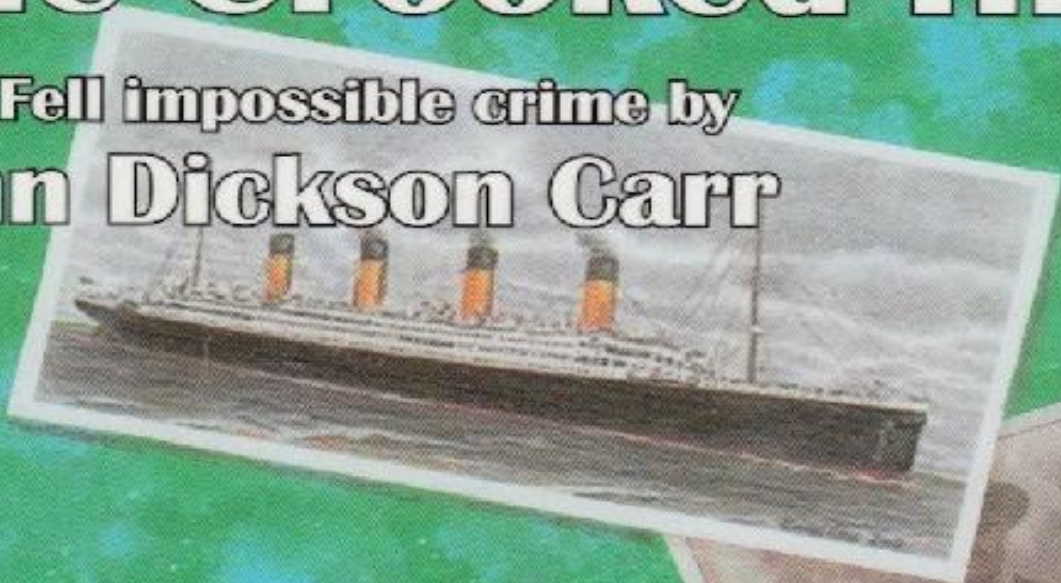


# The Crooked Hinge

A Dr. Fell impossible crime by  
**John Dickson Carr**



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# THE CROOKED HINGE

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A GIDEON FELL MYSTERY

JOHN DICKSON CARR

COLLIER BOOKS

*A Division of Macmillan Publishing, Co., Inc.*

NEW YORK

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*This Collier Books edition is published by arrangement with Harper & Row, Publishers. Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 866 Third Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10022, Collier-Macmillan Canada Ltd.*

*Printed in the United States of America. -*

*First Collier' Books Edition. 1964*

*Fifth Printing 1974*

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# PART I

## THE DEATH OF A MAN

Wednesday, July 29th

The first rule to be borne in mind by the aspirant is this:- Never tell your audience beforehand what you are going to do. If you do so, you at once give their vigilance the direction which it is most necessary to avoid, and increase tenfold the chances of detection! We will give an illustration.

-PROFESSOR HOFFMANN, *Modern Magic* –

# CHAPTER ONE

**AT A WINDOW** overlooking a garden in Kent, Brian Page sat amid a clutter of, open books at the writing-table, and felt a strong distaste for work. Through both windows the late July sunlight turned the floor of the room to gold. The somnolent heat brought out an odour of old wood and old books. A wasp hovered in from the apple-orchard behind the garden; and Page waved it out without much animation.

Beyond his garden wall, past the inn of the Bull and Butcher, the road wound for some quarter of a mile between orchards. It passed the gates of Farnleigh Close, whose thin clusters of chimneys Page could see above rifts in the trees, and then ascended past the wood poetically known as Hanging Chart.

The pale green and brown of the flat Kentish lands, which rarely acquired a harsh colour, now blazed. Page imagined that there was even colour in the brick chimneys of, the Close. And along the road from the Close Mr. Nathaniel Burrows's car was moving with a noise audible for some distance, even if it was not moving fast. There was, Brian Page thought lazily, almost, too much excitement in Mallingford village. If the statement sounded too wild for belief, it could be proved. Only last summer there had been the murder of buxom Miss Daly, strangled by a tramp who had been dramatically killed while trying to getaway across the railway-line. Then, in this last week of July, there had been two strangers putting up at the Bull -and Butcher on

successive days: one stranger-who was an artist and the other who might be - nobody knew how this whisper got started - a detective.

Finally, there had been today the mysterious running to and-fro of Page's friend Nathaniel Burrows, the solicitor from Maidstone. There seemed to be some general excitement or uneasiness at Farnleigh Close, though nobody knew what it meant. It was Brian Page's custom to knock off work at noon, and go over to the Bull and Butcher for a pint of beer before lunch; but it was an ominous sign that there had been no gossip at the inn that morning.

Yawning, Page pushed a few books aside. He wondered idly what could stir up Farnleigh Close, which had seldom been stirred up since Inigo Jones built it for the first baronet in the reign of James the First. It had known a long line of Farnleighs: a stringy, hardy line still. Sir John Farnleigh; the present holder of the baronetcy of Mailingford and Soane, had inherited a substantial fortune as well as a sound demesne.

Page liked both the dark, rather jumpy John Farnleigh and his forthright wife, Molly. The life here suited Farnleigh well; he fitted; he was a born squire, in spite of having been so long away from his home. For Farnleigh's story was another of those romantic tales which interested Page and which now seemed so difficult to reconcile with the solid, almost commonplace baronet at Farnleigh Close. From his first voyage out to his marriage to Molly Bishop little more than a year ago, it was (thought Page) another advertisement for the excitements of Mailingford village.

Grinning and yawning again, Page took up his pen. Got to get to work.

Oh, Lord.

He considered the pamphlet at his elbow. His "Lives of the Chief Justices of England" which he was trying to make- both scholarly and popular was going as well as might be expected. He was now dealing with Sir Matthew Hale: - All sorts of external matters were always creeping, in ,because they had to creep in and because Brian Page had no wish to keep them out.

To tell the truth, he never really expected to finish the "Lives of the Chief

Justices," any more than he had finished his original law-studies. He was too indolent for real scholarship, yet too restless-minded and intellectually alert to let it alone. It did not matter whether he ever finished the Chief Justices. But he could tell himself sternly that he ought to be working, and then with a sense of relief go wandering down all sorts of fascinating bypaths of the subject.

The pamphlet beside him read, *A Tryal of Witches at the Assizes Held at Bury St. Edmonds for the County of Suffolk, on the Tenth Day of March, 1664, before Sir Matthew Hale, Kt, then Lord Chief Baron of his Majesty's Court of Exchequer: printed for D. Brown, J. Walthoe, and M. Wotton, 1718.*

There was a bypath down which he had wandered before. Sir Matthew Hale's connection with witches of course, was of the slightest. But it would not prevent Brian Page from writing a superfluous half-chapter on any subject which happened to interest him. With a breath of pleasure he took down a well-worn Glanvill from one of the shelves. He was just beginning to muse over it when he heard footsteps in the garden, and somebody "oi'd" at him from outside the window.

It was Nathaniel Burrows, swinging a briefcase with unsolicitor-like gestures...

"Busy?" demanded Burrows.

"We-el," Page admitted, and yawned. He put down Glanvill. "Come in and have a cigarette."

Burrows opened the glass door giving on the garden and stepped into the dim, comfortable room. Though he held himself well in hand, he was excited enough to look chilly and rather pale on a hot afternoon. His father, grandfather; and great-grandfather had handled the legal affairs of the Farnleighs. Sometimes it might have been doubted whether Nathaniel Burrows, with his enthusiasms and occasional explosive, speech, was the proper person for, a family lawyer. Also, he was young. But as a rule he had all these things under control; and managed, Page thought, to look more

frozen-faced than a halibut on a slab.

Burrows's dark hair had a wide paring, and was smoothed round his head with great nicety. He wore shell-rimmed spectacles on a long nose; he was peering over the spectacles, and his face at the moment seemed to have more than the usual number of muscles. He was dressed in black with great nicety and discomfort; his gloved hands were clasped on the briefcase.

"Brian," he said, "are you dining in tonight?"

"Yes. I -"

"Don't," said Burrows abruptly. Page blinked.

"You're dining with the Farnleighs," Burrows went on. "At least, I don't care whether you dine there; but I should prefer that you were there when a certain thing happens." Something of his official manner came back to him, and swelled his thin chest. "I am authorized to tell you what I am going to tell you, Fortunately. Tell me: did you ever have reason to think that Sir John Farnleigh was not what he seemed?"

"Not what he seemed?"

"That Sir John Farnleigh," explained Burrows carefully, "was an impostor and a masquerader, not Sir John Farnleigh at all?"

"Have you got sunstroke?" asked the other, sitting up. He felt startled and irritated and unwarrantably stirred up. It was not the sort of thing to spring on a person at the laziest period of a hot day. "Certainly I never had reason to think any such thing. Why should I? What the devil are you getting at."

Nathaniel Burrows got up from the chair, depositing the briefcase there.

I say that," he answered, "because a man has turned up who claims to be the real John Farnleigh. This isn't a new thing: It's been going on for several months, and now it's come to a head. Er " He hesitated, and looked round. "Is there anybody else here? Mrs. What's-her-name - you know, the woman who does for you -or anyone?"

'No.'

Burrows spoke, as though entirely through the front of his mouth and

teeth. "I shouldn't be telling you this. But I know I can trust you; and (between ourselves) I am in a delicate position. This is going to make trouble. The Tichborne case won't be a patch on it. Of course er - officially, as yet, I have no reason to believe that the man whose affairs I administer isn't Sir John Farnleigh. I am supposed to serve Sir John Farnleigh: the proper one. But that is the point. Here are two men. One is the real baronet - and the other is a masquerading fraud. The two men are not alike; they don't even look alike. And yet may I be damned if I can decide which is which." He paused; and then added: "Fortunately, though, the affair may be settled tonight."

Page had to adjust his thoughts. Pushing the cigarette-box across to his guest, he lit a cigarette for himself' and studied Burrows.

"This is one clap of thunder after another," he said. "What started it, anyhow? When has there been any reason to suppose that an impostor stepped in? Has the question ever come up before now?"

"Never. And you'll see why." Burrows got out a handkerchief, mopped his face all over with great care, and settled down calmly. "I only hope it's a mare's nest. I like John and Molly - sorry, Sir John and Lady Farnleigh - I like them enormously. If this claimant is an impostor, I'll dance on the village green-well, maybe not that, perhap - but I shall make it my business to see that he gets a prison sentence for perjury longer than Arthur Orton's was. In the meantime, since you're going to hear about it tonight, you'd better know the background of the whole thing, and why the infernal mess has come up. Do you know Sir John's story?"

"In a vague general way."

"You should know nothing in a vague general way;" retorted Burrows, shaking his head disapprovingly. "Is that the way you write your history? I hope not. Listen to me; and keep these simple facts firmly fixed in your mind.

"We are going back twenty-five years, when the present Sir John Farnleigh was fifteen. He was born in 1898 the second son of old Sir Dudley and Lady Farnleigh. There was, no question then of his inheriting the title: