

Murder at R.C.H.

George Bradshaw switched off the alarm five minutes before it rang, it would wake Gina and he knew she could do with another half hour, the day ahead was a baby sitting one, for their daughter and much as she said she enjoyed it George knew she would be very tired by bed time.

Even in cold, dark January he looked forward to his day and began far earlier than needed. He was the mortuary attendant at Redhill County Hospital, a job he was proud to tell anyone, all about. He had begun work at the hospital as a boy, doing anything asked of him but after several years they needed someone to help in the mortuary and George was sent, probably transferred by a system without rules in those days and, he guessed, a way of getting rid of a lad disliked by his superior. The freezing atmosphere in the mortuary, the chill of the white tiled room and the bodies wrapped in white cloths waiting for burial, were not appealing to a candidate applying for work. In those days doctors avoided examining corpses, unless the disease was 'interesting', most deaths in his early days in the job, were seen, as inevitable. At first, he had helped Alf, a man who rumour had it had been an inmate at the workhouse, aided by a series of others who rarely stayed long. He had been alone there for years now, trained by the doctors who worked alongside those in the pathology lab. A place of continuing fascination for George. After years, through the forties and fifties he worked largely alone it was when Dr Baron the county coroner was appointed that he really learnt his trade. Dr Baron taught him skills usually the business of medics which meant that George was able to prepare any body for post mortem allowing the coroner to come and complete his work quickly. George was observant and clever, much cleverer than most people gave him credit for, Dr Baron had a lot of confidence in George's innate intelligence and relied heavily on his assistant's skills.

George had made tea and was about to sit down with his breakfast when there was a knock at the kitchen door, it was just five, far too early for visitors. A police sergeant in a crumpled uniform stood on the step, "George, sorry to disturb you. I didn't know whether a phone call or a knock on your door would be best at this time of day."

"Come in Bob, what's up?"

"I've got a body in the van and I can't find a place to leave it."

"That's police business isn't it? 'Aven't you got a 'fridge at Redhill nick?"

"We're chocker at Redhill and I want to go off duty. My Inspector reckoned we could leave it with you until the undertakers can move on the ones we've got, should be later today."

"Why didn't you take it straight there, you've done it before, as long as you leave the paper work for me, in my office I can deal with it when I go in?"

"We tried to do just that, but the key wasn't in the nurses' home with Sister Tutor, like it usually is. Apparently, Marion Noakes was away overnight and that new woman, Nurse Williams, couldn't find it. We looked all over."

"Sid Craven, takes the keys for the Labs and the mortuary over to the nurses home before he goes off duty, always has, regular as clockwork. I can't stand the bloke, but he never fails."

"Craven's the Head Porter, he has that office just inside the gate, right?"

"Yes, the Porter's Lodge, all the duplicate keys are there but at night, in case anyone needs to go to the lab or open my doors at the back the keys are taken over to the nurses home opposite. Marion takes care of them."

By now Gina disturbed by the voices appeared, wrapping a dressing gown around her ample figure, "Oh my goodness why are the police here, George. It's not one of the kids?"

"No, no, love it's work, you go back to bed."

"Bob. I didn't see it was you, just saw the uniform."

"Hello Gina," Bob would normally have greeted Gina more affectionately, but as she wasn't dressed it didn't seem appropriate. "Sorry about this, we'll be out of your way as soon as George has got his coat on, it's nippy this morning."

A very young-looking policewoman was waiting in the car ready to drive. She looked less tired than Bob Gates and was happy to tell George that he was safe in her hands since she had just passed the police advanced driving test although hardly any women drove for the police, 'even, in this day and age,' as she said. George wasn't going to get into a discussion about women driving 1962 but the Surrey police seemed to think that they were right to let them drive their new Morris Oxfords, so he made suitable comments while holding tightly on to the security handle on his side of the car as they made their way up to the hospital.

"What I don't understand is why the key wasn't there." George commented as they drove, a bit too fast for his liking, through the open gates of the hospital, I always keep a spare set. Sid Craven doesn't approve but I refuse to go cap in hand to him, ever."

"You're a not fan of Mr Craven then George?"

"Can't stand the little weasel, plenty of nasty rumours about him. I had my first job at the hospital with him, fifteen, I was, he treated me like a skivvy. I was glad when I got the chance to move. I've been in the mortuary most of my time here, my own boss, so as to speak"

"The customers never complain, either, eh, George?" said Bob smiling at his own joke.

The constable reversed expertly between high brick walls and brought the van to a stop outside the double doors of the building, waited until George opened them and slid her vehicle into place beside the huge refrigerators. It took hardly any time for the body to be transferred from the van to one of the drawers and for the paper work to be handed over. George would see to it and make sure it was ready for the undertaker later that day.

"You'll get on to the Co-Op, then Bob?"

"Yes, you shouldn't have him here long." Bob nodded towards the 'fridge." I'll pass on the message. See you then, mate." The two officers got into their vehicle and drove off into the grey winter day.

George filed the papers away for later, now he wanted to see about the missing keys, so he walked down through the mortuary. It was a peculiar building, said to have been part of the old workhouse, although most of the wards were much more modern. Built on the side of a rising piece of land each floor appeared to be on ground-level but the slope meant that there were three flights of stairs inside. The mortuary door opened into the Pathology Laboratory with its five departments, George knew them all and their staff from the longest serving member to the newest students. He worked most closely with Dr Baron the county coroner whose office was half way down the building. At the end nearest the front door were three steps leading to a small entrance hall and waiting room, still fairly dark at that time of morning on a winter's day.

Each section of the wide passageway was lit independently, no automatic lighting system existed in the old building then, so it was not until he neared the waiting area and he had touched the switch

the that the area inside the outer door became illuminated and he saw the still form of Sid Craven, his head at an odd angle against the bottom step. The man was most certainly, dead.