

The Tachy Murder Case

By Brett Roe



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Epilogue

Lady Tachy passed the small circle of glass in her fingers back and forth through the single beam of morning sunlight that pierced the shuttered windows of her bedroom. It gleamed and sparkled in her hand like a precious jewel. Still aglow from the night's amorous play, she felt deliciously at ease in her great canopy bed, her naked skin warm against the silken sheets.

"You were so gallant when you offered this to me," she mused, affectionately. "It must have been fate that we were sitting next to each other at that magic show at the Palace Theatre. And that the program had such dreadfully small print that I had to keep squinting at it. I've kept this with me ever since that enchanting night, my darling, so I could always feel your presence."

"A dangerous romanticism, my dear," observed her bedmate, propped up on one elbow beside her. "Suppose someone had seen it?"

"I put it on a long, thin chain that reached down to my bosom."

"Ah, then it was well hidden."

He slid his hand to the space where his monocle had so often been concealed. Lady Tachy sighed.

"At last we can be together! Everything worked out just as you planned. You've been brilliant, my darling. And as you know, I can't resist a really brilliant man."

"Including your late husband?"

"Of course. I was madly in love with Albert when we were first married. But then he began to neglect me for his work, and that's something I just can't abide. The man I love must always put me first in his life. Our love must be special and absolute."

"Well, I won't make the same mistake as poor old Albert. Or as poor old Niels, for that matter."

She giggled. "Poor old Niels! What a bore! Always stealing those furtive looks at me, and then getting so flustered whenever I met his gaze. He was just a mass of impulses with no determination. His mistake was being so fatally convenient. And you know, I don't think he even really minded what happened to him. I doubt he was ever happier in his life than when I surprised him in the lab and suggested we play that naughty little sex game. You should have seen the look on his face – like a child on Christmas morning! And after I'd handcuffed him to the chair and stuffed my stockings in his mouth, he kept that gleam in his eyes the whole time I was sitting on his lap, whispering in his ear, and squeezing his nose."

"Well, you certainly took his breath away. And I did notice that he had a rather odd look on his face when I was dragging him over to the cranny. A bit giddy for a corpse, I thought. I'm just glad that he was a better fit in that damned compartment than I was. Do you remember what a devil of a time I had getting out of it after you signaled me?"

I must say, I was quite impressed with how well you kept your composure through it all. And how deftly you handled Albert's device."

"Well, Niels gave me a nice little demonstration when he saw how *excited* it made me. And you were so dashing when you fired that pistol! You looked as if you were fighting a duel over me."

"In a way, I suppose I was. But thanks to you and Niels, the outcome was rigged quite decidedly in my favor."

"Still, it was all a terrible risk. A risk you took for me."

"And one very much worth the taking, my love. Now, you have Albert's money, and we have each other."

"It's turned out so perfectly! Except – and I hope you won't think this weak of me, darling – sometimes I do feel just a little bit sorry for them: Stuffy old Albert, who let science turn his heart into a stone; and odd, quirky Niels, always so uncertain about everything. Now that they're gone, they seem rather pitiful."

"I have only the warmest admiration for your carefully modulated compassion, my dear. And while you're at it, you might also bestow a portion on poor, old Inspector Demain. After all, the success of our scheme has quite besmirched his previously untarnished record. After such a long and distinguished career, this is the first time he ever failed to finger the real murderer. And on the verge of retirement, too."

The expression on her lover's face made Lady Tachy laugh.

"Oh, we needn't concern ourselves with that, darling. Since neither one of us will ever breathe a word, the dear inspector's reputation will stay just as sterling as ever."

"True enough, my dear. So, when all's said and done, there's not a single living soul who has any reason to complain about how things worked out. Now, let me show you a little something I learned while I was in the Orient..."

Lady Tachy giggled as her lover's mustache wriggled down her belly like a bristly caterpillar. Further down, it seemed to change into something she found far more delightful than a butterfly.

VI. Pints and Pronouncements

Inspector Demain and Colonel Ether sat across from each other at a small wooden table in the Yard Birds Pub. It was the afternoon following the dramatic closure of the Lord Tachy murder investigation. Holding a pint of stout in one hand and a smoldering cigar in the other, Colonel Ether was shaking his head in a shroud of smoke.

"I don't understand any of it, Demain. How in blazes could that lab assistant fellow have shot Lord Tachy with a gun that was still locked in the study? It doesn't make any sense."

Inspector Demain had submitted his report that same morning, but he knew the colonel rarely understood reports before they were explained to him.

"Your confusion is perfectly understandable, Colonel. The method of this murder was quite extraordinary. But all the evidence points to only one conclusion: Niels

Schrödinger killed Lord Tachy with the Lord's own gun. And he did so by firing the fatal shot the night before it struck its intended victim."

"But that's impossible, Demain!"

"No, Colonel, it's merely unprecedented. It all has to do with advanced science, energy fields and experiments with time. Sticky subjects to be sure, but I'll try to explain."

It took Demain the better part of an hour and two more pints to lay out his conclusions in a manner Colonel Ether could begin to grasp. He explained how Lord Tachy had built a device that could somehow induce certain events to occur backwards in time. The fragments of his notes that had been recovered told of experiments with projectiles sent into an energy field that caused them to retrace their trajectories back to their points of origin. These same experiments, Demain theorized, had given Lord Tachy's assistant the idea of how to murder his employer. The evening before Lord Tachy's death, Schrödinger, while filing results of the day's experiments in the study, must have used the opportunity to take the gun from his lordship's desk. Then, when he was alone in the laboratory cleaning up, he readjusted the device to carry out his diabolical plan. Positioning himself on the exact spot where he knew Lord Tachy would be standing the next morning when he turned on the machine, he held the pistol at chest height and fired it into the energy field. Having somehow configured the device to collapse the field the instant the bullet entered it, the shot was essentially caught in a frozen moment of time. The following morning, when Lord Tachy started up his device, the deadly projectile flew back along its previous path, striking Lord Tachy in the heart and killing him instantly.

"After setting his trap, Schrödinger returned the gun to the study, locked up for the night, and then hid in that concealed cranny in the laboratory wall where we later found him."

"Astounding!" declared Colonel Ether. "But why, Demain? What was his motive in all this?"

"I suspect it was a combination of personal resentment and greed. Having worked for so long in the shadow of a great man, one known to be fiercely possessive of his discoveries and accolades, it must have been too much for Schrödinger when he saw Lord Tachy about to achieve his greatest triumph. I suspect he planned to steal his lordship's personal notes – the ones with his theories and diagrams which he always kept with him and never shared with anyone – and then make it appear that the device had malfunctioned and gone up in flames, along with its inventor. That would explain the incendiary charge with the timer we found in his pocket. Of course, that type of explosive could have been used to booby-trap the machine so it detonated right after Lord Tachy activated it, but that method of murder wouldn't have gotten Schrödinger those precious notes. After securing them, and setting his charge, he must have planned to wait in the cranny until the servants broke down the door and put out the fire. In all the confusion, there'd have been ample opportunity for him to slip away. His alibi would have been that he'd left earlier that same morning on the vacation he'd given notice of weeks before. Eventually, he could have used Lord Tachy's notes to build a new device and taken credit for having succeeded where his mentor had failed."

"If that was the rascal's plan, then obviously something went terribly wrong."

“Quite right. Although Schrödinger had guessed correctly that Lord Tachy's invention would carry out his murder just as he'd intended, he hadn't counted on the effect that his tampering would have on the device itself. Apparently, it caused exactly the type of violent malfunction that he'd intended to simulate, but with a much larger explosion. As a result of the blast, the covering over the cranny became jammed and Schrödinger was trapped inside. In that small space with all the heat and smoke, he suffocated. The resulting fire consumed the device, part of the lab, and all but a few of Lord Tachy's notes.”

The old colonel shook his head. “Good lord, Demain, what a terrible waste.”

Inspector Demain took a sip of his stout and nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, Colonel Ether. But then, cold-blooded murder always is.”

V. The Hidden Truth

Inspector Demain looked up from the grisly sight at his feet – the body of a thin, middle-aged man sprawled on the grimy floor – to the expressions of surprise and horror on the faces in front of him. Demain still held the small crowbar he'd used to pry off the smoke-blackened panel behind which the corpse had been waiting to be discovered. It had tumbled out of the concealed cranny like a discarded doll.

“Is that –?” began Lady Tachy, turning pale and swaying slightly as she gazed at the contorted body. “Is that Niels Schrödinger?”

“Yes, Milady. As you can see, he never went on vacation. His presence here confirms my suspicions – suspicions based on the few remaining notes of Lord Tachy that I found in this very laboratory. It was from them that I discovered the fiendish method by which your husband was murdered. And I became convinced that Niels Schrödinger was the only person who could have carried it out.”

Colonel Ether appeared at Demain's side and glared down at the corpse as if he intended to start questioning it.

“Good lord, Demain! How in blazes did you know this fellow was hiding in the wall?”

“Everything pointed to it, Colonel. Since the day of the murder, Schrödinger's whereabouts have remained a mystery. When I reviewed the architectural records of Tachy Manor, I discovered the existence of this cranny – probably a place for Lord Tachy to store sensitive material, concerned as he was about secrecy. Some sniffing around the wainscoting convinced me that Schrödinger was still within it, and that his condition had become quite morbid.”

“Well, this pours pudding in my ear, Demain, I'll tell you that! But it looks like you've done it again. Congratulations.”

“Thank you, Colonel.”

Newton came over and offered his hand, his face thoughtful and a bit conflicted.

“Congratulations, Inspector. It appears that you were right and I was wrong.”

“No, Inspector Newton, we were both right.” Demain gave a nod toward the body on the floor. “There's the hidden rabbit.”

The gravity of Newton's expression lightened by an infinitesimal smile.
 As Demain shook his colleague's hand, he felt as if he were making a final
 farewell before departing on a one-way journey to a faraway land.
I suppose I shall miss this. Oh well, it can't be helped. It really is time to move on.

IV. Five on the Spot

By five pm the day after Inspector Demain had taken over the case, both the willing and the unwilling had been escorted by the local constabulary to Lord Tachy's ruined laboratory. The smell of smoke and chemicals still hung heavy in the air. Inspector Demain stood at the far end of the room in a gray trench coat, his hands clasped behind his back. Colonel Ether had come down from London to witness the event. He stood next to a grave Inspector Newton, the two of them watching Demain like a couple of off-stage actors. The spotlight was on him now.

"This is intolerable!" complained Lord Rutherford, looking as if he were about to whack someone with his walking stick. "How dare you drag me out of my home to this wretched place during my brandy hour!"

"My apologies, Lord Rutherford," replied Demain, "But you did insist that I keep you informed of any new developments in my investigation. I assumed you'd want to be here since I'm about to close the case."

As he'd expected, his statement set off a commotion of reactions among the four civilians. He observed them carefully, but not one betrayed anything more than surprise.

"You mean – you mean you know who murdered my husband?" exclaimed Lady Tachy, looking becomingly pale and poised in her sleek mourning dress.

"Yes, Lady Tachy. I now know the identity of your husband's murderer. And that person is right here in this room!"

A clamor erupted. How many times, wondered Demain, had he played this part in this type of situation? The constables performed their duties admirably, and order was quickly restored. Demain continued.

"As you know, milady and gentlemen, it was in this very laboratory that Lord Tachy was killed under mysterious circumstances. As a lord of the realm, a respected member of this community, and a noted scientist, Lord Tachy was a most unlikely murder victim, and so the question of motive has been almost as vexing as the question of method. The four of you, besides being interested parties in the outcome of this investigation, are also among the only people who may have had any reason to wish for his lordship's death."

Inspector Demain stared from one face to another, his own countenance remaining stern and unblinking. Lady Tachy stood as composed and regal as a statue; Lord Rutherford threw back his gaze with massive defiance; the irreverent Mr. Kuhn couldn't quite hide his anxiety behind a frozen smirk; and the enigmatic Mr. Higgs bore a massive scowl. Demain took them all in, revealing nothing in his steel-gray eyes.

"Lady Tachy, of course, became the much younger wife of a wealthy husband and now, with his death, stands to inherit the bulk of his fortune. Hers would be a motive

frequently found in popular detective fiction. Lord Rutherford has had a number of public quarrels with his neighbor over the years, including, most recently, one involving his lordship's latest research. Mr. Kuhn here was involved in a professional dispute with Lord Tachy and has admitted that his personal animosity toward his lordship clouded his judgment in a recent encounter. And Mr. Higgs had his hopes of marriage to Lord Tachy's niece frustrated by Lord Tachy's disapproval. For these reasons, each of you has been subject to suspicion since Lord Tachy's death. It is time to put those suspicions to rest. I will now reveal the identity of Lord Tachy's murderer."

Inspector Demain pulled a small crowbar from the pocket of his trench coat, turned to the wall behind him, and set to work.

III. Fingering

Despite the unrest that Demain's arrival had reportedly caused, he found Inspector Newton's conduct to be irreproachably professional and his methods a model of clockwork efficiency. Newton had even arranged for Demain to meet the four available suspects on his list that same afternoon. At teatime, Demain was escorted from the laboratory through another maze of hallways by Fields, the pale, blonde butler of Tachy Manor. There was something of the automaton in the servant's precise movements and rigid dignity, and his responses to each of Demain's questions were as flat and impersonal as if he were reciting sums.

"Inspector Newton tells me that you're quite knowledgeable about the history of this house. Is that true?"

"I do possess knowledge on that subject, sir."

"What can you tell me about its architecture? I'm especially interested in the more recent additions."

"The east wing is all that remains of the original castle, which was built in what was known as the 'Apollonian style.' For over a century, it has been a tradition in the Tachy family for the current lord to remodel or extend the mansion along more modern principles of design. Lord Albert's grandfather added on an entire new wing, utilizing an architect by the name of Maxwell who propagated it at a right angle to the original structure. Lord Albert's father then enlisted a Mr. Planck to devise an even bolder addition, but its conception was so complex that even with Planck's constant supervision, only the foundation was laid during his lordship's lifetime. When Lord Albert came of age, he engaged the firm of Heiss and Berg to complete his father's addition and utilized one of their contractors, a Mr. Feynman, to design the interior and electrical system of his laboratory."

"Are there copies of the blueprints?"

"Yes, sir. They're kept in the family archives."

"I'd like to see them – both the structural designs and the Feynman diagrams."

"Very good, sir. I'll collect them for you before you leave."

The butler conducted Demain into a well-lit sitting room where the inspector immediately became the focus of four pairs of eyes.

As Fields announced him, Lady Tachy rose from her seat.

“Thank you, Michael. That will be all.”

Tall and graceful, she was wearing a sleek, black mourning dress that accentuated both her ivory-white skin and her elegant figure. Her expression of barely contained grief seemed completely at odds with the girlish effects of her flaxen curls and hazel-blue eyes. Any man worth his salt would wish to comfort such a creature, thought Demain. Inspector Newton, with his forefinger extended, had described her first from his list of suspects.

“Lady Diane Tachy, née Nisus, was the only child of a successful wine merchant. Her mother died in childbirth. Her father had the means to send her to some good schools until drinking reduced him to debt and ill-health. After his death, she left her university studies and took various forms of employment – sales clerk, secretary, some modeling and acting. She met Lord Tachy at a dinner party given by one of her former professors. His lordship had been a widower for a little over a year at that point. They had a whirlwind courtship and were married just two months later. In the five years since then, they appear to have lived a quiet, respectable life. But there’s the usual local gossip about a May/December romance, beauty marrying brains, and a merchant’s daughter landing a wealthy husband.”

Lady Tachy greeted the inspector demurely and he expressed his condolences.

“Am I to understand that you will be taking over the investigation of my husband’s murder?”

“I’m here to offer the resources of Scotland Yard, Lady Tachy. We’ll be working in conjunction with the local constabulary.”

“Just more muddling about you mean!” The interjection came from an older gentleman of stout proportions who now surged to his feet. Adopting an attitude of authoritative indignation, he advanced on Demain with a gold-plated cane that seemed far too frail for his rotund girth. “First, our local excuse for a police force starts pulling in everyone and their grandmother to muddy up the waters, and now the Yard’s come down to make this sideshow into a national scandal!”

Demain responded with a level gaze and a calm tone. “And how do you suggest we handle this investigation, Lord Rutherford?”

There was no mistaking the man from Newton’s description, which he had begun with two fingers raised. *“Lord Rutherford owns the land next to Lord Tachy’s estate. The locals say he’s solid and respectable, but with a volatile nature at his core. He and Lord Tachy have had a number of neighborly feuds over the years, some of them quite heated. During the past few months, Rutherford publicly accused Tachy of engaging in dangerous experiments that were a threat to the community, and made vague statements about putting a stop to them. He claims he was out riding at the time of Lord Tachy’s death, but there’s no one who can corroborate his alibi.”*

“Well, for one thing, I wouldn’t go creating scandals!” declared Lord Rutherford, waving his cane in the air between them. “People from good families with proper breeding don’t go around murdering each other. Obviously, the culprit was a common burglar, or an escaped loony, or one of the servants. That’s who you should be investigating.”

Demain held his composure. “I assure you, Milord, we are investigating those sorts of persons. However, we have a duty to follow up every line of inquiry. And with all due respect, it has been my experience that members of noble families with impeccable breeding do, on occasion, commit murder. I’ve put a few of them in the dock myself.”

Rutherford's face turned red and he glared at Demain with such intensity that he appeared on the verge of splitting in two. “I give you fair warning, Inspector: I intend to hold you personally responsible for whatever comes of this investigation! Good day.”

With that, Rutherford made for the open doorway as forthrightly as a cannon ball. But at the threshold, as if he'd bounced off an invisible barrier, he abruptly reversed his momentum and turned back round to face Demain again. “And I insist that you keep me fully informed of your progress in this matter, Inspector. Make no mistake: I have prominent friends in government and I will certainly make use of their influence if this investigation does not turn out to my satisfaction. Good day!” With a final glare, he exited the room.

“Well, that’s a relief. It feels like a cool breeze in here now that all that hot air has gone.” The speaker was a slender young man with a long, equine face, dressed in a Bohemian-style black suit with a bow tie. He appeared quite bemused by his own remark and gave a wink at Inspector Demain as if they were both in on the joke. His mouth was set in a feral smirk of irreverence.

Demain considered him dispassionately. “Mr. Kuhn, I presume?”

Newton had described the man with three fingers raised. *“Willard Feyerabend Kuhn has a rather chimerical academic background in physics, philosophy and history. He's made a name for himself as something of a professional muckraker in the science world, posting a number of articles challenging the methods and opinions of several prominent scientists. He was about to publish a book – for which he'd received a sizable advance – that apparently made some critical mentions of Lord Tachy. When word of it reached his lordship, he had his solicitor block the book's release with threats of a libel suit. Kuhn's publisher then requested a face-to-face meeting between the two men to resolve the matter, and after some back and forth, Lord Tachy gave permission for Kuhn to visit him at the manor this past week. Kuhn took a room at a local inn and then visited the manor every day after his arrival, but he wasn't granted a private meeting with Lord Tachy until two days before the murder. Servants say they then heard raised voices from his lordship's study, after which they report Lord Tachy literally threw Kuhn out of the house. He claims to have been alone in his room when Lord Tachy was killed.”*

“I understand you visited this house in the days prior to his lordship's death,” said Demain. “I'd be interested in your impressions of Lord Tachy's household at that time.”

Kuhn leaned back in his chair with his legs crossed and his chin lifted as if he were about to tell a ripping yarn.

“Well, Inspector, what really struck me about this place was the atmosphere of fear and awe it contained. It was as if Lord Tachy were some kind of high priest performing holy mysteries in his inner sanctum. No one really knew what he was up to in that laboratory of his, and the whole staff seemed to be trying to hide their misgivings out of deference to 'the great man.' Even his assistant, Mr. Schrödinger, always seemed as

nervous as a cat. It was as though they all feared that one day Lord Tachy was going to unleash God or the devil into their midst. Given what happened, perhaps he did.”

“I find your remarks quite impertinent, Mr. Kuhn!” interjected Lady Tachy, her voice quivering with anger.

“My apologies, Ma’am,” replied Kuhn, appearing somewhat abashed. “I was just trying to answer the inspector’s question as honestly as I could.”

“What did you and Lord Tachy argue about,” asked Demain. “And how did it escalate to the point where a well-bred man of science would feel compelled to physically force you from his home?”

Seeming a bit chastened by Lady Tachy's ire, Kuhn adopted a more restrained manner. “Although Lord Tachy was undoubtedly a brilliant scientist,” he began, with a glance at his hostess, “That did not make him immune to the prejudices of his upbringing. Some of his attitudes were decidedly elitist – particularly in terms of science and heredity. It clearly offended him that I, a mere commoner, would publicly dispute with titled members of the scientific community. And he became outraged when I dared to challenge his views on 'the one true faith' of scientific exceptionalism.”

“You make it sound like a religious dispute.”

“In a way, it was. You see, Inspector, men like Lord Tachy hold a mythical view of science. They see it as a method-driven process of pure logic and progressive inquiry that’s leading us all to some sort of rational enlightenment. But my work has debunked that myth. Historically, their vaunted 'method' has frequently been a crutch for mere plodders and shackles for true visionaries. And although science keeps claiming to be on the verge of 'The Final Victory of Truth Over Error,' that confidence always rests on insufficiently supported theories and logically suspect assertions. Lord Tachy became quite enraged when I pointed out how that applied to some of his own published work and opinions. He even accused me of being an anarchist! At that point, I surmised that our points of view were completely incommensurable, and so I allowed myself to be escorted from the premises.”

Demain narrowed his gaze in a way that had caused many a suspect to squirm. “I find it very odd, Mr. Kuhn that you would go to all the trouble of getting a private audience with Lord Tachy – presumably, so you could convince him to allow your *magnum opus* to be published – and then provoke him in such a careless manner. Or did you have some other motive in coming here?”

Demain noted the look of apprehension that flashed across Kuhn's face. The young man shifted uneasily in his seat, causing two small coins to fall from his pocket onto the floor. With a slight look of embarrassment, he gathered them up with one hand, his cockiness withering a bit as he did so.

“My motive for coming here was as you stated, Inspector. However, I must admit that when I finally met Lord Tachy, and found him to be the virtual embodiment of all the close-minded, stifling, scientific arrogance I've been crusading against, I allowed my personal passions to get the better of me. I'm afraid my pragmatism was completely overcome by my principles.”

“Ye wouldn't know a principle if it struck you in the face, you little prat!”

The interjection came from an imposing seaman who was seated at the far end of the room. Clad in the dark blue uniform of his profession, he sat formidably upright in his chair, his stern eyes and authoritative voice seeming to solidify the air.

“If you believe you're in the right, you don't let some old geezer toss you out on your ear. Lord or no lord!”

“Do you speak from experience, Mr. Higgs?” asked Demain.

“Lord Tachy's niece, Susy, became acquainted with Petty Officer Higgs during a seaside vacation,” Newton had said, with four fingers raised. *“They began a romance and asked Lord Tachy's permission to marry. Since he was the executor of the estate of Susy's father, his late brother-in-law, he controlled her inheritance. Lord Tachy concluded that Higgs was just a fortune-hunter and forbade the marriage. As a result, Susy broke off the engagement. Higgs then jumped ship and eventually showed up at a local pub where he was heard to make drunken threats of revenge. He denies killing Lord Tachy, but it's unclear where he was or what he was doing at the time of the murder.”*

Before the bosun could answer, one of the servant girls came in and addressed Lady Tachy.

“Excuse me, mum. The cook wanted to know how many there'll be for dinner?”

“Would you care to join us, Inspector Demain?” asked her ladyship. “Our cook, Marie, makes a wonderful curry. Though I warn you, it's quite hot.”

Demain recalled his doctor's stern admonitions and politely declined the invitation. After that, he managed to conclude his questioning before his second cup of tea turned cold.

II. Burning Questions

Inspector Demain spent most of the train ride reviewing the case file. When he stepped off at the station, he found a car and driver waiting for him. The chauffeur was a short, wiry fellow with dark features and an animated manner. As he drove, he kept up a lively chatter and frequently suggested alternate routes to various points of interest.

“Your last name is Fields?” inquired Demain, noting the driver's ID tag.

“Yessir. Paul Fields.”

“Are you by any chance related to the butler at Tachy Manor?”

“Yessir. He's my older brother. Though we're not much alike. Michael's 'fair as day' and I'm 'dark as night,' as our old mum used to say. And Michael's what you might call a stickler: everything in its place, consistent routine, that sort of thing. Me, I'm more the impulsive type. I like to just let things happen and leave it up to chance. Nothin's certain and you might as well accept it, that's my motto. Here we are, sir.”

Tachy Manor sat in a rolling countryside of tamed forests, squatting hills and rustic sheep farms. Driving along the narrow road from the front gate to the entrance, Inspector Demain saw the great old house as a conflict of centuries: a solitary tower and one section of wall from the original castle, and then a series of additions expressing the architectural fancies of different ages like an aggressive march of time.

As Demain stepped out of the car into the bright midday sun, one of the tall double doors that formed the main entrance of the house swung inward causing a dark slit to open in the white facade. A quick-footed bobby emerged from it on the double. He approached Demain with a wave of his hand.

“Constable Young at your service, sir,” he exclaimed as he stopped and saluted. “Inspector Newton's at the crime scene. He left instructions that you were to be escorted there as soon as you arrived. If you'll follow me, sir.”

Demain followed the constable into the house. He was led through a long series of branching hallways as confusing as a maze. Eventually, they turned a final corner and stood facing the open doorway of a large room. Constable Young paused, adopting a confidential manner.

“Just one thing, sir. Perhaps it's not my place to say, but I don't think you should be left in the dark. Inspector Newton was a bit put off when word came down that the Yard was sending another detective to take over this case. And when we learned it was you, well, some of the men may have been a bit too open in their enthusiasm. I mean, we've all been reading about your cases since we were lads. I believe that also rubbed the inspector the wrong way. I thought you should know.”

“Thank you for enlightening me, Constable Young. I appreciate your candor.”

Demain stepped carefully through the threshold and surveyed the room. Although its interior had been ravaged by both fire and flood, its former use as a laboratory was still apparent. Most of the contents of the room – tables, desks, benches, chairs, glassware, tools and machine parts – were scattered every which way and more than half the room was scorched and blackened. There were foul puddles of ash and chemicals on the floor and the acrid smell made Demain's eyes water. Sorting through it all were two more constables and the man Demain took to be the lead detective from the county office, Inspector Newton. A weary-looking scarecrow of a man, Newton seemed both shrewd and ill at ease, like a strict principal at a school dance. He approached Demain and offered his hand in a perfunctory manner.

“Your reputation precedes you, Inspector Demain.”

After a quick handshake, Newton recited the facts of the crime scene. The remains of a long table, now twisted like a dead insect, showed the sight of the explosion that had started the fire. The spot where the body had been found was still visible as a partial outline on the soot-covered floor.

“The fire might have destroyed the entire room, and possibly Lord Tachy's body as well, if the servants hadn't gotten to it as quickly as they did,” observed Newton. “What's odd is that no one seems to know who sounded the alarm.”

“You find that point meaningful, Inspector Newton?”

“Certainly. If the person who shot Lord Tachy was the same one who sounded the alarm, then the killer must have wanted the murder to be discovered and not taken for an accidental death due to the fire.”

“A most peculiar desire for a murderer, wouldn't you say?”

“Not necessarily. The murderer may have simply realized that fire would be an unreliable cover for the crime. Left to itself, it might have failed to completely consume what the culprit wished to destroy, while trying to direct its destruction would risk

leaving clues of the intent. The way I see it, the fire could have been meant to obscure some details of the crime while leaving others for us to find.”

“An interesting theory. But you’re suggesting quite a Byzantine mind behind this affair.”

Newton looked at him coldly. “Inspector Demain, I may not have your distinguished reputation, but I assure you, I have caught some clever criminals in my time. I know when things add up and when they don’t. This case is over-populated with coincidences and paradoxes. I, for one, distrust the former and abhor the latter.”

Demain smiled. “My dear Newton, I meant no disrespect. I always treat theories with skepticism while I’m in the process of gathering facts. Including my own. Please, continue.”

Newton gave a terse nod and continued his recitation. The initial autopsy had set the time of death at around 8 am. The servants had confirmed that Lord Tachy had followed his usual routine and begun work in the laboratory at 7:30. By all accounts, Lord Tachy was alone in the laboratory with the door locked at the time of the murder.

“And I assume that the door is the only way in or out of the laboratory?” asked Demain.

“Yes. After the alarm was sounded, the servants had to smash it in. It was bolted from the inside.”

“Interesting. Do we know what sort of research Lord Tachy was engaged in?”

Inspector Newton betrayed a look of exasperation and shook his head.

“I’m afraid that’s all rather muddled. Lord Tachy had a reputation for secrecy and never corresponded with colleagues about his ongoing projects. His notes were apparently lost in the fire and so far we’ve been unable to locate his assistant, a Mr. Schrödinger. All we have to go on are the reports of Lady Tachy and the servants. Of course, none of them are scientists, and their impressions of his lordship’s work are either vague or fanciful. They all say that Lord Tachy had built some kind of machine, and a few of them understood its purpose to involve some sort of experimenting with time.”

“Is there anything left of the machine itself?”

“No. It took the brunt of the explosion. There’s not a piece of it left bigger than a shilling.”

“Well, that’s a shame. If we could determine what sort of experiments had been going on in this laboratory, I think we’d know a great deal more about what happened here. And why.”

“Frankly, Inspector Demain, I disagree. I think all this business about secret experiments and fiddling with time is just part of the same smoke screen as the ‘accidental’ fire. It’s like a magician’s trick where people get fooled into looking for some remarkable event and don’t catch the simple sleight-of-hand by which the trick’s being done.”

“You have a very logical mind, Newton. But remember, we’re not dealing with magic here, we’re dealing with advanced areas of science. So, unless we discover a trick mirror or a hidden rabbit, I think we should be open to the possibility that this murder may have involved some truly extraordinary methodology.”

Newton regarded him with a sour look. “Well, you’re in charge of the case now, Inspector Demain. But if I were you, I’d keep looking for the rabbit.” He then directed himself to the three young constables. “And just what are you men looking at? Get back to work!”

Newton's men returned to a methodical search of the crime scene, proceeding from the unscathed portion of the laboratory. Demain joined in the process at the opposite end of the room where the fire damage was the worst. He stepped gingerly between the dank puddles on the floor and peered intently at the blackened floor.

“Tell me, Newton, have you turned up any likely suspects?”

“The servants all vouch for each other’s whereabouts at the time of the murder and there’ve been no reports of any vagrants or strangers in the vicinity in the last fortnight. That leaves five possible suspects that we know of. As I mentioned, one of them, Schrödinger, hasn’t been seen since the evening before the murder. According to Lady Tachy, he’d planned to leave on an extended vacation that night or the next morning, but no one seems to know his exact itinerary.”

Newton went on describing all the suspects on his list, including their backgrounds and alibis, until Demain, looking up from the blackened shell of an overturned desk, stopped him with, “Excuse me, Inspector Newton, but could you and the constables please give me a hand with this rather large desk? I can see the edges of some papers underneath it.”

I. The Lord in the Laboratory

“I believe it’s pronounced '*Tacky*,' Sir. And yes, I have heard of the gentleman. A highly regarded scientist as I recall.”

Despite having spent most of the last hour rushing across London, Detective-Inspector Leginald R. Demain sat with an attitude of casual poise in front of the large, walnut desk in Colonel Ether’s office. His composure was genuine – this was hardly the first time in his long career that he’d been urgently summoned to Scotland Yard. Nevertheless, although his length of service had added grey to his hair and more than a few pounds to his midriff, he still felt the same lively tingle in his stomach that he always felt when he was about to receive a new case – like a school boy on the first day of class.

“Quite right, Demain,” replied Colonel Ether as he idly rolled a smoldering cigar between the fingers of his right hand. “And since he was also a respected peer of the realm, investigating his murder is going to demand a good deal of discretion as well as quick results. That’s why I sent for you. But first, tell me honestly, are you up to it?”

It was a question Inspector Demain had never had to answer before, and although now a reasonable one, it still perturbed him. “Of course, Colonel. I feel fine. My doctor has urged me to take early retirement within the year, not immediately.”

His superior regarded him thoughtfully. A large and imperious man, the Colonel always seemed to fill up the whole space of his office, causing visitors to feel enveloped by his presence. On this occasion, it was his ponderous concern that Demain felt enveloped by.

“Normally, I wouldn’t assign this type of case to a man on his way out the door, but I’d like to have my best detective on this one. Given the prominence of the victim, it’s already attracted the attention of the press, and we have to show we’re on top of it. Besides that, the local constabulary have turned up some oddities in their investigation which makes it sound right up your alley. Practically tailor-made, in fact.”

“What sort of oddities?”

Colonel Ether flipped open a report lying on the desk in front of him.

“Lord Tachy was found murdered at his estate yesterday morning. He was in his private laboratory with the door bolted from the inside. Somehow, a fire got started in the lab, and when the servants broke in to put it out, they discovered the body. He’d been shot once in the chest. The bullet appears to have come from the lord’s own pistol, which was found in a desk drawer in his study.”

“Any other peculiarities?”

“Well, there’s Lord Tachy himself. Seems to have been considered something of an eccentric genius. At the time of his death, he was working with great secrecy on some kind of contraption that’d generated a lot of rumors and concerns among his servants and neighbors. No telling at this point if that had anything to do with his murder. You’ll have to figure that out for yourself.”

“Very well, Sir. I’ll get right on it.”

The colonel flicked the report across the desk top.

“Here’s the initial report from the local detective.”

Demain scanned the first page, stroking his mustache thoughtfully. As he stood up to take his leave, he noticed the colonel peering at him strangely.

“Is something wrong, Colonel Ether?”

“I can’t make it out, Leger... there’s something queer about your face. You look different somehow.”

Demain felt himself start to flush.

“Perhaps it’s that I’m not wearing my monocle, Sir.”

Colonel Ether slapped the desk top with his left hand.

“That’s it! Your monocle. You just don’t look like yourself without it. Where in blazes is it?”

“I’m afraid I broke it, Colonel. Accidentally knocked it off my bedside table a week or two ago. Damn shame, really – I’ve had it since my regimental days in the Orient.”

Colonel Ether shook his head. “Sorry to hear that, Demain. That monocle was almost your signature – like what’s-his-name’s magnifying glass, or that other fellow’s accent. Hard to get used to you without it. Hope it doesn’t put you off your game in this investigation.”

“Don’t worry, Colonel. I don’t need a monocle to solve a murder.”

Prologue

Smack! The apple returned to the hand that had thrown it. Displaying it to the attractive young woman beside him, the old gentleman smiled at the astonished look on her face.

“My word, Albert! How on earth did you do that?”

Lord Tachy gave a casual shrug as he slipped the apple back into the pocket of his lab coat. “It’s just one of the more theatrical effects I’ve discovered in my research. Knowing how fond you are of magic shows and the like, I thought it would amuse you.”

Before them stood a long table holding four metal boxes, vertical glass tubes filled with variously colored solutions, and snake nests of tangled cables. The boxes gave off a buzzing drone like tin-plated beehives. Churning in the air above the device was what appeared to be a small electrical storm in a billowing purple cloud – or a bodiless demon writhing in the mouth of Hell.

“So, that strange light throws things back at you?”

Lady Tachy looked up with lovely, inquisitive eyes at her husband's face. Tall and still distinguished-looking despite his age, his lordship’s craggy, patrician features glowed in the shifting hues cast by his device.

“Not exactly. That energy field actually inverts the time dimension of certain events. The apple came back to my hand because the temporal component of its inertial frame was reversed.”

Her eyes widened. “You mean this machine controls time?”

“Nothing quite so grand as that, my dear. But I have discovered some new and interesting ways to interact with time. You see, in our ordinary frame of reference, the space-time continuum’s temporal dimension has a single, invariable vector, moving from the past to the future. But by changing one's frame of reference with regard to that continuum, certain discrete phenomena can appear to occur along a contra-temporal vector. For example, a particle such as a positron that appears to move from past to present can also be viewed as being an electron – its negatively charged doppelgänger – moving backward in time. From a scientific point of view, it's just a matter of how one chooses to look at it. Building on concepts such as that, I've discovered other examples as well. Collectively, I call them 'retrograde temporal flux.'”

“But what does this mean, Albert? What are you going to do with it?”

“For now, I'm just studying it. There are so many questions still to be explored. If I start publishing my results too soon, others will undoubtedly step in and take credit for discoveries that resulted directly from my work. That's why I have to maintain such secrecy. Eventually, when I'm ready to publish, I hope to produce a completely new model of temporal agency.”

Sensing the tumble of thoughts playing out behind his wife's knitted brow, he added, “But don't trouble yourself about this, Diane. You asked to know what's kept me so preoccupied these past few weeks –”

“Longer than that,” she interjected.

“Very well – however long it’s been. But my point is that this work involves extremely complicated concepts. That makes it very hard to explain it in layman's terms.

I just wanted to show you a sample of my results so you'd know that I haven't been wasting my time down here.”

“I never thought you were wasting your time, Albert – just that you were devoting it to something other than me. Now you've shown me the face of my rival. What a fascinating mistress you've acquired! How can I ever hope to compete with such an exotic creature?”

“Don't be ridiculous, Diane. This is my work.”

“It's your *passion*, Albert! And I'm your wife. You should be sharing your passion with me! How do you think I feel being left out of something that's so important to you – something that takes up all your attention? Can't you find some way to include me in this? Let me help you. What's the next step in your research?”

Lord Tachy sighed with unconcealed exasperation. “I'm studying the effects of retrograde temporal flux on the flow of information.”

“What sort of information?”

“Any kind that can be physically detected – photons, sound waves, what have you. I'm trying to adjust the field produced by my device to receive contra-temporal information.”

“You mean – seeing into the future?”

“Well, *a* future. Since it involves quantum-level events, it's a matter of probability. Finding *any* coherent information stream is a matter of rolling the dice, and getting the specific one that most likely emerges from our present is like trying to get a precise sequence of numbers out of *billions and billions* of rolls.”

“Then, how are you planning to do it?”

“Essentially, I'm trying to 'load the dice.’”

“What does that mean? How can you –”

Lord Tachy raised his palms in a gesture of futility. “My dear, there's just no way I can put this into terms you would understand.”

Lady Tachy's eyes turned cold. “Albert, I'm not stupid.”

“No, no, of course not. But I can't explain any more of this in non-technical language. And that's why you can't help me with my research. It just wouldn't work. But I'll tell you what: I'll pick out a few books for you to read on advanced physics. And after you're comfortable with them, you can start on these –”

Lord Tachy went to the wall nearest them and removed a heretofore invisible panel set flush with the wainscoting. Behind it was a large cranny that contained a stack of bound notebooks.

“I haven't shown these to anyone. They're my own advances in temporal mechanics, endochronic chemistry and field theory. You're the only person I trust enough to share them with. Once you reach the point where you can understand the concepts and formulas in them, then, perhaps, you can assist me.”

Lady Tachy's face had become expressionless. “And how long do you think it will take me to read all this?”

“Well, that depends on you, my dear. But I'm sure you'll be a very apt pupil. And since you'll be studying the most fascinating mysteries ever pondered by the human mind, the time should pass quickly.”

“Very well, Albert,” she said flatly. “I’ll look forward to receiving those books from you. For now, I’ll say good-night. Thank you for the demonstration. It was quite – enlightening.”

Lord Tachy smiled and gave his wife a peck on the side of her head.

“Good-night, my dear. I’ll be up later.”

Having turned his attention back to his device, he didn’t notice that his wife had stopped at the door with one hand on the knob, her eyes fixed on him. He looked up when she spoke.

“You know, the last book you gave me to read was a collection of sonnets. It was on our honeymoon, remember? They were quite lovely.”

Lord Tachy nodded, befuddled for a moment by the non-sequitur. All he could think to reply was, “Ah, yes.”

Lady Tachy went out, closing the door behind her.

Contrary to his initial intentions and his usual routine, Lord Tachy worked late that night. A fever of inspiration came over him, bringing new hunches and insights he found too intriguing to ignore. As he twisted dials, adjusted outputs, jotted down figures and wrote out equations, he felt very much like a gambler chasing a jackpot. Before him, the roiling energy field leered like cosmic chance: a mask of chaos with a purposeful gaze.

Long after his eyes grew tired, he continued to stare at the angry kaleidoscope. He prodded its pandemonium and sifted its defiant dissonance, searching for hidden harmonies. Eventually, he discerned an effervescent pattern starting to emerge, flickering its way into existence. It was as if a cocoon of formless static were yielding a delightfully coherent butterfly. He urged it along incrementally, coaxing it with delicate manipulations, conjuring it with mathematical spells...

He saw things.

The energy field gaped. Probabilities danced. The old scientist’s features were bathed in the glow of discovery.

End.

