

AG BARNETT'S MYSTERY SINGLES

1950's - Case No.6

Toad in the Hole



CROFT & BUNDLE



AG BARNETT

Toad in the Hole

Gertie Bundle had been open ten minutes and was pulling the first half of mild of the day for Arthur Jessop when Mabel Pritchard came through the door of The Old Pyed Bull at a speed that suggested either an emergency or gossip. The two were generally interchangeable for Mabel.

"Reg Slade," Mabel said, gripping the edge of the bar with both hands. Her small round eyes were bright. With Mabel, horror and excitement looked the same. "Battered to death. In the allotment trench beside the police station. Ted Allsop found him at six this morning, face down in the mud."

Arthur had stopped halfway through reaching for his glass. "Reg Slade?"

"Yes! Hit on the head with a spade. Murdered."

"Dear God."

"That's not even the best bit." Mabel leaned in.

Gertie felt herself tense.

"You'll never guess whose spade it was."

Gertie could guess. The whole pub could guess. Frank Hooper had stood in this very room not a week ago, red-faced and jabbing his finger at anyone who would listen, and announced that he would bury Reg Slade in his

own allotment if the man mentioned the debt one more time. Half of Woodstock had heard it. The other half had heard about it within the hour, because that was how Woodstock worked.

"Frank's," Gertie said.

"His initials carved on the handle and everything." Mabel's chin lifted. She had delivered her parcel and was satisfied. She bustled out again, no doubt to inform the rest of the town.

Arthur shook his head. "Poor old Slade. I know he wasn't popular, but..."

"He was known as 'The Toad for a reason,'" Gertie said. She did not see the point of pretending otherwise. Reg Slade had lent money to half the town at rates that would make a pawnbroker blush, and nobody who borrowed from him ever seemed to finish paying it back. "But a dead toad is still a dead man."

Arthur drank off his half and stood up. He was chapel steward at the Methodist on Chapel Lane, and he took his half of mild where the chapel could not see him. Gertie had never once mentioned it to anybody. "I should let them know at the chapel. And the other plot-holders, while I'm at it. Mabel won't reach them all before lunch."

He left. Behind Gertie, the pub clock ticked round to eleven and a boy came in for a packet of cigarettes for his father, and the morning, which had begun with one sort of feeling, was settling itself into another.

Hester Croft arrived twenty minutes later with Argos trotting ahead and her walking stick tapping on the flagstones. She stood in the doorway and looked at Gertie and said nothing.

"You've heard, then," Gertie said.

"Mabel Pritchard stopped me on Rectory Lane. I believe she may have also told the milkman, two schoolchildren, and a cat."

Hester sat down in the corner seat by the window, the one she always sat in, and placed her stick against the wall. Argos settled beneath the table. Hester's pale blue eyes moved across the room, slow and thorough. She said nothing else.

Gertie knew the look. Something had engaged in that complicated clockwork mind, and whatever it produced was not going to be good news for everyone.

"Tea?"

"Please."

"Do you want a biscuit with it?"

"A man is dead, Gertrude, but there's no need to lose our heads and start eating biscuits in the morning."

Gertie rolled her eyes and bustled off to fetch the tea.

Hester walked to the allotments after she had finished her tea. Gertie stayed at the pub because the pub was where the information was, and information came to Gertie the way water comes downhill.

By midday she had the full picture, or at least the picture Woodstock had agreed upon. Reg Slade had been found at ten past six by Ted Allsop, who had the plot nearest the gate and was a famously early riser. Face down in a freshly dug trench between plots three and four. Hit on the back of the head. Frank Hooper's spade beside him with the initials on the handle. As open and shut as you were likely to get.

Mabel had called it a battering. Mabel exaggerated most things, and everyone knew it, but they often stuck. By half past eleven Sid Markham had made the toad-in-the-hole joke. Brenda Catchpole told him it was disrespectful. Sid said the dead were past disrespecting and ordered another drink. Gertie poured it without comment. The phrase would be all over Woodstock by tea.

What the pub wanted to know, and wanted to know badly, was where Slade's book had got to. He had kept every debt in a small brown notebook in his inside pocket for twenty years, and there were men drinking in that room whose names were in it. Constable Howard had been through the shed twice and come out with nothing at all.

The allotments lay just beside the police station. That had its small advantage. Ted Allsop had walked Constable Howard back to the trench by twenty past six and the cordon had been up by seven. Inspector Wallace had

arrived at half past eight, striding up to and surveying the scene with his hands behind his back.

Gertie also learned, through the steady drip of pub conversation, that two names were beginning to come up around Slade. There was Doris Wickham. Brenda Catchpole had seen her passing money to Slade at the allotment gate on Fridays. Not much. A few coins. But regularly, and always with her head down and her collar turned up. And there was Ted Allsop, who owed Slade nothing himself. Three weeks back, at the allotment gate, there had been a row loud enough to carry the length of the allotments.

"Doris Wickham's Harold owed Slade thirty pounds," Gertie said when Hester came back a little after twelve. "She's been paying it off since he died. Two shillings a week, out of what she makes selling her jam."

Hester accepted a glass of sherry. "Everyone knows this?"

"Everyone knows now. Nobody knew last week. You know how it is. Grown men fighting over six inches of soil down there. Someone sneezes on Plot Four and Plot Five's heard about it before the handkerchief's out." She wiped the bar. "But money? That's different. People keep money quiet."

"And Ted Allsop?"

"Old story. His father had a grocer's in Coombe, and Slade had a hand in him losing it. Ted has never forgiven. They say at the gate three weeks back him and Reg almost came to blows."

"I assume Wallace is focused on Frank."

"Of course he is. Found the spade, found the motive, found the suspect. He'll have it all sewn up by teatime."

"Frank didn't kill anyone," Hester said.

"I've been saying that all morning. Frank's never killed anything in his life except a conversation."

As if on queue, the bell over the door jangled and Frank Hooper stood in it, swaying.

He had been drinking somewhere else, possibly several somewhere-elses, and the morning didn't seem to have been kind to him. His face was the colour of butcher's paper. His hands were lively and not where his pockets were.

"Where is he?" he said.

"Where is who, Frank?"

"That copper. That bloody copper. He's been at my house. I come home for my dinner and there's Margaret telling me what he wanted to know about me."

"Sit down, Frank."

"I won't sit down." He pointed at no one in particular. "I never killed Reg Slade. I'd have liked to, mind. I'd have done it happily. But I didn't. And anyone who says I did is going to have a problem with me."

The pub had gone quiet. Brenda Catchpole was reaching for her bag. Sid Markham had half-stood from his chair.

"Frank," Gertie said, in the voice she used for emergencies and sheepdogs. "Sit down."

He sat down. He put his head in his hands. After a moment, the hands began to shake.

"They're going to arrest me," he said. "I know they are. They're going to arrest me for a thing I didn't do."

The bell jangled again. Inspector Wallace stood in the doorway, with Constable Howard behind him, and even at a distance Gertie could see the pleasure of certainty on Wallace's face. He had come for Frank, and Frank, drunk and ranting and visible to half the regulars, had given him exactly the picture he had expected.

"Mr Hooper," Wallace said. "I'd like a word."

Frank looked up. He looked at Wallace for a long moment before he looked at Gertie, who gave him a small shake of her head.

"Fine," he said. "Fine. Come on then. Take me."

He went out with Wallace on one side and Howard on the other. Gertie had come round from behind the bar by then and held the door for them. Frank did not look at her as he passed.

The door swung shut behind them. The pub remained silent for the count of perhaps four seconds. Then Sid Markham asked for another pint and the the chatter rose up louder than before.

Hester sipped at her tea and said nothing for some time.

"He didn't do it," she said at last.

"I know."

"Wallace will write his report by teatime."

"Yes."

"Then we have until teatime. Perhaps it is time for that biscuit."

* * *

Around half past one, while Gertie was wiping the bar and pretending not to listen to Brenda Catchpole's running commentary on Margaret Hooper's marriage, the door opened and Ted Allsop came in. This was unexpected. Ted was not a half-past-one drinker. Ted was an after-his-tea drinker, and a one-pint-then-home drinker at that. He came up to the bar without looking at anyone and asked for a half of bitter.

"Ted," Gertie said.

"Half of bitter, please."

He paid. He took it to the corner table furthest from the fire, the one by the door, and sat with his back to the room. He drank it neither quickly nor slowly, but purposfully.

Gertie watched him from behind the bar. So did Hester, from her own corner. Ted finished his half. He stood. He went out. He had been in the pub fifteen minutes and had not said three words after his order.

Hester and Gertie exchanged looks.

* * *

Doris Wickham came into the pub just before two. Her eyes were pink and dry. She had cried herself out somewhere on the way. She ordered a port and lemon, which Gertie poured without comment, and sat at a table near the fire.

Gertie brought her a plate of bread and butter, because that was what she had decided the woman needed.

"I'm sorry about all this, Doris."

"All what?" Doris said, though she knew perfectly well.

"People talking."

Doris opened her mouth to reply, then closed it. She reached into her apron pocket for a handkerchief and a folded piece of paper fell onto the table. Gertie saw it. So did Brenda Catchpole, and so did three other people who had been pretending to look elsewhere.

Doris picked it up quickly, but not quickly enough. Gertie had seen the handwriting. Small, cramped, unmistakable. Slade's. Two words and a time. *Friday. Don't be late.*

"It's nothing," Doris said, pushing it back into her pocket. Her face had gone white. "He sent one every week. A reminder. As if I could forget."

"How much did you have left?"

Doris looked at her glass. "One payment. One more Friday and I was rid of him." She smoothed her apron.

The pub was very quiet. Gertie felt the weight of six or seven people pretending not to listen. She put her hand over Doris's for a moment. The hand was scrubbed raw, and under two nails on the right there was a black line the scrubbing had not reached, which was not like Doris at all.

"Well, you've nothing to worry about now," Gertie said, and went back behind the bar.

Hester caught her eye across the room and raised one eyebrow. Some time later, when the pub had returned to its safer noise, she slipped out through the side door without a word.

* * *

The constable was gone from the allotments. The tape was still up. The trench was a dark line in the grey Oxfordshire clay, three feet deep and four feet long.

Hester walked along the path between the plots, her stick tapping lightly. Argos investigated a compost heap, deciding whether he had found anything worth rolling in. She called him back. He ignored her. She called him back again, and he trotted over glumly.

She walked the row.

Plot one, Ted Allsop's, was runner beans on canes, compost turned, neat. Against the toolshed, on the path

side where any passing person could not help but see it, leant a steel crowbar, freshly oiled and entirely the wrong tool for the planting of broad beans. Hester paused. She considered the crowbar. She walked on.

Plot two, Arthur Jessop's, was untouched since autumn. The bean poles from the previous year were still standing, grey and dry, like the bones of something that had given up. She paused at it, considered it, and moved on. A man who had not started his planting was not a murderer. A man who had not started his planting was a man with a wife or a chapel to fuss over, or in Arthur's case, both.

Plot three. Plot four, Frank Hooper's, dug and open, a heap of soil and a clear shape on the ground where the spade had been kept and was no longer. Plot five. Plot six.

Plot seven, Doris Wickham's. Sweet peas threaded through their canes, runner beans behind them, a small cold frame at the back, and at the front a neat row where a row of broad beans had been planted the day before. The earth was patted down. The ground was clean.

Hester stopped.

She looked at the path between Plot seven and the trench. Half a dozen paces. There was a smudge on the dark grey cinder path. Brown, caked, the colour of the clay in the trench, not the colour of the path or any plot. A heel print. Half of one, faint but there. A boot that had walked through wet trench clay and back. By morning it would be gone.

She looked at Doris's plot again. At the front edge, just

inside, was another smudge. Smaller. The same colour.

She tapped her stick once on the ground and walked back to the pub.

* * *

That evening the pub was full. It always was after something happened. People came for the beer, but they stayed for the theories, and Woodstock was never short of those.

The consensus had settled like plaster. Frank Hooper. The threat, the spade, the debt. Wallace had publicly taken him in for questioning and the scene had given the town its picture, and the picture was holding. Half the regulars were sorry for Margaret. The other half were sorry for Frank. Nobody was much sorry for Slade.

Arthur Jessop was in his usual place at the end of the bar, reading the Oxford Mail and shaking his head at intervals. Nobody had asked him anything all day. He had been round to the chapel, he had walked Doris home as far as the gate of her cottage, and he had gone home for his lunch. He was as he always was, which was to say almost not there at all.

Doris was at the table by the fire. She had not gone home. Gertie had called time at half past two, turned out the regulars, and left Doris sitting where she was with a pot of tea. She had sat there through the whole of the shut afternoon. The note had gone round the town by teatime, and Woodstock had decided that a widow bled by the

Toad for three years had nothing to be ashamed of. So the kindnesses started up. Brenda Catchpole bought her another port and lemon. Mabel hovered with sympathy until somebody distracted her. Sympathy in Woodstock was half kindness and half a good view. She looked, Gertie thought, like a person waiting for a bus.

Hester came in around seven. She did not go to her own corner. She crossed the room and sat down at Doris's table without asking.

"May I?"

"Of course."

Hester ordered a sherry and sat. For a while she did not speak. Doris turned her port and lemon round in its glass.

"You will be relieved, I imagine."

Doris looked up. "Relieved?"

"To have it over."

"Yes. I suppose so. Two more Fridays and I'd have been..." She stopped. Her hand went still on the glass. "One more. I meant one more. I've been counting wrong all day. I don't know my own mind."

"Quite," Hester said. "It is the sort of day for it."

Doris looked at her. The colour came up into her face and stayed there. She did not finish her port and lemon.

Hester rose. She put a hand on Doris's shoulder, light and brief, and crossed to her own corner. Argos, who had been

keeping a courteous distance, came to lie at her feet.

Gertie brought her another sherry without being asked.

"What did you say to her?"

"I was just seeing how she was doing that's all."

Gertie looked across the room at the table by the fire.

Doris was turning her port and lemon round in its glass.

"Right."

They drank in silence. The fire took the low evening light.

After a few minutes Brenda Catchpole crossed to Doris's table and offered, gently and persistently, to walk her home. Doris let her. The two of them went out together with Doris's shawl pulled tight against a wind that was not really there.

Hester watched them go. Then she turned to Gertie.

"Ted," she said.

Gertie put down her glass.

"He owed Slade nothing himself. The debt was his father's. But Slade broke his father in the year after the war, and Ted has never let it go. There was a row at the gate three weeks ago. He was there at dawn before anyone else was about. He found the body, or said he did. He has been pale and quiet ever since. He came into the pub at half past one and drank a half of bitter as if it were keeping him alive."

"You think he killed Slade?"

"I think he came at dawn meaning to do something he should not have done. There is a steel crowbar leaning against his toolshed which has not been there in any of the times I have walked past his plot this year. A man with a crowbar at six on a Saturday morning has not come for the beans."

Gertie thought about Ted in the corner by the door, his back to the room.

"I will see him now," Hester said. "He should have the chance to say what he came down to do."

She picked up her stick and went out.

* * *

Hester walked round to Ted Allsop's cottage as the light was beginning to go. Argos walked with her.

Ted answered the door himself. He looked at Hester. He looked at Argos. He looked at the gate behind her as though hoping someone else might be there to send her away.

"Mrs Croft."

"Mr Allsop. May I come in?"

He let her into the front room. He did not sit. He stood with his hands in the pockets of an old jacket and waited for the worst.

"I saw a crowbar by your shed," Hester said.

Ted closed his eyes.

"It was not there a week ago. It was not there two weeks ago. I know because I have walked past your plot twice a week since the runner beans went in. The crowbar was a new arrival, in the place a man with no plan to dig might leave a tool he had brought for some other purpose."

Ted sat down on the edge of the armchair, very slowly.

"I didn't kill him," he said.

"No?"

"But... it's the maddest thing. I went down at dawn meaning to do damage. To his shed. To the lock, the door, the contents. I was going to break it. I was going to break everything in it. He had done my father, and he had done me, and the row at the gate had got round, and I..." He stopped. His hands were shaking. "And when I got to the gate of the allotments, before I had crossed the path, I saw him. In the trench. Already gone."

"You ran for the constable."

"I ran for the constable. And I never said a word about why I was there at six in the morning."

"Because if you had, your crowbar would have come into it and that might have looked bad for you."

"Yes."

Hester nodded once. She got up, slow and effortful on her stick.

"You will tell Inspector Wallace you walked down at dawn to plant your beans. The crowbar was for a stuck shed door of your own. He need not know anything else."

Ted looked up at her.

"Why?"

"Because I do not believe you killed Reg Slade, and the inspector believing you killed him would do nobody any good. And because I am quite certain who did kill him, and you are not going to be useful in muddying up my waters." She paused for a moment as she considered how that last bit sounded. "You know what I mean."

She showed herself out.

She walked back to the pub along Rectory Lane with Argos at her side. The slip and the clay arranged themselves while she walked. By the time she reached the door of The Old Pyed Bull, she had the thing in her mind like a well formed pearl.

She asked Gertie to telephone Inspector Wallace.

* * *

Wallace came to the pub at half past eight, with Constable Howard following at a respectful distance. His case against Frank had begun to soften through the afternoon, Margaret having been firm with him about Frank's Friday evening. The spade-with-initials, on closer inspection, was starting to look less like solid evidence and more like coincidence. Ted Allsop, an hour earlier, had walked into

the station voluntarily to clarify that he had been at the allotments at dawn to plant his beans, and Wallace had let him go, slightly confused. Then Mrs Croft had telephoned.

Hester laid it out. She did not make speeches. She stated facts.

"Frank Hooper's wife confirms he was home by half past seven. The threat was bluster. The spade was left at his open plot. No killer leaves a marked spade with his initials beside the body. Frank is an idiot, but he is not that much of an idiot."

Wallace's ears reddened slightly.

"Mr Allsop, who I gather you have already seen this morning, is not your killer either. He came down at dawn to plant his beans. There is no evidence to put him in that trench."

Wallace turned a page.

"Doris Wickham has been paying Reg Slade two shillings a week since her husband died. She has told us all that she had one payment left. An hour ago, in this room, she told me she had two, and corrected the answer too quickly to mean only that she had miscounted. There is trench clay on Mrs Wickham's plot, and on the path between it and the trench, where she had no business walking if she had only locked the gate. There is a ledger missing from Slade's body and his shed. Mrs Wickham sat in this room all day with soot under her nails, and Gertrude will tell you she is a woman who irons her aprons. Soot does not come from lighting a fire. It comes from raking one out

and crushing what is left, and going back to it, and crushing it again. I think you will find the ledger burned in her grate, in ash she has not yet had the nerve to empty."

Wallace looked up.

"I'm guessing, but by the slip she made to me tonight, Reg Slade had lately told her she would pay for longer than she had been counting on. She had paid for three years. She had been about to be free. He told her she was not. What happened at the allotments on Friday, Mrs Wickham will tell you herself."

Wallace closed his mouth which had been hanging open. Opened it again, then closed it again.

"She took the ledger because the new figure was in it. She thought, I expect, that with the figure gone, no one would know. She is an excellent flower arranger, Inspector. She is not a criminal. She paid a debt for three years and would not pay it any more."

Wallace did not write that down.

"You will want to speak to her tonight, before she has had time to think about it any more than she has. She has not slept since Friday so I would imagine you can get her while her brain's still muddled with it all."

Gertie watched Wallace's face revise itself, slowly and without pleasure. He put the notebook in his pocket and left without thanking them.

They found the ash in Doris Wickham's grate, in the small heap she had not yet emptied. The ledger had gone into it, and the paper Slade had given her with it, and there was nothing left that anyone could read. That had been the point.

They found the rest at Slade's house, on the second search. The drawer of the kitchen table had a false bottom in it, a thin board fitted so neatly that Constable Howard had been through that drawer on the Saturday and come away with nothing but string and candle ends. Under the board was a duplicate book of the sort any tradesman keeps, with a sheet of carbon folded inside the cover. The top copy went to the debtor. The counterfoil stayed with him. Reg Slade had been a great deal more careful than Woodstock had ever given him credit for, and the last counterfoil in the book was made out in his small cramped hand to D.W.

Slade had calculated a further fifteen pounds and four shillings against Doris's name. Harold's original thirty pounds was long since paid. The fifteen pounds and four was interest Slade had been quietly accruing for three years and had only now seen fit to write down. At two shillings a week, it would have taken her another three years to clear. Until fifty-three. Until she was sixty-one.

She did not deny any of it. Gertie heard later that she had sat in the police station with her hands folded and told them everything. Yes, she had met him. Yes, she had picked up Frank's spade. No, she had not meant to kill

him. She had meant to make him take the new figure back. She had meant to make him say it out loud, that he was extending the debt because he could, that he had always been going to extend it, that there was never going to be a Friday when she was free.

He had laughed at her. She remembered that. He had turned to walk away, still laughing, and she had hit him, and he had gone into the trench.

She had taken the ledger and walked home along Rectory Lane in the dusk. She had not slept. She had not eaten. She had come to the pub on the Saturday because she could not bear the empty cottage and the ash in the grate reminding her of what she had done.

Frank Hooper got his spade back, though Margaret confiscated it for a fortnight on principle. The allotments went on. Arthur Jessop planted his beans, late. Spring went on. People dug their rows and argued about compost and whether bone meal was better than blood and fish, and the conversations were a little quieter than usual, but only for a week or two.

Gertie stood behind the bar on the Friday evening and poured a half of mild that nobody had ordered. She looked at the table by the fire where Doris had sat. She thought about a woman who had arranged altar flowers every Sunday and put a man in a trench because she could think of no other way to make him stop.

"Penny for them," Danny said, collecting glasses.

"I was thinking," Gertie said, "that you can pay a debt

with everything you have, and a man like Slade will still find a way to charge you for what is left."

She picked up a cloth and wiped the bar. Outside, the allotments were dark and the church was locked and the spring evening smelled of turned earth and woodsmoke and nothing had changed except the thing that had.

* * *

When the weather turned that autumn and the kitchen at The Old Pyed Bull put toad in the hole back on the menu, there was always a small pause at the next table along whenever someone ordered it. After the pause a regular would say it under his breath, and the joke would go round, and Gertie would not laugh, but she would not stop them either. People made jokes of the things they found hard to explain. It was how it had always worked.