The Purple Line

by John Rhode, 1884-1964

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INSPECTOR PURLEY picked up the telephone. But the torrent of words which poured into his ears was so turbid that he could make little of it. Something about a wife and a water-butt. 'I'll come along at once,' said Purley. 'Holly Bungalow, you say? On the Cadford Road? Right!'

He took the police car, in which he drove out of the fair-sized market town of Faythorpe. The villas on the outskirts extended for a short distance, with a scarlet telephone kiosk near the further end.

It was growing dark on a February afternoon, and it was pouring with rain.

About half a mile beyond the kiosk he saw, on the left, a white-painted gate between the trees and standing beside it, a man with a bicycle. The inspector saw 'Holly Bungalow' painted on the gate.

As he got out of the car, the man at the gate began gabbling and gesticulating. He was short and stocky. He wore a mackintosh, sodden with wet, and was hatless, with the rain pouring from his hair over his face.

'Rode at once to the kiosk,' he was rambling incoherently. 'That's where I rang you up from. We're not on the telephone, you know. I didn't know what else to do. It's a dreadful thing. Come, I'll show you.'

At the back of the bungalow was a verandah, looking out over a lawn and garden surrounded by trees. At the further end of the verandah was a round galvanised water-butt, overflowing with the water pouring into it from a spout in the eaves. Projecting from the top of the butt, and resting against the edge was a pair of inverted high-heeled shoes. 'It's my wife!' the little man exclaimed.

The butt was about five feet high. Beside it was a folding wooden garden chair. Purley climbed on to this, and leaned over the edge of the butt. Within it, completely submerged but for the feet, was a woman, head down and fully clothed

The first problem was how to get her out. He tilted the butt till it fell on its side.

The little man made no attempt to help Purley as he drew the woman out by the legs. She was fairly tall and slim, apparently in the thirties, wearing a dark frock, silk stockings and high-heeled shoes, with no hat.

Purley glanced into the butt. The water had drained out of it, and all it now contained was a layer of slime and a broken ridge-tile, which had at some time presumably fallen into it from the roof.

Purley carried the body into the shelter of the verandah. The little man was quivering like a jelly. 'You'd better come with me,' said Purley.

In a dazed fashion the other followed him back to the car. Purley drove to the kiosk, where he telephoned to the police station. Then the two drove back to the bungalow.

They entered by the front door. The bungalow was not large—lounge, dining-room, a couple of bedrooms. The furnishings were well-to-do. In the dining-room, a french window leading on to the verandah was open. On the table were remains of a meal, apparently lunch, with one place only laid. Beside this, a tumbler, a syphon and a bottle of whisky, half full.

As they sat down Purley took out his note-book and headed a page 'Monday, February 13'. He said: 'You told me the name was Briston, I think?'

The other nodded. 'That's right. I am Henry Briston. My wife's name was Shirley. She had seemed rather depressed for the last few days.'

'When did you last see her alive?'

'About eight o'clock this morning,' Briston replied. 'She was in bed then. I got up early, for I was going to Mawnchester to see my brother, and I took her a cup of tea. She seemed quite cheerful then. I got my own breakfast, and while the egg was frying I put a new chart in the barograph yonder.'

He pointed to the instrument on a bracket fixed to the dining-room wall. Purley was familiar with barographs—there was one in the window of the optician's next door to the police station. The one on the wall was of the conventional type, with a revolving drum driven by clockwork, and a pen at the end of a long needle. The chart stuck round the drum bore out Briston's words. It ran from Monday to Sunday, ruled in two-hour divisions, the lines an eighth of an inch apart.

The pen had been set at eight o'clock that morning, and filled rather clumsily, for the deep purple oily ink had overflowed and run vertically down the chart. The time was now seven o'clock, and the pen pointed correctly between the six and eight o'clock lines. The graph it had drawn ran horizontally for an eighth of an

inch, from eight to ten. After that time it sloped steeply downwards, indicating rapidly falling pressure.

'And after breakfast?' Purley asked. 'You saw her again?'

'I didn't see her,' Briston replied. 'I called through the door and told her I was going, and she answered me. Then I jumped on my bicycle and rode to the station to catch the 8.50 to Mawnchester.'

'Was Mrs Briston expecting anyone to call here?'

'Not that I know of. I met the postman on the road as I was riding to the station. I called out to him if he had anything for me, and he said only a parcel for my wife.'

'Was that garden chair standing by the water butt when you left home?'

'I don't think so. If it was, I didn't put it there. At this time of year it's kept folded up in the verandah. I sometimes use it to stand on and look into the butt to see how much water there is. But this morning the butt was empty. During the dry spell we had last week, we used all the water for the greenhouse. It would have taken three or four hours to fill even with the heavy rain today.'

'Did you put this bottle of whisky on the table here?'

'No, I found it there when I came home. Latterly, my wife had taken to drinking rather more than I liked to see. I didn't clear away my breakfast things before I left this morning. My wife must have done that, and got her own lunch later on.'

'You went to Mawnchester by the 8.50. What time did you come back?'

'By the train that gets to Faythorpe at 4.45. The ticket collector will remember that—we had some conversation. I had taken a cheap day ticket, but it wasn't available for return as early as the 4.45, and I had to pay the full fare. I lunched with my brother in Mawnchester and saw several other people there.'

There came a loud knock. Purley opened the door, to find the divisional surgeon. 'This way, doctor,' he said. 'What can you tell me?'

'Not very much more than you can see for yourself,' said the doctor. 'She's been dead some hours. Death was due to drowning. There's a pretty severe contusion on the top of the head. It wouldn't have been fatal, for the skull isn't fractured. But you'll want to account for it, I expect.'

'Have a look inside the butt,' said Purley. 'You see that broken ridge-tile?'

The doctor nodded. 'Yes, I see it. You found her head downwards in the butt, you say? If, when she dived in, her head had struck the tile, the contusion would be accounted for.'

Purley went back to Faythorpe. Accident, murder, or suicide? The only way she could have fallen headlong into the butt by accident was if she had been clambering about on the roof; such behaviour might surely be ruled out.

Murder? By whom? Her husband's alibi seemed perfectly good, though, of course, it would have to be checked. And there was this finally convincing point. Nobody, certainly not her puny little husband, could have lifted a struggling victim above his shoulders and plunged her head downwards into the butt.

Suicide, then. Everything pointed to that. The depression from which Shirley Briston had been suffering. And possibly the whisky to supply Dutch courage. It had started to rain about half past nine that morning, and had never ceased all day. Three or four hours, Briston had said. The butt would have been full by the

time she might be expected to have had her lunch. She had taken out the garden chair, climbed on to it, and dived into the butt.

Verification of Briston's alibi followed naturally. The ticket collector remembered him perfectly well. 'I couldn't say what train he went by in the morning, for I wasn't on duty then,' he told Purley. 'But he came off the 4.45 and gave up the return half of a cheap date to Mawnchester. I told him that was no good, as cheap tickets are only available by trains leaving Mawnchester after six. So he paid me the difference, and I gave him a receipt for it.'

Purley ran the postman to earth in the bar of the Red Admiral. 'This morning's delivery?' he replied to Purley's question. 'Yes, I do recollect seeing Mr Briston while I was on my way to Cadford. He was riding his bike towards the town here, and as he passed he called out and asked me if I had anything for him. I told him that all there was for Holly Bungalow was a parcel for Mrs Briston.'

'You delivered the parcel, I suppose?' Purley remarked. 'Did you see anyone at the bungalow?'

'Why, yes,' the postman replied. 'I knocked on the door. Mrs Briston opened it. She wasn't properly dressed, but had a sort of wrap round her.'

'Can you tell me what time this was?'

'It must have been round about half-past eight when I spoke to Mr Briston. And maybe five minutes later when I got to the bungalow.'

All that remained was a final word with the doctor. There was just one possibility. Briston had arrived at Faythorpe station at 4.45. He should have reached home by 5.15. It had been after six when Purley had first seen the body in the butt. Only the faintest possibility, of course.

The doctor was at home when Purley called and frowned irritably at his question. 'How the dickens can I tell to a split second? I'm ready to testify on oath that death was due to drowning. But I'm not prepared to say exactly when it took place. When a body has been in water for any length of time, that's impossible. My opinion is that the woman died not later than midday or thereabouts.'

So that settled it. Mrs Briston had been seen alive after her husband left the house. The medical evidence showed that she must have been dead before his return that evening. Clearly, then, suicide.

Next morning, Pursley went to Holly Bungalow fairly early. The door was opened by a man who bore some resemblance to Henry Briston. 'Do you want see my brother?' he asked. 'I am Edward Briston, from Mawnchester. Henry rang me up last night, and told me what had happened, and I came over at once. He's had a very bad night, and I told him he'd better stay in bed for a bit.'

'I won't disturb him,' Purley replied. 'I only looked in to see he was all right. You saw your brother in Mawnchester yesterday, didn't you?'

'Yes, he lunched with me, and we spent the afternoon together in my office, till he left to catch his train.'

Purley nodded. 'Have you any personal knowledge of your sister-in-law's state of mind?'

Edward Briston glanced over his shoulder, led the way into the dining-room and shut the door. 'It was to talk about Shirley that Henry came to see me yesterday,' he said in a hushed voice. 'He told me she was terribly depressed. As it she had something on her mind that she wouldn't tell him.

'I'm going to tell you something, inspector, that I didn't tell Henry, and never shall now. One day last week I saw Shirley in Mawnchester. She was with a man I didn't know, and they seemed to be getting on remarkably well together. I know she saw me, but the couple hurried away together in the opposite direction. It's my belief the poor woman had got herself into a situation from which she could see only one way of escape.'

That might be the case, Purley thought. Glancing round the room he caught sight of the barograph. After that flat step, an eighth of an inch wide, the purple line traced by the pen had fallen steadily till about midnight. Then it had become horizontal, and was now beginning to rise. Fine weather might be expected.

The prosperous appearance of the room prompted Purley's next question. 'Your brother is in comfortable circumstances?'

'Well, yes,' Edward Briston replied. 'Henry hasn't much of his own, but Shirley had considerable means. She was a widow when he married her, and her first husband had left her quite well off.'

Henry Briston's alibi was complete. There could be no doubt now that his wife had committed suicide, and Edward Briston's guess might explain why.

Purley went back to the police station and caught sight of the barograph in the window next door.

He looked at the instrument more closely. It was very similar to the one at Holly Bungalow, the only difference that Purley could see was the chart on the drum, which ran from Sunday to Saturday. A new chart had been fitted at 10 o'clock the previous Sunday, for that was where the purple graph began. For the greater part of Sunday it ran almost horizontally. Then, late that evening, it began to decline. By the early hours of Monday morning this decline had become a steep slope.

As with the instrument at Holly Bungalow, this fall had continued till about midnight.

The queer thing about this graph was that it showed no horizontal step between eight and ten on Monday morning. Briston's barograph must be out of order. But it couldn't be, for in every other respect the two purple lines were exactly similar.

Purley went into the police station. A discrepancy only an eighth of an inch long in the graphs could be of no importance. And then the only possible explanation revealed itself.

His thoughts began to race. There was no confirmation of Henry Briston having left Faythorpe by the 8.50. He had certainly been seen by the postman riding in the direction of the station about 8.30. But he might have turned back when the postman had passed the bungalow on his way back to Cadford. A later train would have given him plenty of time to meet his brother for lunch.

Back to the bungalow, to find his wife dressed and having breakfast. Perhaps he had contrived to meet the postman. He could easily have ordered something to be sent her by post. That contusion the doctor had found. The kitchen poker! A blow, not enough to kill her, but to knock her out.

But it would manifestly have been beyond Briston's power to lift even an inert body over the edge of the butt. No, it wouldn't do. By jove, yes, it would! It hadn't begun to rain till 9.30, and before then the butt had been empty. Briston had tipped the butt over on its side.

First the broken tile, to explain the contusion that must be found. Then the unconscious woman, dragged through the french window of the dining-room and thrust head first into the butt.

An effort, and the butt with its contents was upended in place. Perhaps the rain water was already beginning to trickle into it from the spout.

Then to set the scene, so as to suggest that the victim had been alive at a much later hour. To clear away the breakfast, and to lay the appearance of lunch, with the significant whisky bottle.

In his preoccupation with the crime, he had forgotten to change the barograph chart. It was by then ten o'clock. He put on a new chart, and set the pen on the eight o'clock line, to suggest the time of his action. Then he turned the drum till the pen rested on the ten o'clock line.

He was bound to do that, otherwise it might be noticed later that the instrument was two hours slow. That was the only possible explanation of the purple line being horizontal for a vital eighth of an inch.

The motive might be deduced from Edward Briston's revelation. The only evidence for Shirley Briston's depressed state was her husband's. She hadn't been depressed, but determined. She had told him she was going to leave him. And if she did that, her money would go with her.

It was beyond any doubt that the barograph had been set, not at eight, but at ten. If it could be proved that Henry Briston had set it, his alibi was destroyed. He must have been in a state of great agitation. He had clumsily overfilled the pen, so that the ink had run down the chart. Might he not in his agitation have got some of it on his fingers? That oily purple fluid was not a true ink, but a dye, defying soap and water.

Purley drove again to Holly Bungalow. This time Henry Briston himself opened the door. 'Hold out your hands, Mr Briston,' said the inspector.

'My hands?' Briston replied. He held them out tremblingly, palms downwards. Purley seized the right hand and turned it over. There on the inner side of forefinger and thumb were two faint purple stains.

'Come with me,' said Purley sternly. 'And I must caution you—'