

Murder!

The woman at Victoria station was waiting for her son. Robert Hathall was one minute late, but this quietly pleased the woman. Other people's faults⁷ often pleased her.

'There you are,' she said, when he arrived.

'Have you got your ticket?' asked Robert.

She hadn't. She knew that he'd had money problems for the three years of his second marriage, but that was *his* fault.

'Go and buy them, or we'll miss the train,' she said.

Perhaps they *would* miss the train to Kingsmarkham. Then Angela, Robert's wife, would be angry with him. It would be a good start to the weekend, she thought with a smile.

They did not miss the train. But it was crowded, and they had to stand.

'Angela is looking forward to seeing you,' said Robert.

Mrs Hathall remembered the only time that she had met her daughter-in-law⁸. It was in a flat at Earl's Court. Angela had described Robert's first wife, Eileen, as a greedy⁹ cow. Mrs Hathall had immediately walked out of the building. She told herself that she never wanted to see Angela again.

But here she was, going to Kingsmarkham. And Robert was getting nervous. 'Angela's been cleaning the house to make it nice for you,' he said.

Mrs Hathall wanted to say, 'A good wife *always* has a clean house, not just when a visitor is coming.' But she said nothing.

'Angela's meeting us with the car,' Robert said, when they arrived at Kingsmarkham railway station.

His mother pushed her suitcase at him and took hold of his arm. 'Eileen visited me this morning,' she said, when they were

walking out of the station. 'Why don't you go and see her one evening when you're in London?'

'Is that a joke?' he asked. 'Because it's not funny.' He was looking around the car park for Angela and the car.

A cruel smile pulled at the corners of Mrs Hathall's mouth. 'Your wife's not here,' she said.

'It doesn't matter,' said Robert. 'It's not far to walk.'

It was unusual for him to be so calm, she thought. Usually he became angry when his mother was rude about Angela. Then they would have an argument. But not today.

It was a beautiful September evening. The sun was warm, and the gardens were bright with the last flowers of summer. But Mrs Hathall noticed none of this. She was thinking about Angela – the woman who broke up a happy marriage.

They turned into Wool Lane and walked past a large house. 'That looks nice,' said Mrs Hathall.

'It's the only other house in the lane,' said Robert. 'A woman called Lake lives there. She's a widow¹⁰.' He looked worried. 'I can't understand what's happened to Angela. I'm sorry about this, Mother. I really am sorry.'

Mrs Hathall was so surprised to hear her son say sorry for something, that she could not think of an answer.

After a minute or two, they came to Robert's cottage¹¹. Mrs Hathall was disappointed to see that it was a pleasant old house with brown bricks. Robert unlocked the front door.

'Angela, we're here!' he called.

Mrs Hathall followed him into the living room – and was surprised. Where were the dirty tea-cups and the clothes across the chairs? Where was the dust on the furniture, the dirty windows? She had expected to see all of these things, but the place was amazingly *clean*.

'Where is Angela?' said Robert. 'I'm going out to the garage to look for the car. Go on upstairs, Mother. Your bedroom is the big room at the back.'

Murder!

Mrs Hathall climbed the stairs, checking for dust. There was none. And her bedroom was as clean as the rest of the house. Disappointed, she went into the bathroom where there were clean towels and new soap. She washed her hands and came out again. The door to the main bedroom was half-open and Mrs Hathall looked inside.

A girl lay face-down on the bed. Mrs Hathall smiled coldly. Robert's wife was asleep, perhaps drunk. She was wearing shoes, old blue jeans and a red shirt. They were the same clothes that she had worn when they met at Earl's Court. Mrs Hathall remembered Eileen's pretty afternoon dresses. Eileen only slept in the afternoon when she was ill.

She walked across to the bed and looked down at the girl. She put a hand on the girl's shoulder to shake it. Then she stopped. The girl's neck was cold, and there was an ugly purple mark on it.

She was dead.



Mrs Hathall's heart began to beat faster, but she did not scream. She felt only shock, nothing else. Slowly, she walked out of the room and down the stairs.

Robert was waiting at the bottom. She put a hand on his arm.

'There's been an accident,' she said. 'It – it's too late to do anything. Your wife's dead.' She repeated the words because he did not seem to hear them. 'Angela's dead, Robert.'

He did not speak, but walked quickly past her and up the stairs.

She waited. She was shaking now.

Then he called out from above. His voice was quite calm. 'Phone the police, Mother. Tell them what's happened.'

Chief Inspector Reginald Wexford was looking at the dead woman's passport. On the table next to him were her driving licence, purse and other things from her handbag. He and Inspector Burden had arrived at Bury Cottage at 8pm. It was now nearly midnight. Other policemen were upstairs. They were looking for fingerprints¹² and for other clues. It was a big house. There were five large rooms as well as the kitchen and bathroom.

The passport of Angela Margaret Hathall was three years old. It had never been used. Wexford saw that she was thirty-two years old, and born in Melbourne, Australia. After a minute, he moved away from the table and sat down.

'Your wife lived here alone during the week, Mr Hathall. Is that right?' he asked the man sitting in the armchair.

Robert Hathall was a tall man, but thin and with a pale unhealthy look. His black hair was thinning and dry. His mother sat in a straight-backed chair, watching him. There was no kindness or sympathy¹³ in her eyes.

Hathall nodded. 'I was working in Toxborough. But in July I got a job in London. I couldn't travel up and down every

day. I've been living with my mother during the week. I come home at weekends.'

'You and your mother arrived here at seven-thirty this evening?' asked Wexford.

'Seven-twenty,' said Mrs Hathall, speaking for the first time.

'When did you last see your wife, Mr Hathall?'

'Sunday night,' said Hathall. 'Angela drove me to the railway station. I phoned her every day. I phoned her at lunchtime today. She – she was all right.' He put his head in his hands. 'Who – who could do this? Who would want to kill ... Angela?'

The words sounded false to Wexford. Like something from a television film.

'Were you at work all day?' he asked.

'Yes,' said Hathall. He looked up. 'I work at Marcus Flower, Public Relations Consultants, on Half Moon Street. I'm an accountant¹⁴. You can check with them. I was there all day.' He put his head in his hands again and began to cry loudly.

Wexford watched him silently. Why did he feel no sympathy for this man? Was there really something false about Hathall's behaviour? He waited until the man looked up before he spoke again.

'Your car is missing?' he said.

'It wasn't in the garage when I got home,' said Hathall.

There were no tears on his face. 'But would the son of that hard-faced woman really be able to cry?' Wexford thought.

'Sergeant Martin will get the car's description and number from you in a minute,' he said. 'Try and get some sleep. I'll talk to you again in the morning.'

'Where's the garage?' Wexford asked when they were outside.

'It must be at the back,' said Burden.

The two men went outside. 'You can't see it from the lane,'

Wexford said, when they found it. 'She could bring someone here, put the car in the garage and nobody would see her. Then they could go into the house through the back door.' He looked across the moonlit fields. 'The nearest house is that place up by the Stowerton Road. The only other one is Wool Farm, half a mile away.'

They went back to the lane and Wexford walked towards his car. 'I'll see you in the morning, Mike,' he said to Burden. 'It's going to be a busy weekend.'

Wexford's house was to the north of Kingsmarkham. His wife, Dora, was sitting in bed reading when he got there. He gave her a kiss and started to undress.

'What do you know about the people at Bury Cottage in Wool Lane?' he asked her. 'A man called Hathall lives there. His wife was strangled¹⁵ this afternoon.'

After thirty years of marriage to a policeman, Dora Wexford wasn't shocked to hear this. 'Oh, dear,' she said. 'How terrible.' She thought for a moment. 'The only person that I've met from Wool Lane is Mrs Lake. She's a widow. She's very pretty, and she likes men.'

Before he went to sleep, Wexford thought about Angela Hathall. Did she go out in the car, meet a man and bring him back to the cottage? Maybe the man wanted to sleep with her but she didn't want to sleep with him. So he killed her and drove away in her car.

Then Wexford began to think about happier things – his grandchildren, a recent holiday.

He was soon asleep.