Stemp, 'with her arms stretched forward.'

That explained the blotchiness; the rector had learned enough anatomy to know that when the heart stops beating, blood settles in the lower reaches of the body, however it is lying. He pulled the blanket back a little and saw similar swelling and dark blotches on her shoulders. Where the blood had not settled, her skin was a gentle brown, not particularly dark.

He studied the face again. Beneath the swelling she had high, rather prominent cheekbones and full lips; the eyebrows over closed eyes were two fine arches. A young woman, he thought, perhaps five-and-twenty, no more. Where was she from? How had she come to meet her death here in the frozen wastes of Romney Marsh? How; how and why? There was nothing noble about her clothes, piled neatly on a bench at one side of the room. The rector examined these quickly. Worsted breeches and stockings, a man's coat and waistcoat, both of which he thought were rather too large for her, a thick overcoat which unlike the rest of her garments looked to be quite new, though sadly stained with dried blood down the back; a woman's small clothes, thin and worn from long use. The clothes told him nothing; as the doctor had discovered earlier, the pockets were empty save for a few coins, and there was not a single mark or clue to reveal the dead woman's identity.

Outside in the yard, Stemp locked the door once more. The body would need to remain there until the ground thawed enough for a grave to be dug.

'Out of curiosity,' said the rector, 'what were Miss Godfrey and Miss Roper's servants doing up at New Hall?'

'Raiding the woodshed or the coal store, I expect,' said Stemp, cheerfully. 'Nothing new there. People have been doing it ever since the autumn. The caretaker never notices.'

The caretaker, a one-armed alcoholic former sailor named Beazley, probably never looked out of the windows. 'And you have been turning a blind eye to this,' said the rector.

'House is empty, and has been for months. No one will miss a little wood or coal.' Stemp motioned towards the common room. 'I'm popping in for a glass, reverend. Care to join me?'

'No, but thank you.' The rector reached into his pocket for money, which he pressed into Stemp's hand. 'Have one on me. Buy one for Jack too, if he's there, and thank him for his assistance this morning. You did well today, Joshua. I know this is not exactly the job you signed up for.'

'Makes a change from the usual, sir,' said Stemp, and he grinned and walked off towards the common room.

The usual, for a local constable, consisted of catching stray dogs and rounding up vagrants. The former were returned to their owners in exchange for a small fine; the latter, in accordance with long-standing national practice, were hustled over the boundary into the next parish where they would become someone else's problem, although the rector – to the

vehement disapproval of both Stemp and his housekeeper – made sure the vagrants had a hot meal before they took their involuntary departure from St Mary in the Marsh. Stemp insisted that such charity merely encouraged such people to come back. The rector thought he was probably right.

Stemp's duties as constable took up only a small amount of his time, leaving him free to carry on his other trades: by day an honest fisherman, on dark nights he transformed into Yorkshire Tom, leader of the smugglers in this part of Romney Marsh. The rector knew this; Stemp knew that he knew it, and that knowledge remained their shared, unspoken secret.

Hardcastle had appointed Stemp as parish constable on the same day that he had reluctantly accepted the post of justice of the peace. The act was an inspired one. On the one hand he gained a loyal lieutenant; a man who had his ear to the ground and knew what was going on not just in St Mary in the Marsh but up and down the coast. On the other, the local free-traders were reassured that he did not intend to inquire too closely into their activities. There were already two preventive services – the Customs and the Excise – dedicated to the suppression of smuggling, and the rector judged them perfectly capable of carrying on their efforts without his assistance. He reasoned that his tasks as both rector and magistrate would be made much easier if he did not stand in the smugglers' way; and to those who reproached him for not joining in the fight against the smugglers, he gave the official's standard excuse: *not my department*.

Stemp would do his duty well so long as it did not clash with his other interests, and with that Hardcastle was perfectly satisfied. He went to pay his call on Amelia Chaytor.

He knocked at the door of Sandy House, her home. Lucy, the young housekeeper, admitted him at once, shutting the door behind him against the chilly blast of the wind.

'Mrs Chaytor's not in, reverend,' she said. 'She was waiting for you to call. When you didn't come she got impatient and went looking for you. She said she would wait for you at the rectory.'

I can guess what is coming, thought the rector, walking home bent against the wind, the freezing air singing in his ears. Mrs Chaytor had been one of the first to see the body, and now she won't rest until the killer of the young woman is found. She'll poke her nose into an official investigation and make her views plain to everyone, whether they want to hear them or not. She'll go ferreting around looking for information, and like as not will get into trouble.

He found he was smiling.

Amelia Chaytor was waiting for him in his study, seated in one of the chairs before the fire with her hands clasped primly in her lap. She wore a dark gown of fine wool, rather severe in its cut as became a still-young widow. He had never asked her age but guessed she was about thirty. Her dark brown hair was curled loosely under a white bonnet, and she had blue eyes with long, fine lashes, eyes which could grow rather intense when she was deep in thought. She had about her the kind of poise which, as a younger man, the rector had much admired in women; both her carriage and her voice suggested that she once moved in fashionable circles, if not absolutely one of the *ton* then perhaps on its fringes.

She said in her light voice, 'You have rearranged your books.'

The room was full of books, many of them, like the furniture, worn from long usage. 'The fading relics of my past intellectual pretensions,' he said, sitting down opposite her and looking at his bookshelves. 'Yes, I have put them in some sort of order at last. I began rereading Gibbon, and discovered half the volumes were missing. Tracking them down involved taking practically every book off the shelves. I decided I might as well put them back in order.'

‘*The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*? Not exactly a cheerful subject for winter evenings.’

‘Decline and fall have been much on my mind of late,’ he said. ‘We heard more bad news in Ashford. Lord Malmesbury’s peace mission to Paris has failed; the Directory will not even receive him. The Austrians have been beaten in Italy, again. The embers of revolt still glow in Ireland, and French ships have been sighted off the coasts, preparing, it is said, to land troops to support the rebels. France grows daily stronger, and we, it seems, grow weaker.’ He sighed and changed the subject. ‘Has Mrs Kemp offered you refreshment?’

‘I am perfectly content, thank you.’

He regarded her, quietly. ‘This is a very bad business,’ he said at length. ‘I was persuaded to become a justice of the peace against my better judgement. More than ever, I am regretting that decision.’

‘To be honest, I have never been entirely certain why you agreed.’

‘After the events of last June, Lord Clavertye needed someone he could trust. A *steady hand on the tiller*, was how he put it. He was extremely pressing.’

‘I am sure he was. But in my experience, you seldom care what Lord Clavertye thinks, and are even less likely to do what he wants.’

Lord Clavertye, the deputy lord lieutenant of Kent, was an old acquaintance of Hardcastle’s from Cambridge; these days, he thought, Clavertye respects rather than likes me.

‘I suppose I realised he was right,’ he said. ‘Someone had to take this duty, if only to restore some trust in the law after Fanscombe’s disgrace. I was the only logical choice at the time. And, I do owe Clavertye a great deal. He is the patron of this parish, and it was he who found me this living after my own . . . disgrace.’

She nodded. ‘What do you intend to do about the murder of the young woman?’ she asked.

He frowned, staring into the fire. ‘Let us take stock of the situation,’ he said finally. ‘New Hall has been standing empty since June. Then, on the 23rd of December, two unknown people arrived at the house and gained entry. They apparently spent two nights there. At some point on Christmas Day the woman received a savage blow to the back of the head, then shortly afterwards drowned in the horse pond. The other member of the party has disappeared, locking the house and taking both horses with him.’

‘Just a moment. You said, “him”. Why do we assume the other person was a man? If one was a woman dressed as a man, why not the other?’

‘It is possible,’ he conceded. ‘But I suspect it was a man because of the severity of the blow the woman received. Not many women are strong enough to strike a blow of such power. Also . . . one can conceive of reasons why a man might take a woman in disguise alone to a remote house. It is a little harder to imagine a motive for another woman doing so.’

‘But it is possible,’ she said, echoing him. ‘I am not saying you are wrong, merely that we need to keep an open mind.’

‘I yield the point. I have laid out what we do know. Let us now turn to the list of things we do *not* know. We do not know who the dead woman is, where she comes from or why she was here. We do not know the identity of the other person, or where this other person might now be. Most of all, we do not know why he – for the moment, I shall continue to say he – attacked the dead woman.’

‘But you have a theory,’ she said, and waited.

‘I know how it appears,’ Hardcastle said. ‘The woman was enticed to the house, and the man killed her. There might be several motives: a fit of sudden anger, a quarrel, a disagreement over money, or sex. Perhaps the woman knew something, or had something the man wanted, but refused to divulge it. He attacked her out of spite, or in an attempt to beat a

confession from her. The assistant coroner's report will tell us whether there were any other marks on her body.'

'All of that is certainly quite possible,' she said. 'But there is something particular that bothers me.'

'What is it?'

'The boot. One of her boots had been pulled off and was lying near the body. Why?'

'Might it have fallen off?'

'They were half-boots, and snugly fitting. It would have taken an effort to pull it off.'

He remembered the boots and nodded agreement. 'I think someone tried to pull her from the pond,' Mrs Chaytor said, 'and seized her by one leg, and the boot then came away in the other person's hand. That person then dropped the boot and left the scene.'

'But who could that person be? The killer? Why would the killer smash her skull, push her into the water and drown her, and then try to pull her out again?'

'To hide the body?' she asked.

'Then why not go ahead and hide it? Why give up on the attempt, drop the boot and leave the body where it was?'

'Perhaps the killer then heard someone coming, and fled the scene,' she said.

'It was Christmas Day, and bitterly cold. No one would be out and about . . . except perhaps for some of our neighbours coming to take wood from the woodshed, of course. But Joshua has spoken to every household in the parish. No one admits to going to New Hall that day save for the ladies' two servants.'

'Very well. You have rebutted my arguments. Now advance some of your own, so that I may destroy them in turn.'

He smiled a little. 'I admit it is mysterious, and I have no better explanation to offer. In fact, for the moment there are really only two things to be done. I can write to Lord Clavertye and ask him to instigate a wider search for the man who fled New Hall, on the grounds that he is suspected of murder. And, we must of course search the house and grounds for clues as soon as it is light . . .'

The rector paused, staring into the fire again. 'Why *that* house?' he said, half to himself. 'Why of all the remote places to carry a woman to, why choose that ill-starred place? There are plenty of empty houses on Romney Marsh, many even more remote than this. There were only two of them; why did they choose a house so large? Or *did* they choose it? Did they perhaps stumble upon it by accident?'

'They chose it,' she said, 'or one of them did. They had keys to unlock and lock the doors.'

'Of course, of course. Where would they have got the keys?'

'From Mrs Fanscombe, after she left? Might there be some connection to her?'

'You are forgetting that the Fanscombes only leased New Hall,' he reminded her. 'Eugénie Fanscombe terminated the lease when she departed after her husband's death. She was unlikely to keep any reminders of her unhappy time in that house. The keys would likely have been returned to the owners' solicitor—'

The rector stopped for a moment, still staring into the fire. Then he rose and went to his desk, unlocked it and pulled out a letter, which he carried across to Mrs Chaytor and handed to her. She took it, noting the large and ornate seal, of a kind which meant the writer was either a self-important solicitor or a particularly prosperous cheesemonger. She took the letter and read.

ANTHONY JESSINGTON, ESQ
LINCOLN'S INN
LONDON
1st September, 1796.

The Reverend M. A. Hardcastle
 The Rectory
 St Mary in the Marsh
 Kent

The Reverend Hardcastle, Sir,

In the wake of the unhappy events lately occurred involving the last tenant of New Hall, St Mary in the Marsh, it is my duty to resolve certain issues regarding the said estate. I would very much welcome your assistance in this matter.

I have been, in name, legal advisor to the Rossiter family, the owners of New Hall, these past two years or more. During that time I have, to the best of my professional ability, endeavoured to manage the family's estate in this country carefully and with probity, so you may imagine my dismay on being informed of the activities of the late tenant, Mr Fanscombe. I am duty bound to inform the owners of what has transpired, but I have had no fortune in contacting any member of the Rossiter family, who, as I was informed upon taking over their affairs, are currently residing in unknown parts of the Americas. I feel it my duty to attempt to contact interested members of the family, and, as it is not currently within my power to come myself to St Mary in the Marsh due to an indisposition which makes travel inadvisable, I am therefore communicating with your good self.

It is my devout hope that you shall be able to shed some light on any other members of the Rossiter family who are likely to be extant. For example, there might be a junior branch of the family whose names do not appear in my records. I should be very grateful if you could consult any records of baptism, marriage or death that you have, so that I might compare them with my own records to check the accuracy of the latter.

I should also be most grateful if you felt able to provide any further information as to the whereabouts of those family members who went to America. While I have a distaste for what might be described as 'gossip' or 'tittle-tattle' I am hopeful that some of the family may have been in informal communication with persons local to their estate. It is my hope that you, as rector, may be able to gather relevant information in a discreet manner, so as not to arouse any vulgar curiosity in the locale.

I include for your elucidation a list of the family members as I was passed them upon my acquisition of the Rossiter family affairs.

Your faithful servant,

ANTHONY JESSINGTON

'Dear, dear,' said Mrs Chaytor, clicking her tongue. 'Clearly Mr Jessington is not in favour of using one word where ten will do.' She folded the letter and returned it to Hardcastle. 'He wants you to find the Rossiters for him.'

‘Which I have absolutely no intention of doing,’ said the rector, returning the letter to his desk. ‘I have enough on my plate without acting as a solicitor’s runner as well. In any case, there is nothing I could do even were I so inclined. I did consult the registers, and it so happens that there is an Amélie Rossiter buried in the churchyard, but she died more than a quarter of a century ago. Apart from that, there is nothing.’

‘But there is a connection between this letter and the murder,’ she said.

He looked at her. ‘What makes you say that? Woman’s intuition?’

Her eyebrows rose a little. ‘You must be feeling better,’ she said. ‘You are attempting humour. Your sudden recollection of the letter is reason enough to suggest a connection. Have you heard anything further from Anthony Jessington “Esk”?’

The rector shook his head.

‘Suppose he did make contact with the Rossiters after the date of this letter,’ she said, ‘and informed them that their tenants have gone and New Hall is standing empty. And then suppose someone – a member of the family, a friend of the family – decided that a deserted house on Romney Marsh would make an ideal place to bring a woman for a little Christmas sport. And then, because he was angry with her, or tired of her, or because that is what gives him pleasure, he killed her.’

Amelia Chaytor’s eyes, as she looked back at the rector, were steady and brilliant blue. ‘Which means, so long as he is free, he is likely to attack again,’ she said.