



THE HOME FRONT DETECTIVE SERIES

INSTRUMENT OF SLAUGHTER

**EDWARD
MARSTON**

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE RAILWAY DETECTIVE
SERIES





Instrument of Slaughter

EDWARD MARSTON

*To our delightful granddaughter,
Seren Rose,
a new star in the family*

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By Edward Marston

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CHAPTER ONE

January, 1916

The meeting was held in secret. Though they had similar views and shared objectives, they did not want to discuss them in a pub where they were likely to be mocked and vilified. In a time of war, pacifism was a stigma for able-bodied young men. Each one of them had his own collection of white feathers, contemptuous glances and harsh reproaches. Pressure to enlist grew more intense by the day.

‘Where’s Gordon?’ asked Cyril Ablatt, impatiently.

‘He swore that he’d be here,’ said Mansel Price.

‘Then why isn’t he?’

‘God knows!’

‘He can’t have forgotten,’ said Fred Hambridge. ‘It’s not like Gordon to be late. Shall I go and look for him?’

‘No,’ said Ablatt, firmly. ‘We’ll wait.’

Ablatt was the leader of the group and they’d arranged to meet that evening in the shed at the bottom of his garden. Small and cluttered, it was used as a workshop by Ablatt’s father in his spare time. Hambridge, a carpenter by trade, was interested in the various tools on display, not that he could see them all by the light of the candles that provided the only illumination. There was no source of heat and it was bitterly cold. All three of them wore coats, hats, scarves and gloves. They’d been close friends at school and – though they’d gone off in different directions – war had brought them back together again. Ablatt was a tall, slim individual with striking good looks and a confident manner. He worked in the local library where he regularly fielded hostile questions about why he’d so far failed to join the army to fight for King and Country. He always defended his position in a polite but robust manner.

Hambridge was a big, ugly, misshapen, red-haired young man with freckled features and a look of permanent bewilderment. Alone of them, he came from a family of Quakers. Price, by contrast, was shorter, slighter, darker and of middle height. Proud of his Welsh roots, he was at once the most genial and combative member of the group. He worked as a cook for the Great Western Railway, travelling, for the most part, between Paddington and his native country.

‘They tried to put me on a military bloody train,’ he complained. ‘I told my boss it was against my principles to help the war effort in any way. He said that people like me couldn’t afford principles. I hate to say it but he had a point. I earn a pittance.’

‘Nevertheless,’ said Ablatt, ‘you must stick to your guns.’

Price grinned. ‘I don’t believe in guns, Cyril.’

‘You know what I mean.’

‘I do and I don’t. We’re different, you and me. While you can get up on your hind legs and spout about pacifism for hours on end, I’m against conscription for a different reason. It’s a breach of my liberty, see? That’s what I resent. It’s the state, taking over my life, telling me what to do, what to wear, when to eat, drink and sleep and who to

shoot at. I'm not having that. I've got rights and nobody is going to steal them from me. I don't hold with killing people,' said Price, warming to his theme, 'and never have – simple as that. No government on this earth is going to make me take up arms. In fact—'

He broke off as they heard footsteps approaching along the lane at the back of the house. The garden door creaked open and the steps got closer. Gordon Leach had arrived at last. Ablatt got up to confront him, flinging open the door as his breathless friend was conjured out of the darkness.

'Where the hell have you been?' he asked, accusingly.

Leach raised both hands. 'Sorry – I got held up.'

'This is an important meeting.'

'I know that, Cyril.'

'Then why did you keep us waiting?'

'Let him in and close that bloody door,' said Price. 'It's freezing in here.'

Ablatt stepped back so that the newcomer could enter the shed. Price was sitting on a wooden box and Hambridge was perched on the edge of the workbench. Closing the door, Ablatt took the only chair. Leach had to settle for an upturned bucket. He was a thin, pallid, fair-headed young man with a nervous habit of looking to left and right as he spoke, as if addressing a large and restive audience. After apologising profusely to his friends, he lapsed into silence.

'Right,' said Ablatt, taking charge. 'You all know why we're here. Until this year, recruitment was done on a voluntary basis. The Military Service Act changed all that. Conscription will come in to effect on March 2nd. Any man between the ages of eighteen and forty-one is likely to be called up unless he's married, widowed with children or working in one of the reserved occupations. In other words, all four of us are liable.'

'We simply tell them to bugger off,' asserted Price.

'It's not as simple as that, Mansel,' said Leach, worriedly. 'We'd be breaking the law.'

'There's no law that can make me join the army.'

'There is now.'

'Then we bloody well defy it.'

'That's the point at issue,' resumed Ablatt. 'Are we all prepared to act together as conscientious objectors? Are we all ready to take the consequences?'

'Yes,' said Price, thrusting out his jaw.

'Fred?'

'I've been racking my brains to find a way out,' said Hambridge, seriously. 'I know this may sound daft but why don't we make a run for it? We could head for Scotland and camp out until the war ends.'

'You're right,' said Ablatt with a sneer. 'It sounds daft because it *is* daft.'

'We'd be escaping conscription, Cyril.'

'You won't get me freezing my balls off in the Highlands,' said Price, angrily. 'What are we supposed to live on? Where does the money come from?'

'We have to do *something*,' insisted Hambridge, turning to Leach for support. 'What do you think, Gordon?'

'Running away is not the answer, Fred,' said Leach, clearly appalled by the notion.

‘I’ve got Ruby to think of, remember. We’re getting married this year. I can’t just run off and leave her.’

‘Ruby would understand. It’d only be for a short while.’

‘You should try reading the papers,’ suggested Ablatt, irritably. ‘They all say the same. This war will drag on and on. Why are they bringing in conscription if they think it’s all going to be over by Easter? Forget about Scotland.’

‘All right,’ conceded Hambridge. ‘Let’s make it Ireland, then.’

‘We’re not turning tail like frightened rabbits. We’re going to stay here and demand our rights as conscientious objectors.’

‘Then there could be trouble ahead, Cyril.’

‘That’s my worry,’ admitted Leach. ‘How far do we go?’

‘All the way,’ said Price, pugnaciously.

‘We lead by example,’ said Ablatt with passion. ‘We refuse to fight our fellow men on the grounds of conscience. It’s what any good Christian would do. We march under the banner of peace. Let them bring in their tribunals and whatever else they devise to coerce us. We must stand shoulder to shoulder against them.’ He rose to his feet and wagged a finger. ‘I’m a human being. I will not be turned into an instrument of slaughter wearing a khaki uniform. I will not kill, I will not inflict hideous wounds. I will not turn my back on the teachings of the Bible.’ He looked around the faces of his friends. ‘I know that Mansel won’t let anyone push him around. What about you, Fred? Are you ready to face the music?’

‘Yes,’ said Hambridge, stirred by his words. ‘I think I am.’

‘What do you believe in?’

‘Peace and universal friendship.’

‘Tell that to the tribunal when they haul you up in front of one.’ Ablatt’s eyes flicked to Leach. ‘That leaves you, Gordon.’

Leach licked dry lips. ‘I have to consider Ruby,’ he said, uneasily.

‘The only thing you have to consider is your conscience.’

‘But this will affect her, Cyril.’

‘No woman wants to marry a coward,’ said Price, ‘and that’s what you’ll look like if you don’t do what the rest of us are going to do. Ruby won’t thank you if you go off to war and finish up dead in some rat-infested trench like my poor dab of a cousin. That’s not bravery – it’s plain bloody stupidity. Are you going to let someone *dictate* what you’ve got to do? Well, I’m not – neither is Cyril and neither is Fred.’

‘We’ll take this to the bitter end,’ said Ablatt. ‘Join us, Gordon.’

Leach shivered as a blast of cold air blew in under the door. He turned up the collar of his overcoat and pulled his cap down over his forehead. It was easy for the others. They didn’t have his responsibilities. Ablatt was a clever young man who’d educated himself and who knew how to put thoughts into words. Price could be bloody-minded whenever he felt that someone was giving him too many orders. Though he belonged to the Society of Friends, Hambridge did not follow Quaker doctrine slavishly but he was nevertheless a born pacifist. He was also strongly influenced by Ablatt and would always fall in behind him. None of the three was prepared to comply with the demands of conscription.

Wishing that he had their unshakable conviction, Leach tried to imagine what would happen in the event of refusal. While he hated the idea of bearing arms as much

as any of them, he wondered if they should accept a compromise and help the war effort in a way that did not involve combat. About to suggest it, he saw the warning look in their eyes and realised that it was a waste of time. He was either with them or against them. Since he was too weak-willed to resist the general feeling, he had to accept it and did so with a defeatist nod.

‘That’s settled then,’ said Ablatt, reaching into his pocket to take out a leaflet. ‘I’ve been in touch with the No-Conscription Fellowship. It’s full of people who have the same beliefs as us. Take a look at this,’ he went on, handing the leaflet to Price. ‘The NCF is having a mass meeting here in London early in March and I think all four of us should be there.’

‘You can count on me, Cyril,’ said Price.

‘The same goes for me,’ added Hambridge.

‘I thought you’d be huddled in a tent up in Scotland.’

‘There’s no need to be sarcastic, Mansel.’

‘It was your idea.’ Price read the leaflet. ‘This looks good. I like what I’ve heard about the NCF.’

‘It’s already got thousands of members,’ said Ablatt, ‘and many more will swell the ranks. We’ll be among them. Is that agreed, Gordon?’

Once again, Leach was the last to pledge himself. He’d already made one momentous decision that evening and it had left him in a state of suspended fear. In the long term, there could be unimaginable horrors. In the short term, there was the problem of explaining to Ruby Cosgrove exactly what he’d agreed to do with his friends. And since they had limited leisure time together, she would not be happy to be told that he preferred to attend a public meeting instead of seeing her. He sought desperately for a way of escaping the commitment but none came to mind. Leach eventually capitulated.

‘I’ll try to come, Cyril,’ he bleated.

‘You’ll be there,’ said Ablatt, peremptorily, ‘or I’ll want to know the reason why.’

Leach’s heart sank.

The event was held in Devonshire House, the Quaker headquarters in Bishopsgate, a place that symbolised peace and goodwill. Organisers would later claim that almost two thousand people were crammed inside the building but there was a sizeable crowd outside as well and it was steadily growing. Fuelled by anger at the stance taken by conscientious objectors, hecklers yelled taunts, waved fists and issued wild threats. Soldiers on leave had come to see those they perceived as cowards and shirkers; miserable creatures, in their estimation, who lacked any sense of patriotism. Men who’d lost limbs or eyes in the service of their country added their voices to the hullabaloo. Women were just as ferocious in their denunciation, especially those who’d lost sons or husbands at the front. They couldn’t understand why anyone should be allowed to evade their duty so flagrantly when others had made the supreme sacrifice. It seemed unjust.

One truculent old woman, armed with a walking stick in the hope that she might have a chance to belabour someone with it, confided her feelings to all and sundry in a rasping Cockney accent.

‘It’s cruel, that’s what it is,’ she said, brandishing the stick. ‘Them what’s in there

ought to be ashamed. I went to visit my husband in prison yesterday. This woman told me they'd locked hers up for being a conchie. I said they ought to throw away the key and leave the swine behind bars for good.' She stuck out her chin with pride. 'My man's in there for thieving. I mean, it's a good, honest, decent crime – not like turning your back on your country.'

There was a surge of agreement from those around her and many other suggestions were made of suitably grim punishments for those who dared to resist conscription. Some boasted of attacks they'd made on conscientious objectors and were clearly expecting a major confrontation with them now. They wanted to hand out much more than a white feather. As the crowd grew ever bigger and more volatile, determination to take revenge hardened. A gang of sailors then joined the throng, emboldened by the beer they'd consumed in a nearby pub and roused to a pitch of fury when they'd heard about the meeting of the No-Conscription Fellowship. They weren't content to shout abuse and hurl dire warnings. They wanted blood.

Uniformed police were on duty but their numbers were totally inadequate and, in any case, their sympathies were largely with the protesters outside the building. War had had a profound effect on them, depleting their resources as many colleagues rushed to enlist, yet widening the scope of their duties. In addition to keeping the peace and arresting criminals, they had to search for foreign spies, prevent sabotage, catch deserters, help to billet troops and perform dozens of other onerous duties unknown in peacetime. Protecting men who refused to bear arms was not an assignment that the majority of them could enjoy. They would show far more enthusiasm when arresting conscientious objectors and hauling them before a tribunal. For the time being, they were content to maintain a presence and rely on the power of their uniforms to keep violent disorder at bay. It was a power that was swiftly diminishing.

'I didn't know that this was going on for two days,' said Leach, incredulously.

'There's a lot to talk about,' Price reminded him.

'I can't come back tomorrow.'

'You'll have to, Gordon. We've got to see it through to the end.'

'Ruby will kill me. She was really upset when I told her I was going to be here today. She burst into tears. I can't let her down again.'

'Would you rather let *us* down instead?'

'You can tell me what happens.'

'This is history, mun. Don't you want to be part of it?'

'I'm here today, aren't I?'

'It's not enough. Imagine what Cyril will say.'

Leach shuddered. 'I'm too busy thinking what Ruby will say.'

They'd arrived late and been forced to stand at the back of the room. Somewhere in the mass of bodies were Cyril Ablatt and Fred Hambridge, early birds who'd manage to secure seats near the front. Gordon Leach preferred to be on the periphery of an event to which he brought only half-hearted interest. Mansel Price, on the other hand, wished that they were with their two friends, forming a quartet of resistance against the demands of the state. Like his companion, he was surprised by the people who'd converged in such force on Devonshire House.

‘I thought they’d all be much the same as us,’ he said. ‘You know, ordinary lads with a bit of spunk in them. But some of these people look so ... well, so damned respectable. I heard one man saying he was a bank manager, then there was that chemist we spoke to in the queue. I mean, they’ve got proper jobs.’

‘I’ve got a proper job as well,’ said Leach, tetchily. ‘I work in my father’s bakery. How is he going to manage if I get dragged off to war?’

‘You’re asking the wrong question.’

‘Am I?’

‘How is your father going to manage if you get dragged off to prison?’

Leach blanched. ‘Do you think it will come to that?’

‘It may do. And you agreed to stand firm with the rest of us.’

‘What about Ruby?’

Price sniggered. ‘I daresay you always stand firm with her.’

Leach’s blush turned his friend’s snigger into a guffaw.

The turnout was far larger than either of them had anticipated. Leach found the numbers overwhelming but Price was lifted by the thought that he wasn’t just an isolated dissident. He was part of a nationwide movement, albeit one that had a distinctly middle-class feeling to it in his eyes. There was no GWR cook like the Welshman on the platform, neither was there a baker’s assistant like Leach or a carpenter like Hambridge. Those about to address the assembly were well-dressed professional men with drooping moustaches and an air of propriety about them. Anyone less like potential lawbreakers was difficult to envisage, yet they were all going to preach the gospel of defiance. There were plenty of fur-collared coats and well-trimmed beards in the audience but there were also workmen in dungarees and skinny individuals in ill-fitting suits frayed at the edges. Lawyers rubbed shoulders with unkempt bricklayers and teachers sat beside those on whom education had had no visible effect. There was more than a smattering of women to offer moral support and gentlemen of the press were there to gloat, scorn, reinforce their prejudices or – in a few cases – treat the occasion with a degree of impartiality.

Leach was still thinking about Ruby Cosgrove when Price nudged him.

‘What’s a Muggletonian?’ he asked.

‘What?’

‘A Muggletonian. I overheard someone in the queue saying that he was here because he was a Muggletonian. What the hell is that?’

‘I haven’t a clue, Mansel.’

‘Maybe he went to some posh school called Muggleton.’

‘Be quiet,’ whispered Leach.

‘But I’m interested. I want to *know*.’

‘We’re about to start. Shut up, will you?’

As the chairman rose to speak, the heavy murmur slowly died out. Hambridge waited with something approaching trepidation. It was a paradox. Though he was a Quaker in quintessential Quaker habitat, he was cowed and ill at ease. Hating crowds, he sat hunched up in his seat, profoundly aware of his insignificance. Ablatt, however, was in his element, relaxed and comfortable, already composing in his mind the speech he intended to deliver when he got the opportunity. Nothing would have made the

nervous, watchful Hambridge stand up in front of such a huge audience and, by the same token, nothing would deter his friend from doing so.

The chairman was Clifford Allen, a slight, alert, youngish man with a spiritual quality about him and a deep, measured voice that compelled respect.

‘Fellow citizens,’ he began, ‘let me welcome you all to what promises to be a crucial meeting of the No-Conscription Fellowship. You all know the position we take. Conscription is now law in this country of free traditions. Our hard-won liberties have been violated. Conscription means the desecration of principles that we have long held dear; it involves the subordination of civil liberties to military dictation; it imperils the freedom of individual conscience and establishes in our midst that militarism which menaces all social graces and divides the people of all nations.’

He looked around the sea of upturned faces. ‘We must offer determined resistance to all that is established by the Act.’

A ripple of applause greeted the declaration of intent. It built and built until it reached the proportions of a tidal wave. The chairman was pleased with the response. The meeting had started on a positive note.

An ovation which delighted those on the platform had a very different effect on those outside. When they heard the sustained clapping, they were enraged. The sound was like a red flag to a herd of bulls. Everyone wanted to break into the building but it was the sailors who acted on their behalf. Pushing their way to the front, they ignored the warnings from the police and clambered over the locked gates, earning cheers of encouragement from the crowd. When stewards tried to persuade them not to interrupt the meeting, they were pushed aside by the drunken sailors. Without quite knowing what they were going to do, the naval boarding party threw open the doors and stormed inside, set on causing some sort of commotion. But it never materialised. The sailors were so surprised with what they found that they came to a halt. The room was filled – it seemed to their blurred eyes – with quiet, pale-faced, mild-mannered men, several of whom were too thin, boyish and puny to offer any kind of fight. Instead of disturbing a group of rabid conchies, it was as if they’d stumbled into a church social. The shock took the wind out of their sails completely.

Nobody came to challenge them and there was no hint of danger. They were instead invited to stay and take part in the meeting. The sailors engaged in some good-humoured badinage and then, shepherded by the stewards, they withdrew in an orderly fashion, ridding themselves of a few valedictory jibes as they did so. Their attack had been effectively stifled. Physical confrontation had been averted.

The chairman was quick to seize on the cause of the interruption.

‘It was nice to see such genial visitors,’ he observed, dryly, ‘but it might be safer if we don’t provoke any more disruption. In future, when you approve of something that is said, don’t applaud. The crowd outside will hear you. Simply take out a handkerchief and wave it in approval. Do you all agree?’

Hundreds of handkerchiefs fluttered in the air. The suggestion met with unanimous endorsement. Whenever a speech delighted the audience, it was acclaimed in silence. Everyone on the platform said his piece, then it was the turn of people from the floor. Ablatt was among the first. Leaping to his feet, he caught the eye of the chairman and was given permission to speak. He made his way to the aisle so that he could turn to

the audience before addressing it. It was as if he'd been waiting for this moment for years and he made the best of it.

'Friends,' he said with a sweeping gesture that took in the entire room, 'I wish to offer my personal testimony. I am a devout Christian. I refuse to act as an instrument of slaughter ...'

It was his favourite phrase and he'd used it ever since he first saw it in an article. Somehow he'd made the phrase his own. Price, Leach and Hambridge had heard him dozens of times but only in the close confines of a garden shed or a room in one of their houses. They'd never seen him in front of a large audience before and it was a revelation. Ablatt was a natural orator. His voice was clear, his argument coherent and his assurance remarkable. His speech had far more bite and sheer fervour than those of earlier speakers. The spectators were held spellbound by his eloquence. It made his friends proud of him and they lost any vestigial reservations they might have about defying the Military Service Act. While Ablatt was in full flow, Leach even managed to forget about Ruby Cosgrove.

The magic eventually wore off. By the time the meeting came to an end, Leach was full of apprehension again. He not only had to run the gauntlet of protesters outside, he had to face biting criticism from his fiancée and withstand Ablatt's inevitable ire when he told him that he'd be unable to attend on the following day. Price had no such worries. He'd been roused by everything he'd seen and heard. Whatever the consequences, he was ready to withstand the power of the state. As the two of them came out with the rest of the crowd, they were met with jeers and ridicule but there was no longer any sense of menace. They stood aside to let others pass so that they could wait for their friends. In the event, Fred Hambridge came out alone.

'Where's Cyril?' asked Price.

'They asked him to stay behind,' said Hambridge. 'They were so impressed with his speech that they want him on the platform at future meetings.'

'I'm not surprised. He was wonderful. Isn't that right, Gordon?'

'Yes,' replied Leach, one eye on the baying crowd.

'I was going to take my turn,' said the Welshman, 'but I never got the chance. It may be different tomorrow. Not that I'll be anywhere near as good as Cyril, mind you. Talk about the gift of the bloody gab.'

'There's no point in waiting,' said Hambridge. 'He could be a long time. Cyril said we were to go on ahead. He'll join us later at my house. We can talk over what we heard today.'

'Are you sure we should leave him?' asked Leach as the crowd became more vocal. 'I think the four of us should stick together for safety.'

'Cyril can manage on his own, Gordon.'

'What if this crowd turns nasty?'

'That won't worry him.'

'No,' said Price with an affectionate laugh. 'The one thing you can say about Cyril is that he can look after himself.'

The body lay motionless on the ground. Cyril Ablatt would never deliver a speech of any kind again. Someone clearly had none of his qualms about being an instrument of

slaughter.

CHAPTER TWO

Detective Superintendent Claude Chatfield was a tall, lean individual in his forties with protruding eyes and thinning hair bisected by a centre parting. He was a man of uncertain temper and could, by turns, be loquacious, withdrawn, peppery, emollient, condescending or passably friendly. As he stood behind the desk in his office at Scotland Yard that morning, he was at his most overbearing, determined to assert his authority over anyone of inferior rank. When Harvey Marmion came into the room, Chatfield welcomed him with a sharp rebuke.

‘You’re late, Inspector.’

‘I came as soon as I could, sir,’ said Marmion.

‘You should have been here earlier. My message was explicit.’

‘I responded to it immediately.’

‘If there’s anything I hate, it’s tardiness. You should know that by now.’

Marmion knew all there was to know about Chatfield and none of it endeared him to the man but, since the latter was higher up in the chain of command, all that the inspector could do was to tolerate his multiple shortcomings and obey him. In fact, Marmion had been quite prompt. Hauled out of bed at five o’clock, he’d thanked the constable who’d brought the message, quickly shaved and dressed, given his wife a farewell kiss, then spurned food in the interests of urgency. When he finally arrived at Scotland Yard, his stomach was rumbling and his eyes were still only half-open.

He was a solid, broad-shouldered man with a full head of hair and the kind of nondescript features that made him invisible in a crowd. Studious by nature, Marmion nevertheless had the physique of a dock labourer. Beside him, Chatfield looked spare and insubstantial. It was one cause of the underlying tension between them. There were several others.

‘What seems to be the trouble, Superintendent?’ asked Marmion.

‘Inefficiency among my detectives,’ said Chatfield, meaningfully. ‘Anyway, now that you’re here, you might as well sit down.’ Marmion lowered himself onto an upright chair but the other man remained on his feet so that he held a position of dominance. ‘I might as well tell you that you would not be my first choice,’ he went on, ‘but the commissioner has this strange faith in you and felt that you should take charge of any case that has a degree of sensitivity attached to it, as this one certainly does. You’ll need to handle the press with great care.’ He sucked his teeth. ‘We both suspected that this sort of thing would happen sooner or later.’

Marmion was interested. ‘Go on, sir.’

‘The body of a young man was found in a dark alley in Shoreditch. He’d been bludgeoned to death. Since he still had his wallet, we can rule out robbery as a motive. The victim’s name is Cyril Ablatt. This was in his pocket.’

Picking up a leaflet, he handed it to Marmion who gave it a glance.

‘It’s that meeting of the No-Conscription Fellowship.’

Chatfield was scathing. ‘They’re a bunch of lily-livered layabouts.’

‘I disagree, sir. Most of them are sincere in their beliefs. Their consciences simply

won't allow them to take up arms against their fellow men.'

'Where would we be if *everyone* had that attitude?'

'The vast majority of people don't.'

'Thank heaven for that! We can't fight a war without soldiers. Conchies like this Ablatt fellow are nothing but abject cowards.'

'With respect, sir,' said Marmion, quietly, 'you're making hasty assumptions about the murder victim. Perhaps you should wait until we know more details.'

'The NCF is a hiding place for worthless British citizens too scared to fight.'

'I hope you're not suggesting that Cyril Ablatt *deserved* what happened to him. That would be monstrously unjust.'

'Damn it, man! You're supposed to solve a crime, not take sides.'

'You're the one who's taking sides,' argued Marmion, 'and it's distorting your view of the situation. To begin with, the murder may be wholly unconnected to the fact that the victim may hold pacifist views. It could have been a random attack.'

'It was deliberate and calculated,' insisted Chatfield, smarting at the reproof. 'What could be clearer? That meeting of the NCF stirred up passions. There was a big crowd outside and, at one point, I'm told, it looked as if there'd be a full-scale riot. A gang of drunken sailors actually stormed the building but the attack petered out for some reason. When the conchies eventually left the building, there would have been scuffles. My guess is that Ablatt was trailed by someone who waited for the opportunity to pounce.'

'That's idle speculation, Superintendent.'

'It's an informed opinion.'

'I prefer to keep an open mind. May I ask what action has been taken?'

'I've had the body transferred to the morgue.'

Marmion was disappointed. 'That's a pity,' he said. 'If at all possible, I prefer to see a murder victim at the scene of the crime. It gives me a fuller picture.'

'Are you criticising me?' asked Chatfield, eyes blazing.

'It's not my place to do so, sir.'

'Make sure you remember that in future. As for my decision, I was being practical. If that body had still been there at daylight, there'd be hundreds of ghouls impeding us as they tried to get a look at it. The scene is at present being guarded. You can view it for yourself.'

'I'll do that,' said Marmion. 'The first priority is to inform the family of their son's death. Has someone already done that?'

'No,' replied the other. 'I was leaving that to you.'

'If I can have the address, I'll get over there at once.'

Chatfield gave him the sheet of paper that lay on the desk. 'Luckily, his address was sewn into the lining of his coat. He must have a caring mother. That's all we know about him, I'm afraid.'

'It's a start, sir. And thank you for assigning the case to us,' he added without irony. 'Sergeant Keedy and I are grateful that you've shown confidence in us.'

'The person to thank is the commissioner. It was his idea, not mine.'

'Then I'll be sure to express my gratitude to Sir Edward.'

'The commissioner is like me. He expects results.'

'We won't let him down. If you'll excuse me,' said Marmion, getting up and

moving to the door, 'I'll be off to pass on the sad news. And I'll try to arrange for the victim's next of kin to identify the body.'

'That may be difficult.'

'Why is that, sir?'

'From what I hear, the skull has been smashed to a pulp. I don't think anyone will be able to identify what's left of him.' Chatfield drew himself up to his full height. 'The killer must be caught and caught quickly,' he emphasized. 'The public needs to be reassured that a murderer will not be allowed to roam free in the streets of London. However,' he said with a thin-lipped smile, 'there will doubtless be those who have no cause to mourn Ablatt. His death means that there'll be one conchie less to worry about. I can understand that feeling.'

'That's more than I can do,' said Marmion under his breath.

Concealing his disgust, he went out and closed the door firmly behind him.

Since the outbreak of war, Joe Keedy's work days had been longer and his nights under constant threat. Policing the capital was a twenty-four-hour operation. It meant that, while his social life was curtailed, he was amply rewarded with the action on which he thrived. In case he was roused in the small hours, he always had a shave immediately before retiring to bed so that he looked presentable when awakened at short notice and needed simply to put on his suit before being ready to leave. As it happened, when the police car arrived outside his digs, Keedy was already up and dressed. One glance through the window told him that he and Marmion had a new investigation to lead. Chewing a last piece of toast, he swallowed it with a gulp and washed it down with a mouthful of tea. Then he reached for his overcoat and hat before heading for the door.

Standing at over six feet, Keedy was a handsome, wiry man in his thirties who took far more care with his appearance than the average detective. His hat was set at a rakish angle, there was a sharp crease in his trousers and his black shoes gleamed. He bounded down the stairs and let himself out into the cold. A moment later, he climbed into the car beside Marmion.

'Good morning, Harv,' he said.

'You were quick. Were you expecting me?'

'It's a case of intuition.'

'I thought that was something only women are supposed to have.'

Keedy laughed. 'That's what they tell me.'

Marmion was glad to see him. They were good friends as well as colleagues and had developed a mutual understanding that helped to speed things up. As the car made its way through the deserted streets in the direction of Shoreditch, Marmion gave him a succinct report of events.

'It doesn't look as if we have much to go on,' observed Keedy.

'We soon will have, Joe.'

'That meeting of the NCF could be significant.'

'According to our dear superintendent,' said Marmion, 'it explains everything. He's convinced that Ablatt was followed after the meeting, then attacked for daring to oppose the war. It never occurred to him that other factors might be involved.'

'Ah, well, that's old Chat for you. He always jumps to conclusions.'

‘It’s one of his many charms.’

‘I still can’t believe he was promoted over you,’ said Keedy. ‘Everyone knows that you can wipe the floor with Chat when it comes to catching villains. Yet it was that smarmy bastard who was appointed instead of you.’

‘He probably did better than me in the interview.’

‘He can’t do *anything* better than you, Harv.’

‘Yes, he can,’ said Marmion. ‘He can lose his temper much faster than me. He was frothing with anger when I got there and accused me of being late. If it was left to Claude Chatfield, I’d have to sleep in my office.’

‘I don’t think your wife would like that.’

‘She wouldn’t, Joe. The house seems empty now that Alice has moved out. If I start bedding down at Scotland Yard, I’m sure that Ellen would want to join me.’

Keedy rolled his eyes. ‘That would go down well with the top brass!’

‘As for the promotion, be thankful that I didn’t get it.’

‘But you *deserved* it, Harv.’

‘Think of the consequences.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘If I was Superintendent Marmion, then you’d be travelling in this car with a certain Inspector Chatfield. How would you fancy that?’

Keedy grimaced. ‘I wouldn’t fancy it at all,’ he said. ‘I remember the way he used to treat his sergeants. They did the work and he took the credit. No wonder three in a row enlisted in the army to escape him.’

‘I hope that *you’re* not thinking of doing that, Joe.’

‘Of course not – I prefer to do my fighting on the home front.’

‘Then I can guarantee you’ll have your hands full. Cyril Ablatt is only the latest visitor to the police morgue,’ said Marmion, philosophically. ‘There’ll be plenty of others to keep us occupied and plenty of chances to explode the superintendent’s instant theories about each successive murder.’

‘Chat is a congenital idiot.’

It was Marmion’s turn to laugh. ‘And so say all of us!’

The house had a narrow frontage and stood at the end of a terrace in a grimy backstreet. On the side wall of the building, someone had painted patriotic slogans and outright abuse in large white capitals. They were illumined by the gas lamp nearby. Evidently, one of the neighbours objected to Cyril Ablatt’s pacifist leanings. Drawn curtains in the front bedrooms testified that most people were still asleep but there was a light downstairs in the Ablatt house as the car drew up outside it. Marmion and Keedy got out and took a deep breath. Passing on grim news always upset them because they had to inflict intense pain. There was no easy way to do it. Marmion used the knocker to give a gentle tap. There was an immediate reaction. Footsteps came scuttling down the passageway, then a bolt was drawn back. When the door swung open, they were confronted by the hunched figure of a bald-headed man in his fifties. In pyjamas, dressing gown and slippers, he had the fatigued look of someone who’d been up all night. Sensing disaster, he let out a deep sigh of resignation.

‘It’s about Cyril, isn’t it?’ he asked, biting his lip.

‘I’m afraid that it is, sir,’ said Marmion. ‘Are you his father?’

‘Yes, I am.’

‘I’m Inspector Marmion and this is Sergeant Keedy. Would it be possible for us to step inside, please? I don’t think you’d want to hear this on the doorstep.’

‘Of course, of course ...’

Gerald Ablatt stepped back so that they could step into the dank passageway. Closing the door behind him, he took the detectives into the front room and motioned them to the settee. Removing their hats, they sat down. Ablatt himself was directly opposite, perched on the edge of an armchair. The room was so small that his knees were fairly close to theirs.

‘I’ve been dreading this,’ he admitted.

‘It’s bad news, I’m afraid,’ warned Marmion, gently. ‘Do you think that your wife ought to hear it with you?’

‘My wife died three years ago, Inspector – diphtheria.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that, sir.’

‘It might be a blessing in disguise. Cyril was our only child. Mary doted on him. I’d hate her to have heard that he’s met with some kind of accident.’ His eyes widened quizzically. ‘That is why you’re here, isn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ said Marmion, exchanging a glance with Keedy, ‘but it was rather more than an accident. A young man was attacked and killed last night. We’ve reason to believe that he may have been your son.’

For a few moments, Ablatt was stunned and looked as if he was about to fall over. Keedy sat forward in case he needed to catch the man, while Marmion felt guilty at having to administer the hammer blow. With a supreme effort, Ablatt steadied himself and managed to control his emotions. His hands were tightly clasped and his body tensed.

‘It must be Cyril,’ he said, sorrowfully. ‘He always let me know if he was staying the night somewhere. When he didn’t come home ...’ He shrugged helplessly. ‘I knew that something terrible had happened.’

‘The two of you lived alone, then?’ asked Keedy.

‘Yes, Sergeant, we did. Lots of people complain about sons being a nuisance when they get to a certain age but Cyril wasn’t like that. He was no trouble. All he wanted to do was to stay in his room and read his books.’ A smile flitted across his face. ‘He was a librarian, you know.’

‘Then he’d have no shortage of reading matter.’

‘You’ve seen the sort of area this is,’ continued Ablatt. ‘Most of the lads around here follow their fathers into the same trade. What else is there for them to do? Well,’ he said, holding back tears, ‘I wanted more for my son. I wasn’t having him working as a cobbler like me. It’s a good trade because everyone needs to have their shoes soled and heeled, but it’s a hard life bent double over a last all day. So I paid for Cyril to go to night school. He was educated, you see.’ His face clouded. ‘This war changed everything. Until it started, people looked up to Cyril. They admired him. Then the other lads started to join up and everyone began to wonder why my son didn’t go with them.’ He stood up abruptly. ‘I don’t agree with what he believed. Let me be honest about that. In his place, I’d have been down at the recruiting office like a shot. But Cyril was entitled to his opinion. He had principles, you see. That’s why he went to that meeting yesterday.’ He slumped back into the chair. ‘Oh, I’m so grateful his

mother didn't live to hear this. It would've broken her heart.'

'We'll need someone to identify the body,' said Marmion, softly.

Ablatt stiffened. 'I'll go,' he volunteered. 'He's my son. It's my duty.'

'There's no rush, sir. We'll wait until you're good and ready. Meanwhile, there's something you might do for us. You'll appreciate that we know very little about your son. Anything you can tell us would be valuable. Which library does he work at, for instance? We'll need to speak to his employers. And what about his friends – did he go to that meeting alone or was he with someone else?'

'Oh, all four of them went, Inspector – Gordon, Fred, Mansel and Cyril.'

'Could you give me those names again, please?' asked Keedy, taking out a notebook and pencil. 'We'll need the addresses as well.'

'They all live in Shoreditch.' As Ablatt reeled off the names, Keedy wrote them down. 'Gordon Leach, Fred Hambridge and Mansel Price. Gordon works at the bakery two streets away. Fred is even closer.'

He provided the addresses and explained that the three of them often came to the house. Ablatt had no young lady in his life. Encouraged by the detectives, he then talked about his son with a kind of doomed affection, shuttling between pride in his achievements and despair at his murder. They let him ramble on, garnering an immense amount of information as he did so. The corpse in the police morgue began to take on life and definition. When the recitation finally came to an end, Marmion asked the question that had been on the tip of his tongue since he entered the house.

'Did your son have any enemies, Mr Ablatt?'

The older man blinked. 'No, he didn't,' he answered, resentfully. 'Not the way you mean, Inspector. People didn't like it because he refused to join up and some of them called him names. Then there are those things painted on the side wall. They hurt us at the time but we got used to them. But there were never any real *enemies*. Nobody hated Cyril enough to kill him.' The question had unnerved him somehow and he was trembling. 'I know you want me to come with you but I'll need to get dressed and I'd like a little time to myself first, if that's all right.'

'Take as much time as you like, sir,' said Marmion, sympathetically. 'And thank you for being so helpful. Oh, there is one more thing. We'll need a recent photograph of your son.'

'I'll find one.'

'Thank you. Could the sergeant and I take a look at your son's room, please?'

Ablatt was defensive. 'Why do you want to do that?'

'We're still trying to build up a picture of him.'

'But I've told you all you need to know.'

'His room might be able to add a few salient details.'

'Yes,' said Keedy. 'You told us that he spent a lot of time in it.'

Ablatt gazed upwards. 'He used to read up there – and practise his speeches.'

'You didn't mention any speeches, sir.'

'Didn't I?'

'What sort of speeches were they?'

'The kind he was going to make at the meeting yesterday. Cyril had studied public speaking, you see. It's what gave him his confidence. He could talk the hind leg off a donkey.' He looked suspiciously from one to the other. 'All that you'll find up there is

a pile of books.'

'Their titles might tell us something about him,' said Marmion. Well?'

It took Gerald Ablatt a long time to reach his decision. Part of him wanted to protect his son's privacy while another part of him was eager to do anything that would help the police. In the end, realism won the battle against family sentiment. Ablatt pointed upstairs.

'It's the room at the back,' he said.

Without another word, he went slowly upstairs, grief visibly weighing him down. In the short time they'd been with him, he seemed to have aged ten years.

'I felt so rotten having to tell him the news,' confessed Marmion. 'It was like sticking a knife into him.'

'He bore up very well – better than most people do.'

'Did you believe everything he told us about his son?'

'Yes,' said Keedy. 'He'd have no reason to lie, would he?'

'Let's go and find out.'

Having given the father time to get to his bedroom, they ascended the stairs. As they did so, they could hear the sound of sobbing coming from behind the first door they reached. They walked along the landing to the room at the rear. Marmion led the way in and put on the light. There was barely enough space for the two of them to get inside. Crammed into the room was a single bed, a bedside table, a wardrobe and a bookcase filled to overflowing. Books also stood on the window sill, the top of the wardrobe and the floor. Many of them were dog-eared and had tattered covers. On the bedside table was a large Bible.

Marmion's eye went to the framed photograph on the wall. It showed Cyril Ablatt and what he assumed was his mother, both smiling at the camera. He knew that it must have been taken at least three years ago when Mrs Ablatt was still alive.

'Nice-looking lad,' he said. 'I wish *I'd* looked like that at his age. It would have made me more popular among the ladies.'

'Yet his father said he didn't have one,' recalled Keedy. 'What does that make him – a mother's boy?'

'I don't know. How would you describe someone who spends most of his time alone in his bedroom?'

'I'd say he was a silly fool. He's missing all the fun.'

'This was fun to him, Joe. He loved his books.'

'All work and no play ...'

'Why did he stay up here when he could have been reading downstairs? It would have been far more comfortable to sit in an armchair. There has to be a reason why he preferred being up here.'

'Tell me what it is.'

'He was secretive,' said Marmion. 'That's what this bedroom says to me. There are things in here that he didn't want anyone else to know.'

'What sort of things?'

They conducted a quick search, opening the wardrobe to check its contents, examining the items on the little mantelpiece and even looking under the bed. Keedy reached out a long arm to retrieve a scrapbook. He flicked it open and saw newspaper cuttings pasted neatly inside it. Most related to the war and to those who campaigned