The Saltmarsh Murders

Gladys Mitchell

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CHAPTER I

MRS. COUTTS' MAGGOT

There are all sorts of disadvantages in telling a story in the first person, especially a tale of murder. But I was so mixed up in the business from first to last, and saw so much of it from all conceivable angles and from nearly everybody's point of view, that I can't very well stand outside the story and recount it in a detached manner.

I had taken an arts degree at Oxford, and was intending to read for the Bar when a bachelor uncle died and left me thirty thousand pounds on condition that I went into the Church. Well, my mother and sisters were living on about two hundred and fifty a year at the time, and I owed my father's friend, Sir William Kingston-Fox, for my University fees, so I took the will at its word and did three years slum curating in the South-East district, Rotherhithe way. After that, Sir William recommended me to the Reverend Bedivere Coutts, Vicar of Saltmarsh, and I became the curate there.

I didn't like Mr. or Mrs. Coutts, but I liked Daphne and William. Daphne was eighteen when I first knew her, and William was fourteen. I fell in love with Daphne later, of course. Well, not so much later, really. Daphne and William were surnamed Coutts, and were old Coutts' niece and nephew.

As I look back over the whole thing, I can see that

the match laid to the train of gunpowder must have been the day upon which it became known to Mrs. Coutts that our housemaid, a quiet, softly-spoken, rather pretty country girl called Meg Tosstick, was going to have a baby. I think Meg herself had known for about three months that the thing was going to happen, and had kept a shut mouth and a demeanour of great calmness. Awfully creditable, at least, I think so, because I imagine it must be a rather hysteria-making—(Daphne's word, of course, not mine)—thing to be carrying a baby when one isn't married and has a boss like Mrs. Coutts.

The net result of Mrs. Coutts' discovery that the poor girl was with child, was as may be imagined. Out went the girl, in spite of the fact that she told Mrs. Coutts her father would thrash her and kick her into the street if she lost her place—the old devil used to turn up regularly at both the Sunday services, too !—he was our verger—and Mrs. Coutts told the vicar that public prayers would have to be said for the girl.

If there's one thing for which Coutts was to be admired it was for the fact that, afraid of his wife as he was, he never allowed her to dictate to him where his job was concerned. In the home she reigned supreme, but in the church she became as other women are, and had to cover her bally head. He replied, on this occasion, that it would be the time for public prayers when the girl herself asked for them, and then he turned to me and asked me whether I was going to visit the girl's home and soothe her father, or whether he should go himself. I left it to him, of course. In the end, the innkeepers, Lowry and Mrs. Lowry, who were extra-

ordinarily alike to look at, by the way, decided to take the girl in, and promised to see her through. I didn't know at the time whether Coutts paid them for it, but I supposed that he did. I didn't like the chap, but he was very decent where the parishioners were concerned. Besides, I think his wife's attitude got his goat rather. At any rate the next we heard of Meg Tosstick was the news that she was a mother.

Mrs. Coutts was one of the first to get hold of the tidings, of course.

" It's happened," said Mrs. Coutts. She came into the study where Coutts and I were working, removed her fabric gloves, folded them and laid them on the small mahogany table which had belonged to her mother. The table was inlaid on the top surface with squares of ebony and yellow oak for chess, but no one at the Saltmarsh vicarage played chess, and so the table supported a small cheap gramophone and two cigarette tins containing gramophone needles. The blue tin with the gold lettering held the unused, and the yellow tin with the scarlet lettering held the used, needles. I was sentimental, rather, about these tins because Daphne and I used to dance to the strains of the gramophone. Mrs. Coutts took off her rather frightful dark brown hat, shoved her hair this way and that, as ladies do, and laid the hat on top of the gramophone case. She was a tall, thin woman with eyes so deep in her head, that, beyond the fact that they were dark, you couldn't tell their colour. She had thinnish lightish eyebrows and a nose whose attempt to give an expression of benevolence and generosity to her face was countered heavily by an intolerant mouth and a rather receding

chin. She seated herself in the only comfortable chair, of course, sighed and began to drum nervously on the broad leather arm. I think her rotten nerves were what got on me, really. Her hands, though, were really rather fine. Long, thin, strong-fingered hands, you know. She was rather a fine pianist.

As usual, she started straight in to bait the great man, who, to my quiet delight, had taken no notice at all of her entrance beyond clicking his tongue in an irritated sort of way.

"Have you nothing to say, Bedivere?" she demanded.

"No, my dear, I don't think I have," her husband replied. "Would you mind not tapping like that? I can't concentrate upon my sermon."

"If you are not able to improve upon last Sunday's performance, it won't make much difference whether you concentrate or not," replied Mrs. Coutts, sharply. It was justified, mind you. His previous effort had been well below forty per cent.

"Oblige me, my dear, by not referring to my preaching as a performance," said the old man. He laid down his pen, scraped his chair back and turned to look at her. I rose to go, but he glared at me and waved me to my work. I was checking his classical references.

"I suppose I shall get no peace until I hear the news, whatever it is," he added, "therefore open your heart, my dear Caroline, and do please be as brief as possible. I *must* get my sermon ready this afternoon. You know I've that match to umpire to-morrow."

He stood up, removed his pince-nez and bestowed

upon his life-partner a bleak smile. He was a blue-eyed, hard-faced man in middle life, with more of the athlete's slouch than the scholar's stoop about his shoulders. He was a hefty bloke, very hefty. His hands and wrists were hairy, he had the jowl of a prize-fighter and his thigh muscles bulged beneath his narrow black trousers. He looked out of the window and suddenly bellowed, " Hi ! Hi ! Hi ! " so that I leapt into the air with fright. The window rattled in its worm-eaten frame and his wife also leapt nervously from her chair.

" It's all right, my dear. It's only William at those hens again. The boy's a perfect curse. I shall be glad when the holidays are over, except that I must have him to play for the village against Much Hartley on August Monday. We're a man short, now that Sir William has had Johnstone run in for poaching. Sir William, I really believe, would let a man off for shooting his mother but not for poaching his game. A nuisance. Johnstone could be relied on in the slips and would have made a useful change bowler."

" Never mind about cricket," said Mrs. Coutts. " The thing that worries me about the Bank Holiday is this wretched fête at the Hall."

" The sports, you mean ? " The vicar, having barged her off the subject of his last sermon, became more genial.

" I do not mean the sports, Bedivere, although I am aware that you take interest in nothing else that goes on in the village," she said. The old man let out a groan and decidedly weakened.

" But does anything else go on in the village ? " he

asked. "I mean, of course, apart from the daily round?"

"If you've no conception of what goes on in the village, Bedivere," said the lady, finding a spot and proceeding to bowl slow twisters, "it isn't my fault. I've attempted to bring it to your notice time and again. And I must say, even at the risk of becoming tedious, that the kind of behaviour which obtained last year at the village fête has got to stop. The village will get itself a name like Sodom and Gomorrah if things are allowed to go on unchecked. It is your clear duty to announce from the pulpit next Sunday, and to repeat the announcement on the following Sunday, that you will publicly proclaim the names of all those who transgress the laws of decency and proper behaviour in Sir William Kingston-Fox's park on August Bank Holiday."

"But, my dear girl," said the batting side, pulling itself together, "apart from the fact that the whole thing would most certainly be regarded by the bishop as a rather cheap stunt to fill the church, how on earth am *I* to know how the village behaves itself in the Hall grounds on August Monday? You know as well as I do that my activities are confined to assisting to put up the tea tent for the ladies and to running off the sports finals for the children. And I can only manage the sports if our side is batting and my own innings is at an end. In the evening, as you very well know, I come back here, shut all the windows, and turn on the wireless. People don't want a clergyman about when they're enjoying themselves dancing and skylarking."

Mrs. Coutts' lip curled.