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The Detective Branch

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Published by Phoenix

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The DETECTIVE BRANCH

ANDREW PEPPER

PHOENIX

ONE

According to a passer-by, three pistol blasts shattered the calm of a trading morning on Drury Lane. They came from inside Cullen's pawnbroker shop. According to the witness, Robert Morgan, a printer who had once served in the merchant navy and who'd been walking past the shop, the shots were fired in rapid succession. As he later told the police, he stepped into the dingy shop and through the waft of dust and powder he saw two bodies sprawled out on the tiled floor. The owner of the shop, Samuel Cullen, lay on his back in front of the counter, blood seeping from his stomach, his expression oddly resigned. The other man had been shot in the back and had tried to crawl towards the door, perhaps to get help, and a trail of his blood was smeared across the tiles. When Pyke inspected him a few hours later, his hair was matted with blood and his lips were caked with dust. Pyke found the third man under the stairs at the back of the shop, curled up like a baby, and when he laid him out, he saw that the blast must have caught the man in the face because there was almost nothing left of it. His chin, mouth, cheeks and nose had all been pulped by the ball-shot.

The shop was located on Short's Gardens between a ginnery and an eating house where, on a normal day, a woman with black hair and thick ankles would have been ladling tripe stew into thruppenny bowls. The street name may have conjured images of bucolic tranquillity but in

reality it was a narrow, dirty lane in one of the most run-down parts of the city, a tangled knot of decrepit tenements and open cesspools. Children with wan, malnourished faces squatted barefoot in the filth while wolfish dogs scoured the gutters for scraps. Usually the street itself would be choked with fish and vegetable barrows, and donkey carts laden with coal, but because of what had happened, barricades had been erected at either end, and although curious bystanders had begun to mass behind them, it was still eerily quiet.

The pawnbroker's shop was where the neighbourhood's poor came to trade their last possessions – silver lockets left to them by their grandmothers and, if they were desperate enough, the boots straight off their feet. The pawnbroker would give them a fraction of the true value of the item they brought in, and a slip of paper allotting sixty days in which to reclaim their property. People rarely did; in which case the items were sold for five or six times more than the pawnbroker had paid.

Cullen's shop was typical of its kind and nothing about it suggested that its owner possessed – or had ever possessed – something that might be worth killing for. The makeshift shelves were stacked with pairs of old boots, petticoats, dirty cotton-print dresses, soldiers' uniforms dating back to the time of Napoleon, braces, broken umbrellas, cheap metal combs, mildewed bonnets, torn books and magazines.

Having arrived with two of his sergeants, Whicher and Shaw, Pyke had cleared the shop and inspected the dead bodies. He didn't know, and had never come across, Samuel Cullen – another indication of the man's lowly status. Cullen had been identified by the owner of the neighbouring ginnery, who had peered down at the other victims and declared he'd never seen them before. But Pyke had. When he'd rolled over the corpse of the man who'd been shot in the back and had tried to crawl out of the shop, he found himself staring at a face he knew. He stood up suddenly,

held his breath and wiped his upper arm across his forehead. Harry Dove was the friend of a friend. A friend, if that was the right word, who wouldn't want his name dragged into a murder investigation.

'Know him, then?' Whicher said, perhaps because he'd seen Pyke's reaction.

'I thought I did, for a moment,' Pyke said, turning away from Whicher to shield his expression.

'Oh.' If Whicher didn't believe him, he hid the fact well. 'You?'

Whicher shrugged. 'What about the other fellow, the one you found under the stairs.'

'What about him?'

'Any idea who he is?'

Pyke opted to ignore the question. 'Is Shaw upstairs with the passer-by?'

Whicher nodded. He was short, for a policeman. Just five foot eight, the minimum height to gain entry to the force. His dark hair was closely cropped and his clean-shaven face was pitted with smallpox scars. But it was his eyes which stood out: they were emerald green and shone with understated intelligence. He didn't say much but he had a keen eye for detail and a sharp memory. Although the man was young, Pyke already regarded him as his natural successor, or at least the one most capable of taking charge of an investigation. Whicher was cool, methodical and, equally important, he kept himself to himself outside work hours. The others, Pyke had heard, regarded him as aloof.

'Shaw is taking care of the wife, too,' Whicher said. 'She was out running errands when the robbery took place. Came back to find her shop crawling with policemen. She collapsed on the floor and had to be restrained.'

'You're calling it a robbery, then?'

'Why? You don't think it was?' He gave Pyke a sceptical look.

Earlier, they had come across the pawnbroker's safe, behind the counter at the back of the shop. It had been opened and emptied. The key was still in the lock.

'The passer-by said he heard three shots in quick succession. Said he entered the shop almost immediately.'

'So?'

'Let's assume that the safe was cleared before the men were shot.'

Whicher put his hands on his hips while he considered Pyke's hypothesis. 'That sounds about right.'

'So why did the gunmen open fire on Cullen and the other two *after* they'd got what they'd come for?'

Whicher shrugged. 'You think there was more than one of them?'

'Three shots were fired. In rapid succession. That's what the witness said, wasn't it?'

'Yes.'

'In which case, a single gunman wouldn't have had time to reload his pistol.'

Pyke turned his thoughts back to Dove and whether he should own up to recognising him, what the consequences might be. He looked down at the bodies, and tried to reconcile the conflicting sentiments assailing him. It was his job to remain detached, to see things as they were, but it was hard to look at the crime scene and not feel a twinge of excitement. An abomination had been perpetrated and it was his job to find the man or men responsible. At bottom, it was why he'd agreed to join the police force; because he loved the thrill of the chase.

A little later Cullen's wife confirmed the identification of her husband with a nod and sniffle but said she hadn't ever seen the other two men before.

'And before you ask,' she said, wiping her nose on the sleeve of her dress, 'I don't know nobody what'd want to kill my Sammy, neither.'

'But he can't have been a popular man, given how he earned his living.'

That made her snort. She was fifty, Pyke estimated, a few years older than her husband, and had probably done well to marry at all. Her skin was dark and tough, her eyes small and quick, like a magpie's.

'Sammy didn't force folk to do business with 'im. And he gave 'em a fair price, compared to some of them others. Else they wouldn't come back.'

Pyke nodded. Anyone with a petty grievance against Cullen wasn't likely to go to the shop armed with a pistol or blunderbuss. 'Had your husband ever been in trouble with the law?'

The wife glowered at him and folded her arms.

'Was your husband ever convicted of a crime, Mrs Cullen?'

She refused to meet his stare or answer his question and Pyke decided not to force the issue. If Cullen had been arrested or convicted of fencing stolen goods, they would find out soon enough.

'Has anyone made threats against your husband recently?'

This time Pyke saw that he'd struck a nerve and, before Cullen's wife could deny it, he added, 'If they didn't find what they were looking for, they'll be back, you know that.'

'Like you said, some folk round 'ere don't care for how we earn our bread. But we ain't got no problems with our neighbours. Ask 'em if you don't believe me.'

Pyke stole a glance at Whicher. 'Was your husband expecting someone this morning? Did he say anything to you about a visit?'

She assessed him coolly. 'He did say something over breakfast this morning. Said someone was comin' to see him, an' it might be good for business. Truth be told, he seemed quite excited.'

'Did your husband mention any names?'

Biting her lip, Cullen's widow looked into Pyke's face,

the extent of her grief apparent for the first time, and shook her head.

The full complement of the Detective Branch assembled in the back room of the shop just after five.

Two members had left or been promoted in recent months, which meant there were now just four of them, five including Pyke. Frederick Shaw was the youngest and the one who deferred to Pyke's authority the most. Pyke didn't encourage this and found it more irritating than endearing, but while he felt Shaw was too timid and too beholden to the rules, the man had a quick mind and was willing to learn. He also had the kind of uniform, nondescript features that were useful in their line of work, meaning he could disappear easily into a crowd. He was average height, average build, average weight, with short brown hair and no sideburns or whiskers, as was the fashion. William Gerrett, on the other hand, always drew attention to himself. In some ways, this wasn't his fault. At six foot three inches, he was a head taller than anyone else in the room and had the kind of weak chin that disappeared into the flesh of his neck. He was flabby and heavy boned, too: a farmer's lad who had never quite outgrown his natural talent for tilling the soil and who was quite unsuited to the careful, painstaking logic of police work. He had made a name for himself by being an intimidating figure on the beat, but those skills had little value in the Detective Branch and Pyke had often wondered why he'd been chosen as a detective in the first place. Pyke didn't care for the man's looks or his poor personal hygiene, but it was the man's sloppiness that he couldn't forgive. Often Gerrett would forget to file even the most rudimentary pieces of information and needed to be reminded, two or three times a day, what he was supposed to be doing.

Shaw, Gerrett and the fourth member of the Branch,

Eddie Lockhart, all lived together in a boarding house with the other single officers in Great Scotland Yard. As far as Pyke could tell, Gerrett and Shaw were friends, but Lockhart was the linchpin of the group and, by some margin, the most charismatic and handsome of them. At six feet tall, he was about the same height as Pyke but he was thinner and wirier, and wore the thinnest of moustaches, which he doubtless had to trim each morning. He had a natural confidence and an easygoing manner which worked well for him in the job, as witnesses and even suspects felt comfortable talking to him. But he was also the member of the Branch that Pyke knew the least about and the one who kept his assessment of Pyke closest to his chest. In fact he had seemingly made a conscious decision to keep his distance from Pyke and perhaps resented the fact that Pyke tended to consult first with Whicher rather than him, even though he was older. Lockhart was also intelligent, which made him either a useful ally or a potentially awkward presence in the team. Thus far, Pyke had found him to be the latter.

Pyke told them to gather round and ran through what had happened. Their eyes glistened with alarm and excitement. They might all have worked on murder investigations before but Pyke suspected that none of them had been in such close proximity to three dead bodies. Even Lockhart had baulked when he'd first stepped into the shop. Pyke examined their faces. They were all men he had inherited when he'd assumed the position of head of the Detective Branch at the end of the previous year. At the time he had been told he would be able to recruit two additional men of his own choosing, but now he had been informed that he would have to wait for replacements for the two who had left.

'Whatever else you were working on, gentlemen, this now takes priority. There will, of course, be immense pressure on us to find and arrest the person, or persons, who

committed this act. I'll expect your full co-operation. Is that understood?'

They all nodded. The air around them was still thick with the scent of fresh blood.

'Let's start with Cullen, then. From the look of his shop, I'd say he wasn't too successful as a pawnbroker. Was he a fence, too? Perhaps. The wife as good as admitted he sometimes dabbled in stolen goods. I'll need a volunteer to visit Bow Street first thing in the morning, go through the records there, and find out if he was ever convicted of a crime.'

Shaw put up his hand. 'I'll do it, sir.' He was always the first to volunteer and insisted on calling Pyke 'sir', even though Pyke had repeatedly told them to call him by his name.

'Good.' Pyke paused, looking at his men. 'We don't know who the other two victims are. We need to identify them as quickly as possible, and find out what they were doing in the shop.' Pyke said this even though it was clear to him that a man like Harry Dove wouldn't have been there to buy a gnarled pair of boots or a broken umbrella.

'After the inquest, I've arranged for the bodies to be laid out in an upstairs room at the Queen's Head, just across the road. When news of this spreads, people will want to come and look. Someone, somewhere will know the identity of these two men, so I need one of you to remain with the bodies.'

When no one else put their hand up, Gerrett made a half-hearted gesture. Secretly Pyke was relieved; it was the least taxing of the tasks and hence the one most suited to Gerrett's capabilities. Pyke thanked him and moved on.

'The fact that the safe was open and its contents had been removed suggests robbery as the likely motive. But the three men were shot dead *after* the gunman or gunmen had got what they wanted. Why would they do that? Did Cullen

or one of the others try to disarm the gunman and fail?'

Pyke stared at their faces. He didn't get an answer, nor did he expect one. 'If it was, in fact, a robbery, we need to work out what was taken.' He looked at Whicher. 'I want you to have a look at Cullen's books. Talk to the wife, if you have to. Make a list of what was stolen. There'll also be a record of what people brought in to be pawned. Look for anything unusual or valuable and make a note of it.'

Next, Pyke turned to Lockhart. 'I want you to knock on doors and speak to the neighbours. The man or men we're looking for might've entered the shop from the street or from Drury Lane. Someone might have seen them. Similarly I'm guessing they left through the backyard. Again, someone living in one of the tenements might have seen something. Talk to people, try to jog their memories.'

Lockhart nodded curtly but said nothing. He seemed almost jittery and couldn't bring himself to look at the corpses.

'Whoever did this,' Pyke said, 'came prepared. They came with loaded pistols. The witness heard three shots in rapid succession. That tells us they didn't have any qualms about pulling the trigger.'

Pyke thought about the bodies laid out in the adjacent room. Briefly, he tried to imagine someone walking into Cullen's shop, pistol already drawn; imagined this man ordering Cullen to open the safe and empty the contents into a bag; imagined him turning on Cullen and firing. Perhaps it had been a double-barrelled pistol, in which case he could have turned it on Dove or the other man and fired again. But a man like Harry Dove wouldn't have given him the time to reload. So maybe the gunman had used two pistols, or maybe there had been two gunmen after all?

Killing someone was never easy, but whoever had done this had moved from man to man, seemingly firing at will. Pyke closed his eyes and tried to picture the scene: the jolt

of the pistol as the shot was discharged, the tearing of flesh, the screaming, the acrid whiff of burnt powder. None of this had put off the gunman. Rather he had gone about his task with methodical precision. One shot, followed by another, followed by another.

It struck Pyke later that he wasn't looking for a robber. He was looking for an assassin; someone who liked to kill.

'How's your uncle?' Edmund Saggers asked. He had managed to push his considerable bulk to the front of the barricade and persuade one of the uniformed constables to let him talk to Pyke.

'He's been better,' Pyke said, glancing at the shining faces of the mob gathered behind him. 'He's been worse, too.'

As a reporter for the *London Illustrated News* and, before that, a freelance penny-a-liner, Saggers had met up with Godfrey Bond every month for the past ten years to talk about literary tittle-tattle over a table full of food and as much wine as both men could pour down their throats. He had also become Pyke's friend – or a friend of sorts. From time to time, Pyke found it useful to get Saggers to highlight stories arising out of particular investigations and most of the time Saggers was willing to oblige, in return for an exclusive at some later date.

'I heard he's given up his apartment in Camden and moved in with you,' Saggers said.

'That's right.' Pyke hesitated, wondering whether to voice his concerns about his uncle. 'How did Godfrey seem to you, the last time you met for lunch?' In Pyke's opinion, his uncle's health had deteriorated since the start of the year but he didn't want to articulate this to Saggers. He didn't even want to acknowledge it to himself. Although Godfrey was in his seventies, the notion that the old man's health might be failing was too much for Pyke to bear.

Saggers considered the question. He was wearing a tweed

coat and matching trousers that had been made for him and which he rarely, if ever, changed out of. 'Between the two of us, he didn't finish his wine.'

Pyke nodded. It confirmed what he'd suspected for a while. The idea panicked him, as much for Felix's sake as his own. His fourteen-year-old son was devoted to the old man. It was also true that Godfrey was the only father he, Pyke, had ever known.

Saggers gestured at Cullen's shop. 'I heard there are three dead including the owner. Shot by a person or persons unknown.'

'What else did you hear?'

Saggers let his gaze drift over Pyke's shoulder. 'Hard to understand 'em, to be honest.' He stared up at a soot-blackened building. 'This place shouldn't be called Little *Dublin*. From the accents I'd say Little Cork would be more accurate.'

'People gossip,' Pyke said. 'You must have overheard something.'

'Have you heard of the Raffertys?'

That got his attention. 'No. Should I have?'

'Three brothers from County Cork, or so I gather. Talk is, they've started their own gang.'

Pyke looked into Saggers's eyes; they were almost translucent in colour, half buried in two deep pits of flesh. 'Do people think they might be responsible for the murders?'

'I've been standing here for about an hour and I've heard the same name whispered three or four times. Draw your own conclusions.'

Ned Villums was sitting at his functional desk in his plain office in a residential street in the middle of Clerkenwell. He barely looked up when Pyke was ushered into the room by one of his assistants.

'I'm here about the Short's Gardens robbery.'

Villums finished what he'd been reading and raised his eyes. 'I've already heard about it. Three dead, if my information's correct. Nasty business.' He waited for a moment, then added, 'For what it's worth, Cullen was a stupid, shambling wreck of a man.'

Pyke wiped the sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief. 'I'm sorry to have to tell you this, Ned, but Harry Dove was one of the victims.'

'Harry? You mean . . .' Villums struggled to come to terms with what Pyke had just said.

'Shot in the back.' Villums's eyes shifted focus and instinctively he gripped the desk. 'Like I said, Ned, I'm sorry. I know how much the lad meant to you.'

To look at, Villums was as insignificant as the next man. His greasy hair had no particular style and his ill-fitting jacket and matching corduroy breeches made him look more like a costermonger than one of the shrewdest, most revered men in the city's sprawling underworld. That was exactly why he'd risen to the position he had when others had died or gone to prison. He didn't draw attention to himself; he was a good judge of character; he dealt only with people he knew and trusted; and if crossed, he could be as ruthless and cruel as the worst of them. Pyke had known and traded information with him for more than twenty years, and while he didn't exactly consider Villums to be a friend, there was, Pyke felt, a mutual respect. Knowing what they were both capable of, they had been careful not to antagonise one another. Villums was certainly not the kind of man you wanted to turn your back on.

'Jesus Christ. Sit down and tell me what happened.' Villums fetched a bottle of whisky from the shelf behind his desk and poured them both a glass.

Pyke did as Villums asked, leaving nothing out. Villums didn't interrupt. Even after Pyke had finished, he just sat there quietly, assessing what he'd been told. Pyke didn't

know how Dove had first come to Villums's attention but he had become one of the man's most trusted associates.

Eventually, after rearranging some items on his desk, Ned sat forward. 'I've heard about the men you're interested in. The Rafferty boys. Nasty types. I'm told they sometimes play cards in the King of Denmark but more often you'll find them at the Blue Dog on Castle Street.'

'But are they capable of walking into a pawnbroker's shop in broad daylight and killing three men?'

Villums shrugged. 'Rumour has it they hung a police informer on a meat hook, slit open his stomach and pulled out his intestines inch by inch.'

'Why haven't I heard of them?'

'They do robberies, mainly. Houses, shops, warehouses, even banks. They're careful, though. Makes me wonder whether they would walk into a pawnbroker's shop in the middle of the day like that.'

Pyke picked up the whisky glass Villums had filled for him. 'The bodies of two as-yet-unidentified men will be laid out for public viewing. Sooner or later someone will recognise Harry.'

Villums nodded. 'And you think I'll be dragged into the investigation?'

'Your connection to Harry isn't exactly a secret.'

'But you're in charge of the investigation.'

Now they were getting down to it. Pyke sat back in his chair and drank some whisky. 'You're asking me to keep your name out of it?'

'If people know about my connection to Harry, they might find out about my association with you. If that becomes public knowledge, it wouldn't be good for either of us.'

Pyke tried to assess whether this constituted a threat or not. He had traded information for money with Villums and subsequently a pickpocket ring and a gang of house-

breakers had been tried and convicted. He had also been paid for arresting Villums's enemies. Pyke was happy to leave the ethics of his actions for others to worry about: the convictions had put men who stole for a living behind bars and had been instrumental in consolidating Pyke's status in the Detective Branch and the New Police. It was also true that Pyke had plenty of enemies, men who had opposed his appointment and who would dearly love to expose him as a liar and a criminal.

When he'd first found out that Pyke was going to join the Detective Branch, Villums's reaction had surprised him. Pyke had expected suspicion, even hostility, but Villums had welcomed the news. 'Don't you see?' he had said. 'You'll be on the inside. I'll finally have someone on the inside.' At the time, Pyke didn't try to dampen Villums's enthusiasm. He'd certainly profited from the information Villums had passed on to him but he had also tried to distance himself a little from his former associate.

'Do you know what business took Harry to Cullen's shop in the first place?' Pyke asked, deciding to change the subject.

Villums didn't seem to have heard the question. Instead he picked up the whisky bottle and poured himself another glass. 'Harry was no fool,' he said eventually, his calloused fingers wrapped around the tumbler.

'I didn't say he was.'

'You want me to be blunt, Pyke, I'll be blunt,' Villums said, suddenly. 'You're a policeman now. Keep Harry out of the investigation.'

Pyke looked into Villums's slate-grey eyes and held his stare. 'As I said, someone will recognise him sooner or later. It's inevitable.'

'Then just make sure my name isn't brought into the conversation,' Villums said.

'I'll do what I can, but I can't make any promises.'

Villums sat forward, drumming his fingers on the edge of his desk, his eyes glowing. 'We've had a good understanding for a number of years. I might even count you as a friend. But rest assured, Pyke, if I was ever faced with the choice of protecting you or saving myself, I'd do whatever was needed.'

'Then we both know where we stand.'

Villums stared at him, contemplating his next move. 'I'll ask around about Harry.'

Standing up, Pyke felt a rush of blood to his head. Or perhaps it was just the whisky. He walked to the door, then turned around. 'Ned.' He waited for Villums to look up at him. 'We've always got along by respecting each other's privacy and not interfering in each other's business.'

'So?'

'This is *my* investigation, Ned. I'm a policeman now.'

Villums seemed disappointed by this response. 'You're your own man, Pyke. Always have been, always will be.'

When he got home that evening, Pyke ate the supper left for him by his housekeeper, a middle-aged spinster called Mary Booth, and looked in on his son, Felix, who was asleep in his room. For a while, he lay on his bed reading, but sleep was beyond him so he put on his boots and let himself out into the garden of his Islington town house. It was a cooler night than the previous few and the wind was now coming from the west, carrying the hint of rain. He wandered down to the bottom of the garden where the sty was located and saw that one of his pigs, Alice, had escaped and was rooting around in his neighbour's vegetable patch. Pyke was joined by Copper, a three-legged mastiff and former fighting dog he'd acquired and now kept as a pet, and between the two of them, they managed to herd the long-bodied pig back into the sty.

A year earlier, Pyke had employed Villums to dispose of

thirteen gold bars he'd illegally acquired from the bullion vault of the Bank of England and he'd used the proceeds to buy the house where his family was now living. It was a stout, respectable terrace in Islington; strangely only a few streets away from the house on Cloudsley Terrace that his deceased wife, Emily, had inherited from her father and where they had lived in the first years of their marriage. Pyke had wondered about the wisdom of buying a house in an area that held so many memories for him but Felix had been insistent, for although he had been too young to remember the old house, he had liked the idea of living in a part of the city his mother had known.

It had almost been ten years since her death and they hardly ever talked about her. Perhaps this was as it should be, Pyke thought, as he climbed the stairs. Perhaps you ran out of things to say about someone who had been dead for so long. But late at night, when he couldn't sleep, Pyke would lie in his bed, staring up at the ceiling, and he would think about their time together, trying to remember the small details; the shape of her mouth, the touch of her fingers, the crease just above her nose that deepened whenever she became irritated or angry. Sometimes his thoughts would also turn to Jo, Felix's nursemaid and then his nanny. Pyke had had a brief and unsuccessful dalliance with her a few years earlier, and he would wonder where she was now and what she was doing. In the end, his mind always wandered back to Emily, and as Pyke lay there listening to the shutters rattle against their jambs, he thought about what had been lost and what he would never get back.