An Expert in Murder

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Extract

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Night was falling when at last he sat down, ready to write. Looking out over the garden, he watched as the louring, grey skies were replaced – inch by inch – with a blackness that wrapped itself like a shroud around the bushes at the limits of his view. Winter had played its customary trick, weaving the landscape together in a cloth of muted colours and bringing a spent uniformity to all he could see. The cold had deadened the richness of the world. In the morning, there would be a covering of frost on the window ledge.

Impatient now to hand over his past, he poured the last inch of warmth from the whisky bottle on the desk and drained his glass before reaching for a sheet of notepaper. It was, he thought with satisfaction, an original sort of bequest. As if in deference to the significance of the moment, the house – usually so alive with faint but familiar sounds – fell silent as he picked up the slim, brown volume that lay on the table in front of him. He flicked through its pages until he came to the section he wished to use; the phrase had always struck him as peculiarly apt, and never more so than now. With a bitter smile, which came half from regret and half from resignation, he picked up the pen and began, his lips forming the words in perfect unison with the ink on the page. 'To become an expert in murder', he wrote, 'cannot be so difficult.'

One

Had she been superstitious, Josephine Tey might have realised the odds were against her when she found that her train, the early-morning express from the Highlands, was running an hour and a half late. At six o'clock, when she walked down the steps to the south-bound platform, she expected to find the air of excitement which always accompanies the muddled loading of people and suitcases onto a departing train. Instead, she was met by a testament to the long wait ahead: the carriages were in darkness; the engine itself gravely silent; and a mountain of luggage built steadily along the cold, grey strand of platform. But like most people of her generation, who had lived through war and loss, Josephine had acquired a sense of perspective, and the train's mechanical failure foretold nothing more sinister to her than a tiresome wait in the station's buffet. In fact, although this was the day of the first murder, nothing would disturb her peace of mind until the following morning.

By the time she had drained three cups of bland coffee, the train appeared to be ready for its journey. She left the buffet's crowded warmth and prepared to board, stopping on the way to buy a copy of yesterday's *Times* and a bar of Fry's chocolate from the small news kiosk next to the platform. As she took her seat, she could not help but feel a rush of excitement in spite of the delay: in a matter of hours, she would be in London.

The ornate station clock declared that it was a quarter past eight when the train finally left the mouth of the station and moved slowly out into the countryside. Josephine settled back into her seat and allowed the gentle thrum of the wheels to soothe away

any lingering frustrations of the morning. Removing her gloves and taking out a handkerchief, she cleared a small port-hole in the misted window and watched as the strengthening light took some of the tiredness from the cold March day. On the whole, winter had been kind. There had, thank God, been no repeat of the snow wreaths and roaring winds which had brought the Highland railway to a sudden standstill the year before, leaving her and many others stranded in waiting rooms overnight. Engines with snow ploughs attached had been sent to force a passage through, and she would never forget the sight of them charging the drifts at full speed, shooting huge blocks of snow forty feet into the air.

Shivering at the memory of it, she unfolded her newspaper and turned to the review pages, where she was surprised to find that the Crime Book Society's selection was 'a hair-raising yarn' called *Mr Munt Carries On*. They couldn't have read the book, she thought, since she had tried it herself and considered Mr Munt to have carried on for far too long to be worth seven and six of anybody's money. When she arrived at the theatre section, which she had purposely saved until last, she smiled to herself at the news that *Richard of Bordeaux* – her own play and now London's longest run – was about to enter its final week.

As the train moved south, effortlessly eating into four hundred miles or so of open fields and closed communities, she noticed that spring had come early to England – as quick to grace the gentle countryside as it had been to enhance the drama of the hills against a Highland sky. There was something very precious about the way that rail travel allowed you to see the landscape, she thought. It had an expansiveness about it that the close confinement of a motor car simply could not match and she had loved it since, as a young woman, she had spent her holidays travelling every inch of the single-track line that shadowed the turf from Inverness to Tain. Even now, more than twenty years later, she could never leave Scotland by train without remembering the summer of her seventeenth birthday, when she and her lover – in defiance of the terrible weather – had explored the Highlands by rail, taking a different route from Daviot Station every morning. When war broke out, a

year later almost to the day, the world changed forever but – for her at least – that particular bond to a different age had stayed the same, and perhaps always would.

This link with the past was becoming harder to hold on to, though, as she found herself unexpectedly in the public eye. She had had thirteen months and four hundred and sixty performances to get used to being the author of the most popular play in London, but fame still tasted strange to her. *Richard of Bordeaux* had brought success, but success brought a relinquishing of privacy which, though necessary, was not easily or willingly given. Every time she journeyed south, she felt torn between the celebrity that awaited her in London and the ties which kept her in Inverness – and knew she was not truly comfortable with either. But during the miles in between, for a few precious hours, she could still remember how it had felt to be seventeen and sure of what you wanted.

Today, though, anonymity vanished even earlier than expected when a pleasant-looking young woman boarded the train at Berwick-upon-Tweed and slid back the door to Josephine's carriage. She struggled apologetically with her luggage, but a gentleman quickly stood to help her wrestle a large, beautifully embroidered travelling bag into the overhead luggage rack, and she smiled gratefully at him when he offered up his window seat. As the girl settled herself in, Josephine gazed at her in fascination, but it was not so much her features that drew attention as the remarkable hat that framed them – a cloche, made of fine black straw, which was accentuated on one side by a curled white ostrich feather, flecked with beige and brown and attached by a long, black-tipped hatpin. It was hardly the sort of thing that Josephine would ever wear herself, and it made her own plain velvet seem bland in comparison, but she admired its delicate beauty nonetheless.

The young woman nodded brightly at her and Josephine returned to her paper but, as she scanned the racing pages, she was uncomfortably conscious of being watched. When she looked up, the girl turned hurriedly back to her magazine, acutely embarrassed at having been caught, and began to study its pages with

exaggerated interest. Aware that the journey would be more relaxed for both of them if she smoothed the moment over, Josephine broke the ice. 'You know, I often think that for all the nonsense these racing pundits talk, I could get a job doing it myself,' she said.

The girl laughed, delighted to have a chance at conversation. 'As long as it doesn't take you away from the stage,' she replied, and – as she noticed Josephine's surprise – looked aghast at her own familiarity. 'I'm sorry to disturb you,' she continued, 'and I really don't want to be a nuisance, but I've just got to say something. It is you, isn't it? I recognised you straight away from that lovely article. What a wonderful coincidence!'

Josephine forced a smile and quietly cursed the publicity photograph that had appeared in one of the more obscure theatrical journals, confirming to its handful of readers that Gordon Daviot – the name she wrote under – was certainly not hers by birth. 'How observant of you,' she said, embarrassed to see that the other occupants of the carriage were taking a new interest in their travelling companion. 'That came out a year ago – I'm surprised you remember it.'

'That's the coincidence – I read it again just the other day when I found out I was coming down to see *Richard* in its final week, and I've got it with me now.' She pointed towards her bag as proof of the happy accident. 'Listen, I hope you won't think I'm just saying this because it's you, but I do love that play. I've been so many times already and I *will* miss it when it's gone.' She paused, absentmindedly curling a lock of brown hair round her finger as she looked out of the window. 'I suppose most people would think it silly to get as engrossed in theatre as I do, or to put such value on stories that other people make up, but for me it's much more than a play.' She looked back at Josephine. 'I shouldn't be talking to you like this when we've only just met and you want to read your paper, but I must thank you now I've got the chance. My father died last year, and it's all been so miserable for my mother and me, and sometimes your play got me through. It was the only thing I could lose myself in.'

Touched, Josephine folded away her newspaper. 'It's not silly,' she said. 'If you took any notice of people who think it is, there'd be no pleasure in the world. I'm sorry to hear about your father, though. Was his death very sudden?'

'Oh no, he'd been ill for a long time. He was in the army, you see, and he never recovered from the war.' She smiled ruefully. 'And sometimes I think my mother will never recover from my father. She was devastated when we lost him – we both were – but she's been better lately. And we work together, so at least I've been able to keep an eye on her.'

'What do you do?' Josephine asked, genuinely curious.

The girl raised her eyes, and this time her smile was warm and conspiratorial. 'Can't you guess? We're in hats.' She held out her hand. 'I'm Elspeth, by the way. Elspeth Simmons.'

'Call me Josephine. It's beautiful, you know – your hat.' Elspeth blushed and started to protest, but Josephine interrupted her. 'No, honestly – if I've got to sit here and take compliments, then you must have your share. You've got a real talent – it must run in the family.'

'Perhaps, but I wouldn't really know – I'm adopted, you see,' Elspeth explained candidly. 'They took me on when I was a baby. You're right – my adoptive mother taught me everything, but we're not very much alike, although we get on tremendously well. All this play business drives her up the wall – she hates the theatre, apart from a bit of variety at Christmas, so I usually go with my uncle. When I tell her how pleased I am to have met you, she probably won't even know what I'm talking about. Still,' she added, a little wistfully, 'I like to think my original parents had some theatrical blood in them somewhere.'

Looking again at the memorable hat, Josephine guessed that Elspeth's adoptive mother was not without her own sense of the dramatic. Although by now the girl had lost much of her initial shyness and was talking eagerly about the theatre, Josephine could not resent the loss of her cherished peace and quiet. Rather, she felt a growing admiration for Elspeth's spirit and lack of self-pity. Her conversation did not entirely mask the series of tough

blows that life had dealt her: abandoned as a baby, then claimed again only to have her second chance at happiness destroyed by a conflict which she was of no age to understand – if such an age existed. Thousands like Elspeth there might have been, but the sharing of tragedy – even on such a scale – did not make the personal cost any easier to bear for each individual it touched. Josephine knew that as well as anyone. Twenty years after it started, the war had reinvented its suffering for a second generation in the form of inescapable confinement with the sick and wounded, and an eventual loss whose pain was the more sharply felt for its delay. After her father's long illness, then his death, who could blame Elspeth for taking refuge in the less demanding emotions of the stage, or for contemplating another, more glamorous, identity? It was not so different to what she herself had done and – in the face of her own father's fragile health – what she continued to do.

'I hope you won't think it rude of me to ask,' Elspeth continued, 'but will you be sad when your play ends?'

Josephine had asked herself the same thing when she saw the press notice earlier. The answer had not required much soul-searching, although it would have been churlish to show the true extent of her relief. 'No, not really,' she said. 'It's going on tour, after all, and it's lovely to think that people all over the country will see it. I do have another play or two on the go, and my publisher wants a second mystery story at some point, so there's plenty to keep me busy.' She did not admit it to Elspeth, but there was another reason why her heart was no longer in the play that had made her name: that business last year with Elliott Vintner had soured the whole experience for her. The voice of reason inside her head told her time and time again that she was not to blame for the court case or its repercussions, but the thought that a man had taken his own life because of her success filled her with a coldness that no amount of rational argument could eradicate.

Fortunately, before Josephine could go further down that road, a restaurant attendant passed through the carriages to announce the next sitting for lunch. 'Let's go and have something to eat,' she

suggested to Elspeth, conscious that the young woman's enthusiasm for her work was beginning to wear a little thin with everyone else in the compartment. 'It's been a long morning.'

The train's delay had created a healthy appetite in its passengers. The dining car was almost full when they arrived, but a waiter showed them to the last vacant table. 'Gosh – how lovely,' said Elspeth, looking round at the bronze lamps, plush carpets and walnut veneer panelling, 'I don't think I've ever eaten anywhere as luxurious as this before.' She removed her hat, then looked round anxiously for somewhere to put it before the waiter came to her rescue and took it from her with a wink. 'I'm not used to first class,' she admitted, picking up a silver butter knife to admire the railway crest on the handle. 'The ticket was a present. Will you order for us – I'm sure it's all delicious.'

Josephine smiled at her. 'To be honest,' she said, 'Inverness isn't exactly overrun with top restaurants so I think we should just treat it as a posh café and have what we like. I'm going for the sole – how about you?' Elspeth studied the menu and, when the waiter arrived, chose a no-nonsense steak and kidney pudding. 'A glass of wine, miss?' he asked.

'I'd love one, but I wouldn't know where to start,' Elspeth said, looking at Josephine.

'The Burgundy would go well with your lunch, so let's both have that,' she said and watched, amused, as the waiter unfolded Elspeth's napkin and slid a silver vase of flowers closer to her with another wink that brought a flush to her cheeks.

'I'd love to know more about the cast,' Elspeth said, as their drinks arrived. 'Tell me – are John Terry and Lydia Beaumont as close off stage as they are on? I won't tell anyone if it's a secret, but they make such a good couple as Richard and Anne.'

Josephine smiled to herself, imagining how pleased Terry would be to perpetuate the rumour of a romance with his glamorous leading lady, but she had to crush Elspeth's hopes. 'No, they're both . . . well, they're just good friends,' she said. 'I suppose it would be difficult to work together if they were involved and they've got another joint project lined up with my next play.'

'Am I allowed to ask what it is?'

'Of course you are. It's a play about Mary Queen of Scots. In fact, I wrote it for Lydia. She's always wanted to play her.'

'How special to have a play written for you! She must be so pleased. I can't wait to see her in it.'

'You'll see her sooner than that, actually. She should be meeting me at King's Cross if this train arrives before she has to be at the theatre,' Josephine explained, tucking in to her meal and encouraging Elspeth to do the same. 'I'll introduce you if you'd like to meet her.'

'Oh, that would be wonderful. You know, I can't wait to tell Uncle Frank about all this. He's seen *Richard* almost as many times as I have.'

'Is that who you're staying with?'

'Yes, I always do when I'm in London. He and my Aunty Betty have a shop in Hammersmith – shoes and knitwear, that sort of thing.'

'Do you come down often?'

'About once a month. I bring the hats and help out in the shop a bit. It's a family business, so we all chip in. But Uncle Frank's passionate about theatre. He collects memorabilia and drives Aunty Betty mad because there's only a small flat above the shop and he packs it with stuff. When I'm down, we spend as much time as we can in the West End. He'll be so thrilled when I tell him about my journey. I don't suppose you could sign a copy of the programme for him and leave it at stage door, could you? Would it be too much trouble?'

'Of course not, and I'll sign your magazine as well if you like.' She thought for a moment, then said: 'Do you have your tickets for the show yet? I've got some reserved for the week and you'd be most welcome to join me one evening.' It was unlike her to encourage intimacy in this way but, for some reason, she felt protective towards the young woman in front of her. Much to her surprise, the response to her question was a pink tide which began at Elspeth's neck and rose slowly upwards.

'Actually, I'm going with someone tomorrow night and he's got us top price seats,' she explained. 'We've been out a few times and

he's lovely. It's his first job in theatre and he doesn't get much time off, so I suppose the last thing he needs is to sit through it all again,' she added, and instantly looked horrified. 'Not that he doesn't love the play, of course, it's just . . .'

She tailed off, at a loss as to how to redeem herself, and Josephine came to her rescue. 'Please don't worry – if I could choose between another night with *Richard* and a good dinner at the Cowdray Club, there'd really be no contest. You can have too much of a good thing. No matter how entertaining it is for the audience, it's a bit of a busman's holiday if you work there – he must be very keen on you to go at all.'

As Elspeth blushed again and excused herself for a moment, Josephine asked for the bill. She looked on, amused, as the waiter transferred his attentions from Elspeth to another table, where he spent more time than was strictly necessary polishing a crystal glass for a young woman dining alone. This girl was more receptive, and she watched while the couple circled round each other, wondering what the outcome would be. When Elspeth reappeared, Josephine shook off her insistence that the bill should be halved and they headed back to their compartment.

At last, the carriages began snaking through the outskirts of the capital. How England's cities were changing, Josephine thought, looking out at the small, modern houses and giant cinemas which seemed to have sprung up everywhere. As the train slowed its speed still further and ran into a deep cutting, the dwindling daylight vanished altogether. When it returned, it gave form to the dark bulk of St Pancras and the Midland Grand, an edifice which would have looked more at home in a gothic tale of terror than it did next to the ordinary contours of King's Cross. Josephine had heard that engine drivers on this route took a pride in the journey, racing against the timetable and each other to achieve speeds of more than ninety miles an hour, and she was not the only passenger on board to offer up a silent prayer of thanks to the competitive nature which had brought the train to its destination less than an hour behind schedule.

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Stamping her feet against the coldness of the day, Lydia Beaumont was nevertheless in a remarkably good mood. Ever the actress, she always felt an affinity with the transience and variety of somewhere like King's Cross: the wandering population of travellers and street traders had an anonymity which intrigued her and a colour which appealed to her weakness for showmanship and talent for mimicry.

The other reason for Lydia's unshakeable good humour was standing beside her. She and Marta Fox were, to paraphrase her character in the play, still at the stage in their relationship where the heavens could collapse without undue damage to either of them. By March, it was not uncommon for the year to have offered Lydia at least three different versions of the love of her life, but Marta had survived to enter victoriously into a fourth month of tenure. By Lydia's own admission, this was a relationship of some permanence.

From the approaching train, Josephine spotted her friend and felt the same mixture of admiration and apprehension that always accompanied their meetings: admiration for her graceful charm and childlike mischief, for the humour which was always in her eyes and never far from the corners of her mouth; apprehension because, if she were honest, Josephine was almost as uncomfortable with the celebrity of others as she was with her own. With Lydia, though, there had been a mutual appreciation from the outset – a genuine trust stemming from their shared frankness and hatred of vanity in all its guises – and Josephine had come to value the friendship greatly, whilst marvelling that it should be hers. From force of habit, she cast an appraising eye over the woman who stood next to Lydia on the platform and was pleased to note that her own first impressions tallied with the description that her friend's letters had carried to Inverness. Even from a distance, there was an air of calm about her, a quiet containment in the resolute stance that held its own beauty. If Marta proved as strong as she seemed, she could be just the antidote Lydia needed to the fickleness which was an inevitable part of her life in the theatre.

Elspeth was so excited at the sight of Anne of Bohemia alive and

well less than fifty yards away that Josephine's gentle wave of greeting could hardly be seen from the platform. Keen to leave the train and meet Lydia, the girl reached up to drag her bag down from the luggage rack but, in her haste, forgot that she had opened it earlier to find the magazine for Josephine to sign. When its contents spilled out onto the floor, she looked mortified and Josephine – whose instinct towards amusement was overcome by her sympathy for Elspeth's vulnerability – came quickly to her aid. As the two scrabbled on the floor for stray sweets and loose change, they looked at each other through the legs of the other passengers, and laughter soon won out. Standing back against the window to allow everyone else to gather their belongings, they took a minute to compose themselves sufficiently to leave the compartment. What sort of scene they were creating for those on the platform, Josephine could hardly imagine.

'Here she is at last,' said Lydia, pointing towards the carriage window. 'My God, dear, have you seen that hat?' Marta took one look and muttered something about getting them a place in the queue for taxis. 'We'll be with you in a jiffy,' Lydia called after her.

When she turned back to the train, Josephine was on her way over with the companion who had made such an impression on the train's arrival. Had she not known her, Lydia would never have guessed that this quiet Scottish woman, dressed simply in a dark suit and pearls, was the author of the biggest hit in the West End. Nothing about Josephine had changed since Lydia first became aware of her as a shadowy presence in the stalls during rehearsals. She still looked more like a school teacher or one of those solitary women you saw writing letters in the corner of a hotel lounge. It had been hard to get to know her, as she discouraged intimacy and rarely gave her confidence to anyone, but the effort had been worthwhile. Josephine was thoughtful and sensitive, interested in everything and possessed of a puckish, sarcastic wit that was as evident in her conversation as it was in her work.

Greeting Lydia with a hug, Josephine introduced the girl as a friend she had met on the journey down. The actress, always gracious when faced with her public, went through the routine of

conversation and autographs that had become second nature to her, whilst managing to make Elspeth feel that she was the first person ever to mention the poignancy of the death scene. After a politely timed exchange of charm and admiration, she remembered Marta and the waiting taxi. 'Come on, we must get you safely to that madhouse you're staying in,' she said to Josephine. 'I'm sure you could do with a rest after such a long day, and I need to be at the theatre on time or Johnny will be a bag of nerves throughout the entire first act. You'd think he'd be used to it by now.' She flashed a winning smile at Elspeth, and picked up Josephine's travelling case. 'Is the rest of your luggage being sent on?' she asked.

At the mention of luggage, a look of panic crossed Elspeth's face. 'I don't believe it,' she cried. 'After all that fuss, I've left my bag on the train. I must go back and get it, then I'd better find my uncle. My mother's entire new range is in there,' she explained, gesturing towards the mountain of hat boxes that an unlucky porter had felt obliged to transfer from the luggage car to a platform trolley, 'and she'll kill us if we don't get it safely delivered to Lillibet's.' Hugging Josephine tightly and promising to look her up at the theatre, Elspeth vanished back into the carriage from which she had so thoroughly emerged, too concerned about her bag to notice that the feather had become dislodged from her hat and now lay on the platform floor. Josephine bent down to pick it up.

'Keep it – it'll suit you,' teased Lydia, looking half-admiringly, half-sympathetically at her friend. 'You really do have the patience of Job. I don't know anyone else who could spend a day with all that enthusiasm and still look sane at the end of it.'

Josephine smiled. 'Much to my surprise, it's been a pleasure. I must give it back to her, though,' she said, turning towards the train.' She'd be so sad not to have it when she meets her young man.'

Lydia caught her arm. 'We really must go, Josephine – I can't be late. Give it to her when she comes to see you at the theatre. My guess is that it won't be long.'

Josephine hesitated. 'No, you're right. I'll probably see her tomorrow. Let's go and find Marta – I'm dying to meet her.'

'Yes, and you can tell me whether this novel that she's writing is any good or not. She's far too divine for me to have any way of telling. She could jot down the shipping forecast and I'd think it was pure Daviot!' Laughing, the two women walked out into the street, too engrossed in their conversation to notice the figure now moving towards the train.

Back on board, Elspeth saw with relief that her bag was still on the floor where she had left it. The train seemed almost deserted, the only noise coming from further down the car where staff were presumably preparing for the next journey. Looking down at the magazine, which now held two precious signatures, she smiled to herself and placed it carefully in the bag's side pocket, thinking with excitement of the pleasure she would get from watching the next performance now that she knew two of the people involved.

As she buttoned the pocket securely and made sure this time that the rest of the bag was fastened, she heard a noise at the door behind her. Turning to explain to the guard that she had forgotten something and was just about to leave, she stared with recognition, then confusion, at a face which she had not expected to see on the train. Instinctively, before she had a chance to consider the strangeness of the moment, she took the gift that was held out to her with a smile and looked down at the doll in her hands, a souvenir of her beloved play and something she had longed to own. When her companion took the 'Do Not Disturb' sign from its hook and hung it outside the door, then stepped quickly over to the window to pull down the blind, Elspeth opened her mouth to protest, but the words were too slow to save her.

An arm reached out towards her, drawing her into a deadly embrace which seemed to mock the physical affection she had so recently come to know. There was no time to scream. The hand that gripped the back of her neck, holding her close, was swift and sure, and by now no strength was needed. Surprise had given way to a paralysing horror and she had no more control over her limbs

than the doll which fell to the floor and lay staring upwards, an indifferent witness to her final moments. She tried to breathe normally, to stay calm, but her face was pressed into her assailant's chest and panic welled up in her as she realised that this must surely be death. Please God, no, she thought, not now, not when I'm so happy.

When the lethal point punctured her skin, she felt nothing more than a sharp blow beneath her ribs but there was no chance to be thankful for the lack of pain, nor to wonder that her body should surrender itself with so little ceremony. In that briefest of moments, somewhere between waking and oblivion, between life and death, she was aware of all she would miss but the longing was soon over, replaced as she fell to her knees by a lasting, if premature, peace.