MURDER BY CANDLELIGHT

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MURDER BY CANDLELIGHT

TEN CLASSIC CRIME STORIES FOR WINTER

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Contents

It Takes Two …

Cyril Hare

It takes two to make a murder. The psychology of the murderer has been analysed often enough; what qualifies a man to be murdered is a subject less frequently discussed, though sometimes, perhaps, more interesting.

Derek Walton, who was killed by Ted Brackley on a dark December evening in Boulter's Mews, Mayfair, was uniquely fitted for his part in that rather sordid little drama. He was a well-built young man, five feet eight inches high, with dark hair and hazel eyes. He had a toothbrush moustache and walked with a slight limp. He was employed by Mallard's, that small and thriving jewellers' establishment just off Bond Street, and at the time of his death had in his pocket a valuable parcel of diamonds which Mallard had told him to take to Birmingham to be reset. The diamonds, naturally enough, provided the motive for the murder, but Walton would not have died exactly when and how he did

had he been fat, or blue-eyed, or more than five feet nine, for Brackley was a cautious man. There was one other fact in Walton's life which finally loaded the scales against him – he was given to gambling on the dogs, and fairly heavily in debt.

There was very little about Walton that Brackley did not know, after a period of intense study which had extended now for a matter of months. Patiently and remorselessly he had studied his quarry in every aspect. Every detail in his physical appearance, down to the least trick of gesture, gait or accent, had been noted with a more than lover-like devotion. A creature of habit, Walton was an easy subject for observation, and his goings-out and comings-in had long since been learned by heart. Brackley knew all about the lodgings in West London where he lived, the pubs he frequented, the bookies he patronised, his furtive and uninteresting love affairs. More than once he had followed him to Birmingham, where his parents lived, and to the very doors of Watkinshaws, the manufacturing jewellers there who carried out the exquisite designs on which old Nicholas Mallard's reputation had been built. In fact, Brackley reflected, as he waited in the shadows of Boulter's Mews, about the only thing he did not precisely know about Walton was what went on inside his head. But that was an irrelevant detail, as irrelevant as are the emotions of a grazing stag to the stalker the moment before he presses the trigger.

Walton was later than usual that evening. Brackley took a quick glance at his wristwatch and frowned. In ten minutes' time the constable on his beat was due at the end of the mews. He decided that he could allow himself another two minutes

at the most. After that, the margin of safety would be too small, and the operation would have to be called off for the night. A later opportunity would offer itself no doubt, and he could afford to wait, but it would be a pity, for the conditions were otherwise ideal. The shops had closed and the sound of the last assistants and office workers hurrying home had long since died away. The tide of pleasure traffic to the West End had not yet set in. A faint mist, too thin to be called a fog, had begun to rise from the damp pavements. What on earth was keeping Walton back?

The two minutes had still thirty seconds to run when Brackley heard what he was waiting for. Fifty yards away, in Fentiman Street, he heard the back door of Mallard's close, and the rattle of the key in the lock as Walton secured the premises behind him. Evidently he was the last out of the shop as usual. There was a pause, long enough to make Brackley wonder whether his quarry had defeated him by deciding to walk out into Bond Street instead of taking his usual shortcut through the mews; and then he heard the unmistakable limping footsteps coming towards him. He realised, as he slid back into the open doorway behind him, that the steps were decidedly faster than usual. That was unfortunate, since everything depended on precise timing. Now, at the critical moment, so long prepared, so carefully rehearsed, there would have to be an element of improvisation, and improvisation meant risk. Brackley had been to endless pains to eliminate risk in this affair. He resented having any put upon him.

After all, he need not have worried. The business went perfectly according to plan. As Walton passed the doorway

Brackley stepped out behind him. A quick glance to either side assured him that the mews was deserted. He took two soundless paces in time with his victim. Then the rubber-handled cosh struck once, behind the right ear, precisely as he had intended, and Walton pitched forward without a groan.

The body never touched the ground. Even as he delivered the blow, Brackley had followed up and caught it round the waist with his left hand. For an instant he stood supporting it, and then with a quick heave lifted it onto his shoulder and carried it into the entry from which he had emerged. The whole incident had not taken more than ten seconds. There had been no sound, except the dull impact of the blow itself and the faint clatter made by the suitcase which Walton had been carrying as it fell to the ground. The case itself and Walton's hat, lying side by side in the gutter, were the only evidence of what had occurred. Within as short a space of time again Brackley had darted out once more and retrieved them. The door closed silently behind him. Boulter's Mews was as silent as a grave and as empty as a cenotaph.

Panting slightly from his exertions, but completely cool, Brackley went swiftly to work by the light of an electric torch. He was standing in a small garage of which he was the legitimate tenant, and he had laid the body upon a rug behind the tailboard of a small van of which he was the registered owner. The cosh was beside it. There had been little bleeding, and he had made sure that what there was had been absorbed by the rug. Quickly and methodically he went through Walton's pockets. The diamonds, as he expected, were in a small, sealed packet in an inside coat pocket. A

brown leather wallet contained some of Walton's business cards, a few pound notes and some personal papers. Then came an agreeable surprise. In a hip pocket, along with a cheap cigarette case, was a thick bundle of pound notes. Brackley did not stop to count them, but he judged that there were a hundred of them, more or less. He grinned in the darkness. Other arrangements had compelled him to allow Walton to go to the dog races unattended during the last two weeks. Evidently his luck there had turned at last – and just in time. He stuffed the notes along with the rest into his own pockets and then minutely examined the appearance of the dead man from head to foot.

What he saw satisfied him completely. Walton, that creature of habit, had dressed for his work that day in exactly the same clothes as usual. The clothes that Brackley was now wearing were identically the same. Brackley's shoulders were not quite so broad as Walton's, but a little padding in the shoulders of the overcoat had eliminated that distinction. Brackley stood only five feet seven inches in his socks, but in the shoes he had prepared for the occasion he looked as tall as Walton had been. A touch of dye had corrected the slight difference between the colours of their hair. Brackley stroked the toothbrush moustache which he had been cultivating for the last month and decided that the resemblance would pass.

No casual observer would have doubted that the man who limped out of the southern end of the mews carrying a small suitcase was other than the man who had entered its northern end a scant five minutes earlier. Certainly the newspaper seller in Bond Street did not. Automatically he extended Walton's usual paper, automatically he made the same trite

observation he had made to Walton every evening, and heard without comment the reply which came to him in a very fair imitation of Walton's Midlands accent. By a piece of good fortune, a policeman was passing at the time. He would remember the incident if the newspaperman did not. Walton's presence in Bond Street was now firmly established; it remained to lay a clear trail to Birmingham.

A taxi appeared at just the right moment. Brackley stopped it and in a voice pitched loud enough to reach the constable's ear told the man to drive to Euston. For good measure, he asked him if he thought he could catch the 6.55 train to Birmingham, and expressed exaggerated relief when the driver assured him that he had time to spare.

Walton always took the 6.55 to Birmingham, and travelled first class at his firm's expense. Brackley did the same. By a little touch of fussiness and a slightly exaggerated tip, he contrived to leave an impression on the porter who carried his bag to the train which he hoped would be remembered. Walton always dined in the restaurant car. Brackley was in two minds whether to carry his impersonation as far as that. The car was well lighted, and some of these waiters had long memories and sharp eyes. He decided to venture, and had no cause to regret it. The attendant asked him if he would have a Guinness as usual, and remarked that it was some time since he had seen him on that train and hadn't he grown a little thinner? Brackley, taking care not to show his teeth, which were more irregular than Walton's, agreed that he had, and drank off his Guinness in the rather noisy manner that Walton always affected. He left the dining car just before the train ran into New Street, taking care not to overdo the limp.

As he made his way back to his compartment he reflected with the conscious pride of the artist that the campaign had been a complete success. What was left to be done was comparatively simple, and that had been prepared with the same methodical detail as the rest. At New Street station Walton would abruptly and finally disappear. His suitcase would go into the railway cloakroom, to be discovered, no doubt, in due course when the hue and cry for him had begun. Walking through carefully reconnoitred back streets, Brackley would make his way from the station to the furnished room where a change of clothes and identity awaited him. Next day, in London, the van in which Walton's body was now stiffening would drive quietly from Boulter's Mews to the garage in Kent, where a resting place was prepared for its burden beneath six inches of newly laid concrete. There would be nothing to connect that unobtrusive journey with a young man last seen a hundred miles the other side of London.

The trail would end at Birmingham, and there enquiries would begin – and end. Walton's parents, who were expecting him for the night, were unlikely to inform the police when he failed to arrive. The first alarm would probably be sounded by Watkinshaws, when the diamonds they were expecting were not delivered in the morning. Whether Walton's disappearance was held to be voluntary or not was an academic question which it would be interesting to follow in the newspaper reports. But he judged that when the state of Walton's finances was revealed the police would be cynical enough to write him off as yet another trusted employee who had yielded to temptation when his debts got out of hand. A hunt for a live Walton, fugitive from justice,