

## Praise For *The Body On The Doorstep*

‘a gripping, atmospheric page-turner’ *The Book Bag*

‘An enjoyable murder mystery with engaging characters, nicely observed historical detail and gentle humour.’ *Historical Novel Society*

‘... extremely clever, with numerous twists and turns that kept me constantly guessing right up until the final few pages. Some crime stories can feel predictable and lazy, but *The Body on the Doorstep* is fresh and exciting in addition to being skilfully written.’ *Amy’s Book Blog*

‘an excellent debut – hopefully the first of many’ *Amazon Vine reviewer*

‘a wonderfully atmospheric historical murder mystery’ *GoodReads*

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*The Body on the Doorstep* is their first novel.

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*THE*  
**BODY**  
*ON THE*  
**DOORSTEP**



A. J. MACKENZIE

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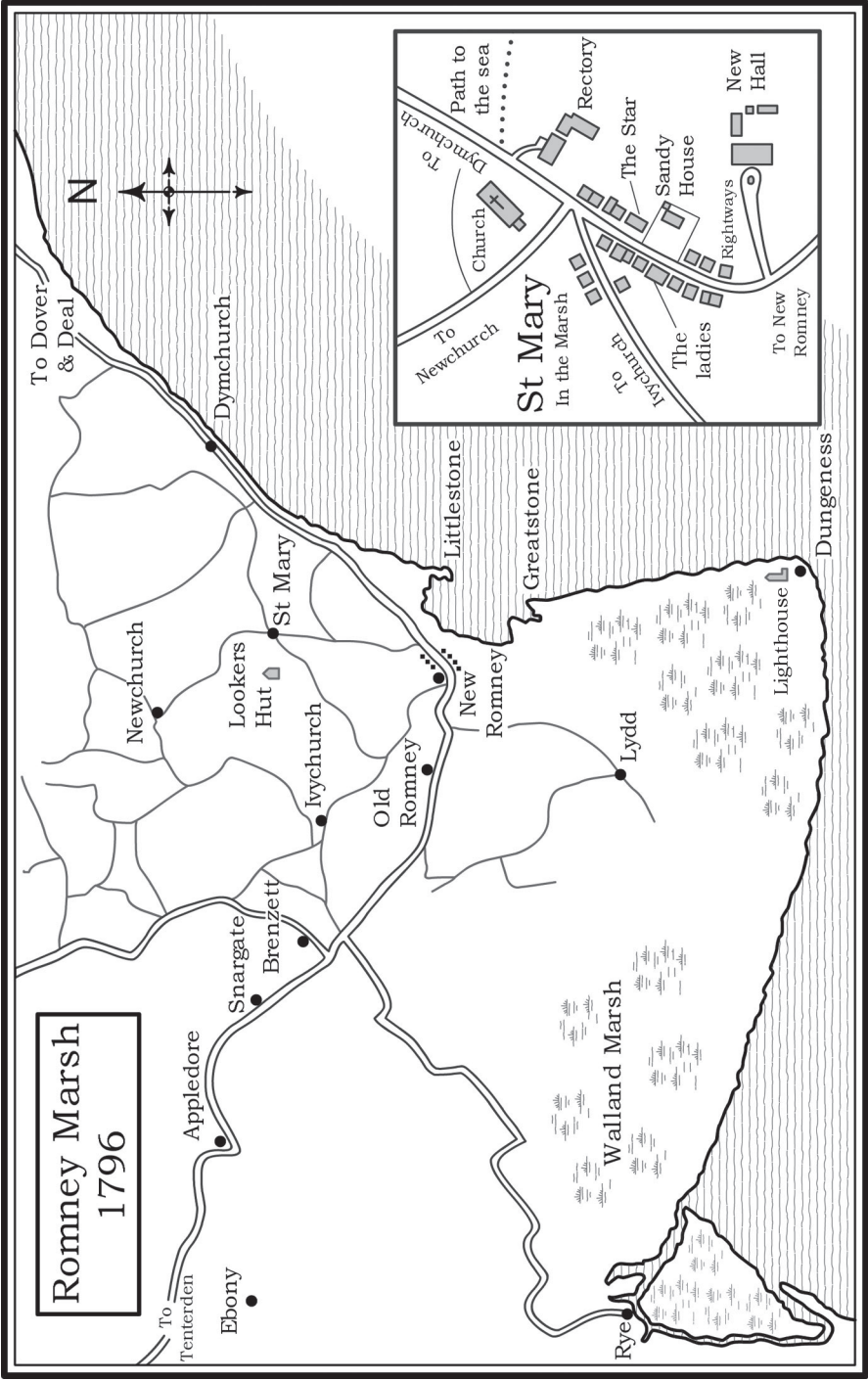


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*To J and KL for their faith that this would happen.*



*THE*  
**BODY**  
*ON THE*  
**DOORSTEP**







# 1

## Death of a Stranger

THE RECTORY, ST MARY IN THE MARSH, KENT.  
6th May, 1796.

To the editor of *The Morning Post*.

Sir,

For the past four years, BRITANNIA has been engaged in a state of continuous warfare against the regicides of the French REPUBLIC and their *blood-stained minions*. During this time, millions in treasure and thousands of men have been committed to expeditions to Corsica, Toulon, Holland, the Indies; expeditions which have resulted in *no other good* than the capture of a few small islands. Meanwhile, the coastline of BRITANNIA itself lies *naked and open* to the enemy . . .

The quill began to splutter. ‘Damn!’ said the rector. He dipped the pen into the silver inkwell sitting on his desk, and began again.

. . . *naked and open* to the enemy, so close that an *invasion fleet* might well reach the shores of Kent just A FEW HOURS after setting out from French ports. Yet, *not a single shilling* has been spent on the protection of the English coast, which is *completely defenceless*. How long, sir, before His Majesty’s government realises the danger that we face? Must we wait until France’s *blood-stained sans-culotte hordes* are ~~marching over the fair fields of Kent~~ marching over the fair fields of BRITANNIA ~~itself~~ herself . . .

The fire popped in the grate and a little shower of sparks flew up the chimney. The rector crossed out the entire final sentence and sat back in



his chair, muttering to himself. 'Damn, damn, damn. Not right, no, not right at all. Blast and damn!'

He needed inspiration. He dropped the pen, reached for the port bottle that stood beside the inkwell, and upended it. A thin trickle of muddy liquid ran into the bottom of the glass, and stopped.

A sudden rage seized the rector's clouded mind. '*Damn!*' he shouted, and he hurled the bottle into the fireplace. It smashed against the fire-guard, spraying bits of broken glass onto the parquet floor. A few drops of port lay on the polished wood, glinting like blood in the firelight.

'Mrs Kemp!' the rector shouted. 'Mrs Kemp!'

Waiting a few seconds and receiving no answer, still fulminating over the injustice of the empty bottle, the rector bellowed again. There came a sound of shuffling feet in the hall, and the door of the study opened to reveal a grey-haired woman with a downturned mouth, holding a candlestick. At the sight of the rector, the corners of her mouth turned down still further.

'For heaven's sake, will you stop shouting!' the woman scolded. 'Don't you realise it is nearly midnight?' Then she saw the broken glass around the fire, and raised her hands in despair. 'Oh, Reverend!' she said, her own voice rising. 'Reverend *Hardcastle!* What have you done *now?*'

The rector stared at her. Nearly midnight? It had just gone nine in the evening when he sat down at his desk to write his latest letter to *The Morning Post*. How could three hours have passed? Then he spotted another empty port bottle, and knew a moment of unease.

He rallied quickly. 'Never mind all that,' he said brusquely. 'You can clear up in the morning. Go to the cellar, and fetch me another bottle.'

'I will do no such thing, Reverend *Hardcastle!* You have drunk quite enough for one evening!'

'For God's sake, woman, you are my housekeeper, not my wife! Go and fetch a bottle, and have done arguing!'

The housekeeper shuffled towards the cellar door and the rector sat behind his desk, both muttering under their breath. The clock in the hall chimed midnight, confirming the hour. The rector yawned suddenly. He considered going to bed and finishing the letter in the morning . . . but then, the housekeeper had just gone to the cellar. It would be a pity if her errand were wasted.

A thunderous noise interrupted his reverie. It took him a moment to realise that someone was knocking on the rectory's front door; knocking, and with considerable force. He opened his mouth to call Mrs Kemp to answer the door, but remembered she was down in the cellar and would not hear him. Muttering again, he rose to his feet, staggered, recovered, walked steadily to the door, turned into the hallway, over-rotated, bumped into the wall, stopped for the moment to take a deep breath and then walked in a fairly straight line down the hall to the door, weaving just once when he collided with a side table. He reached the door just as the heavy door-knocker thundered again, reverberating in his fume-filled mind like the stroke of doom.

'Wait a blasted moment!' shouted the rector, fumbling with the bolts. 'Look here, whoever you are, don't you know what time it is? It is after midnight!' In answer there came more noises, a sharp crack and almost immediately after the heavy thump of something landing hard on the doorstep. Puzzled, the rector drew the last bolt and opened the oak door.

Outside all was very dark. A brisk offshore wind was blowing, roaring in the invisible trees. He peered into the night, remembering vaguely that it was the new moon. His forehead furrowed and he opened his mouth to shout again, for he could see no sign of the man who had knocked at the door and interrupted his writing.

Then he looked down and saw the body on the doorstep, lying slumped almost at his feet. He saw too the blood, pooling darkly on the stone.

Frowning still, not yet fully comprehending what he was seeing, the rector knelt down for a closer look. That action saved his life. From the corner of his eye he saw a flash of light at the end of the garden, and in the same instant something tore the air just over his head, so close that he could almost feel it in his hair. From behind came the sound of shattering glass.

Instantly, the rector's mind was very clear. Someone had shot at him. He knew he had about thirty seconds before the invisible marksman reloaded and fired again. He seized the body by the shoulders and, with a strength that few would have guessed he possessed, dragged it into the hall, slammed the door shut and bolted it. Panting, he stood leaning against the door, listening for another shot or the sound of an intruder

approaching the house. His own pistol was in the desk in his study; he wished he had had the forethought to collect it before answering the door.

The housekeeper stood at the far end of the hall, motionless, mouth wide open, holding a broken bottle. Her apron was covered in blood. No, not blood, port; the shot meant for his heart had instead smashed the bottle she was holding as she returned from the cellar. ‘Reverend Hardcastle,’ she whispered.

‘Hush.’ The rector held up a hand, still listening at the door. At first there was silence. Then another shot sounded, then two more in close succession; but these shots were fainter, more distant. The sound seemed to be coming from the east, towards the sea, and he thought at once: *smugglers*. The gunfire popped and crackled uneasily for about thirty seconds, then died away. Once again all was silent, save for the moaning wind.

Now the rector moved swiftly. He pulled the body into the middle of the hall and took down a lamp from the wall so he could see more clearly. The body was that of a man, young, not more than twenty or so. He was well dressed in a dun brown coat and breeches and darker brown waistcoat, the latter stained with the blood that still bubbled brightly from the hole in his chest.

‘He breathes,’ the housekeeper whispered. She had not moved from where she stood, but she could see the faint rise and fall of the shattered chest in the candlelight.

‘Merciful heavens, so he does.’ The rector knelt by the young man’s head and saw that his eyes were open, and saw too that he was trying to speak. He bent still further, taking the man’s hand in his and feeling a light fluttery pulse in his wrist.

‘Lie still,’ said the rector. ‘We will send for help.’ But even as he spoke he knew it was too late, the pulse was growing slower and fainter and the blood bubbled faster. There were smears of it on the floor where the body had lain when he first dragged it inside. He doubted if the young man even heard him. It was the latter’s last moment of life, and still he strained to speak, yearning to pass a message to the stranger who leaned darkly over him.

‘*Tell Peter,*’ he breathed, his whispered voice only just audible. ‘*Tell Peter . . . mark . . . trace . . .*’

The young man exhaled once more and then lay still. His heartbeat flickered to a halt. The rector knelt for a moment longer, then very slowly and with great gentleness and compassion, lifted the man's lifeless hands and crossed them over his chest, hiding the wound that had ended his young life. Then he bowed his head, and, kneeling there on the bloodstained floor with the wind roaring outside, prayed softly for stranger's soul.



## Spring Morning

‘There it is,’ said Dr Morley. He held up a pair of forceps, between which a small object glinted dully in the sunlight. ‘That is what killed him.’

The rector took the object, which the doctor had just excavated from the dead man’s chest. It was silver-grey where it was not covered in red, round with a flat base at one end and a blunt tapered nose at the other. Its sides were marked with narrow grooves. ‘Curious thing,’ remarked the doctor. ‘Not an ordinary musket or pistol ball.’

‘It is a rifle bullet,’ said the rector. ‘See these grooves? Those are made by the riflings in the barrel.’

The doctor raised his eyebrows. ‘I’ve not seen one before.’

There was an unspoken question in his voice, and the rector answered it. ‘I’ve handled rifles a few times. Some of the sporting set bring them over from Germany, where folk use them to shoot deer and boar. They are not common, although I hear talk that the army is thinking of adopting them.’

‘Really? Why?’

‘Because,’ said the rector, ‘with a rifle you can kill men at long range. Even a new musket is barely accurate at fifty yards. A rifle can hit a target at three, even four times that distance.’

‘Wonderful,’ said Dr Morley. He was a clean-shaven, well-dressed man in his early thirties, the normal elegance of his face slightly spoiled by the lines of fatigue around his eyes. ‘Just what we need. New and better ways of killing people.’

‘Are there any signs of other injuries?’ asked the rector.

‘A few cuts and bruises. I suspect he might have been in a fight recently, but that is hardly unusual for a man of his age. Otherwise, he was strong and healthy.’

The doctor began to clean his instruments in a pail of water. They had brought the body out to the tack room, the housekeeper having expressed an indignant objection to the carrying out of a post-mortem on her larder

table. In the stables beyond they could hear the horse whickering. The rector was reminded that horses did not like the smell of blood. Come to that, neither did he.

He rubbed his eyes. Both he and Morley were tired, the latter with rather better reason. Last night there had been a skirmish out on the Marsh between smugglers and Preventive men, and Morley had been called from his bed just after midnight to attend the wounded. Dawn had been breaking over the English Channel by the time the doctor returned home, and then two hours later the rector's message had arrived, asking him to examine the body of the man who had been shot on his doorstep.

Ordinarily, any instance of violent death would be reported to the parish constable, but St Mary in the Marsh had no constable; the last holder of the post had been dismissed for constant and intemperate drunkenness, and was now in the workhouse at Rye. In the absence of a constable the rector should have contacted Fanscombe, the local justice of the peace, but he had no high regard for Fanscombe's abilities or intelligence. Instead he had sent for Morley, who was also a coroner's deputy and could examine the body in his official capacity.

He had also hoped, he supposed, that Morley might see some clues that he had overlooked, be able to tell him something more about who the man was and why he had died. He himself had gone through the young man's pockets and clothing before the doctor arrived, and had found nothing; his pockets were as empty as if they had been picked, not so much as a farthing or a scrap of paper to be found. A glance at his clothing told him that the London tailors the young man patronised were good but not absolutely of the *ton*. The clothes themselves had a few stains and looked as if they had been slept in, and his black half-boots, also of good make, were newly and heavily scuffed.

Now, Morley had shown him that the man had been shot by a rifle rather than a musket or pistol, which was not really very much help at all.

The rector stood and brooded over the body.

'What is the matter?' asked Morley, wiping his hands on a towel.

'What do you think? As you said, he was a strong and healthy young man. His whole life lay stretched before him, waiting to be lived. Last night, that life was snuffed out in a moment. So much potential, wasted and gone.'



The doctor laughed. 'What, this from a clergyman? No words of religious consolation? The Lord hath called this man unto himself, or some such?'

'The Lord did not call this boy,' said the rector, staring at the doctor. 'It was the hand of man who sent this lad on his final journey. I don't think this is a matter for levity, doctor.'

'That is because you don't see enough dead people, Hardcastle. If you saw more corpses you would realise that, while life is ridiculous, death is more ridiculous still. Be a good fellow and pass me my bag, will you?'

Hardcastle had seen many corpses and did not think there was anything remotely ridiculous about death; indeed, nothing in life was more serious. He passed the medical bag in silence, and Morley began packing his instruments. 'So, who in these parts might have a German *Jäger* rifle?' the doctor wondered.

'No one that I know. You shoot as much as I do; have you ever seen such a thing?'

The doctor shook his head. 'Never. Most folk around here stick to fowling pieces, as I know only too well. I spent half the night picking buck-and-ball out of an Excise man's leg.'

The rector paused. 'Where was this?'

'Up at Dymchurch.'

Dymchurch was on the coast, to the north of St Mary. The rector frowned; something about this did not make sense. 'Why Dymchurch?'

'The Excise men ran into smugglers up there; about halfway between St Mary's Bay and Dymchurch, I think. I wasn't there.' He sounded as though he did not particularly care, either. 'They took three wounded men back to Dymchurch, where I was called to attend them.'

The rector looked up. 'Smugglers, or Preventive men?'

'Preventives, all three. From the Excise service, as I said. Why do you ask?'

'Curiosity, I suppose. I heard the shooting last night, you see. You say it happened up towards Dymchurch?'

'So I was told. As I said, Hardcastle, I wasn't there.'

Another silence fell while the doctor finished packing his bag. He took a pillbox from his pocket and tapped it in his hand until it emitted a small

pill, which he popped into his mouth. A faint smell of liquorice reached Hardcastle's nostrils, mingling unpleasantly with the tang of blood.

Morley picked up the bag and straightened, looking at the rector. 'Look here, I'm sorry if I was brusque. Put it down to lack of sleep. This has been a dreadful business for you.'

'Worse for Mrs Kemp,' said the rector, looking down at the body.

'Was he dead when you found him?'

'Oh, yes, quite dead,' said the rector, the words coming easily to his lips. 'I checked at once. He was not breathing and there was no heartbeat. I suppose we can thank our mysterious marksman for one thing. The end must have been very quick.'

'I would imagine so,' said the doctor, nodding. 'I'll send for the undertakers and have the body taken away, and I'll report the death to Fanscombe and the coroner. There will be an inquest, of course, but the coroner may decide that my examination of the body is sufficient. In that case, you can go ahead and bury him.' The doctor paused; the rector watched him with a stony expression. 'And I'll suggest that Fanscombe sends some militia down to patrol the area for the next few nights,' Morley said, 'in case the rifleman returns. We don't want you murdered in your bed.'

'That is good of you,' said the rector reluctantly. In another mood he might have damned the doctor's impudence and stated flatly that he was able to take care of himself, but at the moment he had other things on his mind.

'And, Hardcastle,' said the doctor, turning in the doorway. 'The front hall of your house positively reeks of port. May I suggest that you lay off the drink for a little while? Give your liver a rest. You'll feel better for it.'

This time the rector's temper did flare, and he looked up angrily. 'Thank you, doctor. I shall bear your opinion in mind.'

Morley's face froze for a moment. Then he shrugged and, carrying his bag, walked out through the sunlit yard to the front of the house. Mrs Kemp was down on her knees before the door, scrubbing hard at the bloodstains on the stone step. His own pony and cart stood nearby, and the doctor put his bag in the back and stepped up onto the driver's seat.

‘Good day to you, Mrs Kemp,’ he said, taking the reins in his hands.  
‘Good day to you, Dr Morley,’ the housekeeper replied without looking up.

The rector remained in the tack room for some time, staring at the body. Then he raised his head, a little like a man waking from a dream, and ran a hand through his sandy, thinning hair before turning and walking out into the sunlight.

It was a glorious morning on Romney Marsh, warm and sweet with the scents of spring. Scattered puffs of cloud drifted across the blue sky on a hurrying wind. Seagulls wailed and squawked in the distance. Hardcastle inhaled deeply, breathing in the fresh air, as questions formed themselves slowly in his mind.

One question that nagged him – and he did not know why it nagged him – concerned the gunfire he had heard last night. Morley had said the skirmish between smugglers and Excise men had been up the coast, half-way to Dymchurch. Therefore, the fighting had taken place well over a mile away to the north-east; indeed, closer to two miles. Surely the south-easterly wind would have blown the sound of any gunfire away from him. Yet he *had* heard shots, quite clearly, and he had been certain they came from the direction of St Mary’s Bay to the east and – experience told him – much closer to the village, probably not more than half a mile away.

But . . . he could have been wrong. A fluke of the wind might have carried the sound of more distant gunfire to his ears. Or Morley might have been mistaken about the location; as he said, he was not there.

And, did it matter? The shot that killed the young man had come from close by. A good rifleman could kill a man at two hundred yards, but only in clear light. Last night had been inky black. The killer must have been close when he fired the fatal bullet, probably even inside the grounds of the rectory. He remembered the crack of the rifle as it fired, the sound sharp and distinct. Yes, it had come from near the house. Yet, he could not get the sound of that more distant gunfire out of his head.

The rector frowned, his concentration deepening. Why had he lied to Morley? He had been surprised by his own glibness, by the ease with which the invention came to his lips. He realised that if he and Morley had been more friendly, he would probably have told the truth.

He drew a deep breath. He did not want to think about the doctor. He listened to the distant rasp of the scouring brush as Mrs Kemp scrubbed steadily at the doorstep, and something about the noise brought back to his memory those terrible last breaths of the dying man. What did those breathed last words mean? *Tell Peter . . . mark . . . trace . . .* They must mean something; the boy had clung desperately to the last shreds of his life so as to get those words out, to pass on what he knew to someone, anyone. Why? What was so important about that message?

A long time would pass before he could forget that dying voice.

The rector shook his head. 'Poor lad,' he said softly to himself. 'I can make nothing of it, nothing at all. The fates served you badly indeed, if they chose me to hear your dying words. The doctor, I am sure, would have understood.' But still he did not regret not telling Morley.

Still the questions echoed in his mind. Who was the young man with the good if not entirely fashionable clothes from London? What had brought him to Romney Marsh in the darkness of a new moon? And who was the midnight rifleman who had killed him?

The rector roused from his reverie. Leaving the tack room, he walked back to the house, stepping carefully past the housekeeper, and fetched his hat and coat and walking stick. 'Mrs Kemp,' he said, 'I am going out for a while. I will return in a few hours.'

'I will leave some cold beef out for you,' said Mrs Kemp, still not looking up.

'I am sure that will be capital,' the rector said kindly. He was not certain how badly his housekeeper had been affected by last night's events, and thus his behaviour towards her had an unaccustomed gentleness. Hardcastle had enough self-knowledge to realise that he was not an easy man to live with, and that in Mrs Kemp he had found one of the few people who would put up with him.

Buttoning his coat against a chilly spring breeze, he walked down the drive through the garden. Ahead of him the squat brown tower of St Mary the Virgin lifted over the trees; beyond it he could see the line of low hills above Appledore, where the Marsh ended and the rolling hills of Kent began.

As he reached the gates, Hardcastle turned on impulse and looked back at the rectory. Two big elms flanked the carriage drive. Beyond the right-hand elm lay a thick hedge, about four feet high and rather ragged and in want of a trim, separating the rectory gardens from the road and then the churchyard of St Mary on the far side. An open lawn ran from the trees back to the house.

The grass needed cutting. He spotted a dandelion thrusting its yellow head insolently out of the lawn and lifted his stick to behead it; but halfway through the stroke he paused and then slowly lowered the stick. There had been two shots. The first had killed the boy. The second, fired as he bent over the body, had flown past his head into the hall and narrowly missed the housekeeper standing at the far end.

The voice in his head whispered again. *Tell Peter . . . mark . . . trace . . .* What did it mean? Mark, trace. Trace a mark? There was a mark that must be traced? A mark on something, on a person, on a map? Trace a source, trace a reason, trace a clue?

*Tell Peter, tell Peter. Tell Peter.*

Suddenly alert, Hardcastle turned and looked at the rectory, a handsomely proportioned building of mellow red brick with a stone portico. The housekeeper had left the door open while she worked, but from this angle he could not see inside the house. He walked swiftly around the left-hand elm, stopped on its far side, and turned to look at the house again. This time he could see through the doorway and straight down the hall.

This, then, was the angle from which the rifleman had fired. He looked down, and saw that the grass around the base of the tree was flattened; someone had been standing here. He saw too a greenish score on the smooth bark of the elm at about shoulder height, showing where something hard had been rested against it; something like the barrel of a rifle, for example, braced against the tree as its owner steadied it for a shot in the dark. A mark, certainly, but not one the dead man could have known about.

He searched around for confirmation of his theory and found it: a fragment of charred cloth lying on the grass six feet away in the direction of the house. Hardcastle recognised it at once: wadding, a patch of cloth

that had rested between powder and bullet in the barrel of the rifle, and had been blown out of the barrel when the weapon was fired.

The marks in the grass were few; the rifleman had not been here long. Walking back to the hedge that enclosed the rectory garden, the rector found a few broken twigs on the ground. Someone had come over the hedge in a hurry, either the rifleman or his victim; quite possibly both. He moved swiftly now, walking through the open gates and across the road to the churchyard. Here, under the branches of the great spreading yew tree that grew next to the lychgate, there was soft ground and here he found the definite marks of running booted feet. He traced them across the churchyard between the fading headstones and then over the low stone wall into the fields beyond for about fifty yards, but here the ground grew firmer, and the trail faded.

It did not matter. He knew now that two men had passed through here last night, both running, moving across the churchyard from west to east towards the rectory, the pursuit of hunter and hunted. He paused, turning back towards the rectory with a frown of concentration on his face. Another question occurred; the boy had been shot in the chest, not in the back as one might have expected had he been facing the door. What had happened? Might he have heard some sound behind him, and turned just as the rifleman pulled the trigger?

'I failed him,' the rector said aloud. 'Had I been faster to my feet, had I not fumbled with the bolts, he would have passed safe inside.'

He stood a moment longer, remembering opening the door, the wind and the darkness. He tried to think of anything he might have missed, any slight sound, anything that would give him a clue; but in his memory there was only the wind, and the flash of the shot that nearly killed him, and then the scattering of further gunfire blowing in on the wind from the sea.

Those shots! Why did their memory nag him still? What could *they* possibly have to do with this matter? Frowning, he turned his face into the wind, crossing the road and followed a gently meandering footpath that led past the rectory grounds, then east through pastures full of sheep towards St Mary's Bay and the sea.

It was a truly glorious day. The wind hissed gently through the grass around him. White-faced Romney ewes raised their heads as he

approached, bleated once and then went back to eating. Lambs galloped insanely across the path, stopped and stared stiff-legged, then turned and began head-butting each other. A skylark carolled its delight into the spring sky. In the meadows that had not yet been grazed, daisies bloomed in snowy profusion. The rector walked quietly through the profusion of spring life, seeing and hearing very little. His mind still echoed with the sound of the dying voice. *Tell Peter* . . . He wanted – no, he *needed* – to know what had happened last night, and why.

Twenty years ago, someone had said of Hardcastle that he had the finest mind in the Church of England. That mind had become rusty of late – its only intellectual exercise was composing letters to *The Morning Post* – but it still functioned when it needed to. Now, as he walked, the rector began to analyse the problem. Three questions required answers. First, who was the dead man? Second, what did those dying four words mean? Third, what exactly had happened out on the Marsh last night? If he could answer these questions, he should find the way to the truth.

But how in heaven's name was he to answer them?

He reached the dunes at the edge of the sea, their rearward slopes covered in coarse grass, and climbed twenty feet up to their crests without slackening pace. I may be thirty-nine, he thought with satisfaction as he climbed, but I still have it in me . . . Then at the top of the dunes he had to stop and lean on his walking stick, wheezing and recovering his breath. That damned doctor would doubtless say that this was because he drank too much. What nonsense. The rector took his drinking seriously, and regulated it strictly. He rarely drank more than two bottles of port a day, and as a matter of routine limited himself to nothing stronger than small beer before midday. Drink too much? What rubbish.

When he could breathe freely again, he looked around. The seaward face of the dunes glowed pale in the sun, while below them the waves foamed creamy white as they broke and rolled inshore. Out at sea two coasters were making their way north, the wind on their quarter filling their dark red sails as they worked their way inside the Varne Bank on a course for Dover. Further east, shimmering a little in the sea spray, stood a white line of chalk cliffs, the coast of France.

The rector glowered darkly at France, then looked again at the coasters. He was no expert in nautical matters, but he guessed that, running before

the wind, they were making six or seven knots towards the English coast. The English Channel was perhaps thirty miles wide at this point. What had he said in his unfinished letter? Given favourable winds, a French invasion fleet could cross the Channel in just a few hours.

‘And if the French do land here,’ he said aloud, ‘there is not a damned thing to stop them.’





### 3

## The Star

‘Nothing but you and me,’ said a voice in response.

The rector turned. He could see no one at first, and he wondered briefly if he had imagined the voice. Then he looked down at the beach and saw a man standing at the foot of the dune. About twenty, sturdily built with a mop of wind-blown fair hair, he wore duck trousers and a polychrome-stained smock. Hardcastle recognised him at once; his name was Turner, and he had come down from London to stay at St Mary for the spring and summer.

‘Mr Turner,’ said the rector, still blowing a little. ‘You gave me a start.’

‘My apologies, sir,’ said Turner a little curtly. He was standing in front of an easel, on which a large canvas was anchored securely against the wind. As the rector scrambled down the face of the dune, Turner walked to one side and raised his paintbrush, pointing it at the coasters and squinting along the handle as if he were sighting a rifle. Then he returned to the easel, picking up his palette and making a series of careful strokes on the canvas. The rector climbed down the dune, boots slipping in the soft sand, and came to a halt a couple of yards or so behind the painter’s shoulder, watching silently as the other man worked.

‘An interesting picture,’ he observed when Turner next paused and lowered his brush.

‘Oh? What makes it so, do you think?’

The rector paused. ‘The quality of light, I expect. You have a way of magnifying the light in your painting. There is a great contrast between light and shadow.’

‘I do not magnify anything, sir,’ said Turner sharply. ‘I paint exactly what I see.’

The rector looked at dunes and sea and ships crisp in the bright clear light, and then at the canvas, where the entire scene seemed to be blurry and shrouded with mist, the outlines of everything vague and out of focus. The light was brighter than in reality, the shadows much darker. No, he thought, this man paints much more than he sees . . .



He changed the subject. 'If you don't mind my asking, Mr Turner, how long have you been here today?'

'About three hours,' said Turner. 'I came to get the morning light. Why do you ask?'

'Mere curiosity. You see, I had a fancy that the smugglers made a run here last night. I wondered if you had seen anything when you arrived, marks in the sand, or other signs of disturbance?'

'Wondering if your brandy had arrived safely, were you? No, I have seen nothing here this morning. But I *heard* plenty, last night.'

The rector's ears began to tingle. 'Oh? When was this?'

'Just on midnight. I was outside, but I heard a clock in the Star toll the hour, and then I heard the gunfire.'

Hardcastle reckoned he owed the younger man one for the crack about the brandy. 'I see. And what was your business outside the Star at midnight?'

'I was waiting for Bessie Luckhurst to open a window and let me in,' said Turner. 'And to save you the trouble of guessing further, it was her bedroom window. While waiting, I heard the shots, quite clearly.'

'Oh? Where would they have come from, would you say?'

'From this direction, from St Mary's Bay. But not as far as the sea; rather further inland, closer to the village.' Turner began to paint once more.

'You are quite certain?' asked the rector.

'I am quite certain,' said Turner. 'I'll tell you what. When I am finished here, I will cast around and see if I can see any sign of where the action took place.'

'Be careful if you do,' said the rector. He looked up at the sun. It was approaching midday, and all this walking and talking had made him thirsty. 'If the free-traders see you, they might think you are spying on them. Watch your step, young fellow.'

'I don't need your advice, granddad,' muttered Turner as the rector turned away, but the latter was labouring to climb back up the dune and did not hear him.

The rector walked back to the village, thinking hard once more. Turner was younger than himself, and his hearing was probably better. If he too had heard gunfire coming from the direction of St Mary's Bay, that was

good enough; that was certainly where the fight between smugglers and Excise men had taken place, and never mind what Dr Morley had said.

He might have questioned Turner further about what he had heard, but the young painter was clearly in a prickly mood. He had seen the scowl on the younger man's face as he passed on his well-intentioned warning against taking too close an interest in the smugglers. But the risks were real. Young, excitable people thought there was something romantic about smuggling and went out onto the marshes or the dunes to watch the fun; but smugglers did not like spectators, and sometimes these young excitable people came back with broken limbs and staved-in skulls. He had seen it before.

Many of the shepherds and farmers and fishermen who drank at the Star, St Mary in the Marsh's watering place, also engaged in smuggling. Hardcastle was fairly sure that Luckhurst, the landlord, was involved in the trade too. In fact, it would probably be easier to make a list of his parishioners who were *not* involved in smuggling in some way, than to try to enumerate all those that were.

The rector knew that the smugglers existed; they knew that he knew. Neither side ever spoke of the fact, and a quiet laissez-faire had developed. The smugglers often used the tower of St Mary's church to hide goods run in from the coast before transshipment up to London; at night, when the wind blew from the right direction, he could find his way from the village back to the rectory without a lantern, simply by following the smell of tobacco on the wind. He never reported this; he was a clergyman, not a Preventive man, and he had spent six years earning the respect of his parishioners. He was not about to throw that away over a few bales of run tobacco, or tubs of untaxed gin, or bottles of French scent.

The smugglers appreciated his discretion in these matters, and were willing to pay for it. Early in his tenure as rector, Hardwick had woken the morning after a run to find a tub of gin on his doorstep. That evening in the Star he had remarked casually to his neighbour, a fisherman named Stemp, that he was not fond of gin. By the following morning, the keg had disappeared and a dozen bottles of extremely palatable Hennessy cognac had appeared in its place. These thoughtful little gifts had continued over time.

The rector stopped, gazing unseeing out over a field of sheep. He had advised Turner to be careful. That advice applied equally to himself. The smugglers tolerated him because he was harmless; he was the genial, alcoholic old buffer up at the rectory, easily bought off with a few bottles of brandy. If he started to investigate any business concerning them, he could be putting himself into harm's way. The smugglers referred to themselves ironically as 'the Gentlemen', but there was nothing gentle about their practices. If they thought he was a threat to them, they would stop him. The penalty for smuggling was death by hanging. These men had everything to lose.

'Wool-gathering, Reverend?' asked a woman's voice.

The rector collected himself and turned and bowed to the woman who stood on the footpath ten feet away. She was tall, in her early thirties, wearing a short grey coat. A green and white bonnet covered her dark brown hair and framed a slightly thin face, made pleasing by blue eyes with long delicate lashes and a dimple at the corner of her mouth when she smiled. She was smiling now.

'It was a joke,' she said. She had a light voice and spoke with very little inflection and just the merest hint of a fashionable drawl, which made it hard to tell what she was really thinking. 'You were gazing at the sheep. Gathering wool.'

'I beg your pardon most humbly, Mrs Chaytor,' said the rector. 'My mind was indeed far away. You are going for a walk?'

She wore sturdy brown boots and carried a light blackthorn walking stick in her hand, so this was not a difficult deduction. 'I thought of walking down to the sea,' she said. 'Do I perceive that you have just come from there?' When he looked at her, she added, 'There is sand on the hem of your coat.'

'Oh!' Hardcastle bent automatically to brush it off, collecting his thoughts. He did not know Mrs Chaytor well. She had moved into the village last year, taking a pleasant house and living, so far as anyone knew, a blameless life. She had given out that she was a widow, but said little else about herself. In other villages, a woman of marriageable age living on her own would have been a source of gossip, but most people in St Mary had secrets, and she was allowed to keep hers undisturbed. She did not

attend church, but then neither did anyone else in the parish, so the rector bore her no particular animosity on that account.

‘Yes,’ he said, straightening. ‘It seemed a pleasant day for a stroll by the sea.’

‘Indeed,’ she said, and her smile faded. ‘Reverend Hardcastle, I have heard the news. It must have been a terrible shock for you.’

He looked at her again, and realised she was talking about the death last night. Of course, it would be all over the village by now. Morley’s housekeeper must have talked, or perhaps Fanscombe’s servants; the justice of the peace’s household ran to gossip like dogs run to fleas. ‘I fear my housekeeper is suffering the blow most of all,’ he said. ‘She is a peaceful soul who hates violence. Let us hope things settle down quickly, and we can put this dreadful business behind us.’

It was her turn to look at him; she recognised a platitude when she heard one. ‘Is it known who the man was?’

‘Not at all. His pockets were entirely empty, and there was no clue about his clothing or his person. We are completely in the dark.’

She arched her eyebrows. ‘His pockets were empty? How curious. I wonder who emptied them, and why?’

‘A very excellent question,’ said the rector, bowing and thinking, *another one*. Mrs Chaytor regarded him, her blue eyes perplexed. ‘Why do you suppose he knocked at your door in particular?’

‘The lamp was still lit in my study,’ said the rector. ‘I expect he saw the lighted window, and made for that.’ He paused, and then to his own faint surprise added, ‘Also, the rectory was the nearest house. I found tracks this morning, indicating that he and his pursuer had both come from the west. They crossed the churchyard and then entered my garden, you see. The poor lad was shot just as he knocked at my door.’

‘My goodness . . . When was this?’

‘Midnight. Just a minute or so after, to be precise.’

‘Why, then it must have happened at about the same time as the shooting down towards the bay.’ Her blue eyes regarded him. ‘Did you hear it?’

His ears began to tingle again. Not one but two other witnesses had now confirmed that his hearing had not betrayed him. ‘I did,’ he said. ‘I have just come from the bay myself.’

'I see.'

'And you are planning to walk there now?'

'I am.'

There was a wealth of meaning in her short answers. He thought of giving her the same warning he had passed to Turner, then hesitated. She had lived here long enough to know the risks, and in his limited experience of her, she seemed a woman who knew her own mind and would do exactly as she pleased in any case. 'Then I wish you good day,' he said bowing again, and she smiled and moved past him down the path. He gazed after her for a moment, but then remembered his thirst.

The village of St Mary in the Marsh was strung out along the road that ran from New Romney north up to Dymchurch, surrounded by fields full of sheep. The church and the rectory lay on opposite sides of the road, at the north end of the village and a little detached from it. To the south, set back from the road and surrounded by parkland, was New Hall, the home of Fanscombe, the local squire and justice of the peace, and his family. The rest of the village consisted of a series of thatched or tile-roofed cottages, a few pleasant larger houses, one of which belonged to the doctor and one of which, Sandy House, was rented by Mrs Chaytor. There was the usual range of village services: bakery, forge, wash-house and a few shops and workshops. At the centre of the village was a white-washed two-storey structure with a sign creaking on hinges over the main door. The sign showed a rather crudely painted white star on a black background.

The rector ducked through the low doorway of the inn into the common room, and a handful of men sitting and smoking pipes and drinking looked up at him, eyes keen with curiosity. Clearly they too had heard the news. He bowed to them, silently, and they waved their hands and went back to their conversation and pipes. Bessie, the landlord's bright-eyed daughter, came smiling to take his coat and hat. He had always thought of Bessie as a rather sweet girl, but after his conversation with Turner he saw her in a rather different light. 'Are you all right, Reverend?' she asked in a voice of gentle concern. 'That was a dreadful thing that happened.'

'I'll be better still, my dear, once I've a mug of beer in me,' said the rector, shrugging off his coat. Behind the bar her father was already pouring a large

tankard of small beer; he slid this over the counter to the rector, who pushed a few coins back.

‘Been out for a walk, sir?’ asked the landlord.

None of the other customers were in earshot. ‘Just down to St Mary’s Bay. Saw that painter fellow down there, Turner. Do you know him?’

He had his mug to his lips, and he nearly choked when Bessie thumped him on the back with a broom handle. ‘So sorry, Reverend,’ the girl said sweetly. ‘Could you move along just a little so I can sweep up? There’s a good gentleman.’

The rector caught the warning look in her eyes and changed the subject. ‘Have you seen his pictures? They’re really rather good.’

‘I couldn’t say,’ said Luckhurst. ‘Don’t know much about painting myself.’

The rector drained the mug and passed it across to be refilled. ‘I’m sorry about that business of yours last night,’ said Luckhurst, filling the mug from a cask and passing it back. ‘That must have been something of a trial for you.’

The rector mumbled a response, face buried in his mug. ‘Any idea who he was, sir?’ asked Luckhurst, carefully.

‘Not at all. He had no papers, nothing to identify him. And he was stone dead by the time I found him, poor fellow, so there was nothing he could tell me.’ Each time he repeated it, the lie became easier to tell. The rector wondered if he would soon start to believe it himself.

He decided to chance his arm a little. ‘I wondered at first if there was some connection with the run last night,’ he said, pushing his mug back for a second refilling. ‘You heard about that?’

‘I did,’ said Luckhurst soberly. ‘That was a bad business.’ He gestured around the common room. ‘Reckon that’s why things are a bit quiet today. Folk are keeping their heads down.’

‘Oh?’ said the rector, raising his eyebrows.

Luckhurst nodded. ‘They’re saying a Customs man was killed, stone dead. They took his body down to New Romney, and he’s lying there now.’

‘Customs?’ said the rector, blinking. ‘I heard it was the Excise that were out last night.’

‘No, this was definitely a Customs man. Jack Hoad came up from New Romney this morning with the news. It’s a bad business,’ the landlord

reiterated. 'The government don't mind a few broken bones, but they take it serious when a Preventive man gets killed. This will be reported to the lord-lieutenant, I should think.'

The rector thought about this. The Lord-Lieutenant of Kent, the Duke of Dorset, cared for very little except cricket and women, and was unlikely to stir himself over this matter. In practice, responsibility for any investigation would devolve on his deputy, Lord Clavertye. Hardcastle knew His Lordship well; among other things, Clavertye was patron of the living of St Mary in the Marsh; it was thanks to his influence that the rector held his present post. Clavertye was a bit puffed up with himself, these days, but he had a sharp mind.

'It will depend on what verdict the coroner's inquest brings in,' he said slowly. 'If they find it was unlawful killing, then I expect you are right. Does anyone know how this unfortunate fellow met his end?'

Luckhurst looked around the room. The men, heads over their mugs of beer and cups of gin, looked silently back; they were of course listening to every word. 'Not a blessed thing,' said the landlord. 'He was shot, that's all I've heard. The affray wasn't much to tell about apart from that. The lads got their cargo ashore up towards Dymchurch, and were just about to move off the beach when the Preventives appeared. There were only a few shots fired; the Preventives were outnumbered and gave way. That's about all there is.'

Damn and blast, thought the rector. There it was again; just when he had it settled in his mind that the firing had come from near St Mary's Bay, up popped this rumour of Dymchurch once more. But could it be dismissed as rumour? Luckhurst had probably been out on the run last night, which was why his daughter had felt bold enough to entertain a lover in her bedroom. What he was hearing came from the horse's mouth.

He sat silent over his beer, brooding and trying to make the facts fit with each other. This they resolutely refused to do.

The door of the common room opened and shut and a man moved up to the bar beside the rector; a big man, much more stout than himself, balding with brown hair and red flabby cheeks above his white stock and big, meaty hands. He looked as if he had had a sleepless night; his eyes, small and bright, were rimmed with red.



‘Mr Blunt,’ said Luckhurst in a carefully neutral voice. ‘Always a pleasure to see you, sir. What can I get you?’

‘Pale ale,’ said the head of the Customs service in Romney Marsh. He had a loud rasping voice which he seldom bothered to moderate. His eyes swept the room. ‘Bit quiet today, ain’t it, Luckhurst?’

‘It’s Saturday, sir. A lot of folk are at market in New Romney. Rest are out in the fields, or the boats.’

Blunt grunted and took his drink. Hardcastle noticed that he made no move to pay for it. The other men in the room were talking in low voices, pretending to take no interest but watching the Customs man out of the corners of their eyes.

‘Bad business last night, sir,’ said Luckhurst, wiping the counter with a cloth. ‘I was sorry to hear about that poor fellow of yours. Is it known what happened?’

‘Not yet.’ He looked at the rector. ‘I heard you had a bit of bother too, rector. I trust you came to no harm yourself?’

Hardcastle knew Blunt – everyone on the coast did – and thought him detestable. Blunt was an uncivilised brute, big, boorish and bullying. To save himself from having to reply Hardcastle took a deep drink from his mug, waving his hand as if to signify that the matter was of no account. Blunt at once lost interest in him and turned back to the landlord.

‘People are asking questions about last night, sir,’ said Luckhurst quietly. ‘They’re saying a Customs man was killed.’

‘Tell them to mind their own god-damned business.’

‘That won’t do no good, Mr Blunt. Every tongue from here to New Romney is already wagging like a dog’s tail,’ said the landlord, mixing his metaphors, ‘and rumours are flying thick as feathers.’

‘Look here, Luckhurst,’ snapped the Customs man. ‘This is a Customs matter, do you understand me? You and the rest of these god-damned peasants will stay out of it, or else face the consequences. Do I make myself clear?’

‘Very clear, sir. But that won’t stop the rumours.’

‘The rumours are bollocks. Ignore them.’

‘Are they? Some of the stories seem pretty believable, Mr Blunt. For example, some folk are saying that the Twelve Apostles are back.’

Blunt had half turned away from the bar, but now he turned back to face the landlord squarely. His beefy face had set hard as stone, and his hands clenched a little. He glanced at Hardcastle, but the rector was nodding over his beer mug, eyes closed. 'Forget about the Twelve Apostles,' the Customs man said in a low voice. 'Don't ever mention that name in public, do you hear? That lot are gone and are never coming back. Savvy?'

'Yes, sir,' said Luckhurst after a long pause.

'Good. Then I'll be on my way.' The door opened and closed once more; outside, they heard the clatter of hooves as the Customs man rode away. Luckhurst muttered under his breath.

'Mr Blunt seemed in a bad temper,' observed the rector in his most neutral voice.

'He's never in any other kind of temper,' Luckhurst grumbled. He shook his head. 'I know what I heard. The Twelve Apostles went away, but that doesn't mean they're not coming back. And I reckon they *are* back.'

'Who might the Twelve Apostles be, Tim?'

'They're a gang that used to operate on this coast. You know. Free-traders.' Luckhurst shot the rector a glance. 'Not from around here, but they operated here. So people said, anyway.'

'I see,' said the rector mildly. 'And Mr Blunt has something against them?'

'Maybe so. Or maybe they have something against him. I've heard it said both ways.' Luckhurst looked up sharply at this point, suddenly aware that he might have said too much. He turned and went down into the cellar, and Bessie tapped the rector on the shoulder.

'Time for your luncheon, Reverend. Unless you want a scolding from Mrs Kemp for arriving late? I thought not. I'll help you with your coat. Stand up, now, there's a good gentleman.'

The rector walked slowly home, where he ate his luncheon of cold beef with a tankard of claret and thought about what he had heard. Dr Morley had been right; there had indeed been a skirmish involving Excise men up towards Dymchurch. However, he, Turner and Mrs Chaytor had also heard firing coming from the direction of St Mary's Bay. Blunt's men had also been out, and had lost a man. Had the Customs men been involved

in a second, quite separate incident? One that Blunt was unwilling to talk about?

It was entirely possible. The Preventive men, charged with stopping the smuggling trade, were divided into two separate services: Customs, which collected duties on all imported goods, and Excise, which collected taxes on all goods of certain categories such as liquor and tobacco, regardless of provenance. In theory they worked together against the free-traders. In practice the heads of the two services in the Marsh, Blunt of the Customs and Juddery of the Excise, hated each other passionately and never worked together if they could help it.

If both services had men out on the Marsh last night, they would have been operating independently. It now looked as if, at about the same time, both had run into parties of smugglers and come under fire.

Very well, he thought, where does that get me? He had solved the puzzle of the gunfire, but he was no closer to knowing who the dead man was, or what his dying words meant.

He was tired now, and it was time to stop thinking. The rector rose and went into his study, where a little smile crossed his face. There, sitting on his desk on a silver tray, was an open bottle of port with a napkin around its neck, and a single glass.

‘Mrs Kemp,’ he said aloud, ‘You are a queen among women.’

An hour later the rector lay stretched out on the chaise longue before the study window, bathed in sunshine and surrounded by an aura of port fumes, fast asleep.

