

Long-Term Investment

Chelsea Quinn Yarbro

The coffins bothered him, no doubt about it. Ever since the foreign gentleman had hired him to supervise his warehouse, the coffins had bothered him—that, and working late, although he was not completely alone at any hour, for even at night the London docks bustled; ships tugged restlessly at their moorings out in the Thames and those secured to the vast wooden piers strained at the lines holding them. Lamps gave off a fuzzy glow, tingeing the docks with gold and lighting the busy efforts of all who labored here. Activity was everywhere: longshoremen worked steadily, loading or removing cargo from the waiting holds; sailors from a hundred foreign ports polished brightwork, swabbed decks, inspected rigging, bucked cargo, hauled lines, all as if it were midday. Many of the office windows in the warehouses were lit, testimony to the industry of the owners of the vessels as well as the men they hired. The brackish smell of bilgewater and the odor of tar hung on the air, stronger than the clean scent off the distant sea, although there was a tang of salt in the fog.

Edward Hitchin sat in the dusty office above the warehouse floor and tried to keep himself busy. The foreign gentleman—calling himself Carfax—was paying him well: ten shillings for a day's work, and twelve when he had to remain past nine at night, handsome wages for a young man from Stepney who was little more than a watchman. He was determined to keep the job as long as possible, for he liked the jingle of coins in his pocket and the respectful nod from the patrolling constables.

A ship was due in from Varna, and Mister Carfax had told Edward to expect another load of coffins. "Not that we haven't a fair supply on hand already," he had added before leaving Edward alone. "Still, it is good business, is it not, to have an ample supply. Coffins are a long-term investment, are they not?" He had chuckled, which Edward found disquieting, but there were so many things about Mister Carfax that gave him pause that this chuckle seemed a minor intrusion.

"Too true," Edward said to himself as he looked out the window and down onto the warehouse floor where several dozen elaborately carved coffins were stacked. He had been thinking about Carfax's remark all evening—that coffins were a long-term investment; he had decided that in its way, the observation was witty. Coffins always got used, eventually. Another load of them and the warehouse would be more than half-filled, and that load would arrive in a matter of hours.

Edward was considering lighting up his pipe when a sharp rap on the entry door claimed his attention. Surely the ship had not yet off-loaded the cargo for Mister Carfax. When the knock was repeated, he bolted from the office, running noisily down the stairs as he called out, "In half a tick!" Opening the door, he found himself facing a man he had never seen before, but knew at once, though the man wore a suit instead of a uniform, that he was a member of the police. Edward blanched but held the door steadily. "Good evening."

"Good evening. Am I addressing Mister Carfax?"

"No," Edward answered, wondering what the police wanted with the tall, foreign gentleman. "'He's away just now. I'm his... assistant. Edward Hitchin.'" He could not make himself ask what the police were doing here, so he waited while the policeman stepped inside.

"Do you have a little time to spare, Mister Hitchin? I am Inspector Ames of Scotland Yard."

This polite inquiry, along with being called "Mister" caught Edward off-balance. "Sure enough," he said after he thought about it.

"You've been here all evening?" The policeman took a notebook from his inner breast pocket, and a pencil from his outer breast pocket, and prepared to write.

"Is this official, you taking down my answers and all?" Edward asked, trying to conceal his anxiety.

"Should it not be?" Inspector Ames asked so mildly that Edward had to resist the urge to spring from the room. "Now, have you been here all evening?"

"Since eleven in the morning. I came in late because I have to be here late to receive a new shipment of... stock." He indicated the dimly lit warehouse.

"The sign over the door says *D. Carfax, importer and purveyor of fine coffins and caskets*" said the policeman. "Is this the stock on hand?"

"Yes," said Edward. "The bills of lading are in the office. What you see here comes from Varna, most of it. Very elaborate carving they do in that part of the world—very elaborate." He pointed to the nearest stack of coffins. "These are the simple ones. There are fancier toward the back. We even have some with bells to be secured above in case someone should be buried alive, and need to be dug up again." He had been told to mention this desirable feature even though he thought it ghoulish.

"Do you open them, or—" the inspector began.

"Oh, no," said Edward hastily. "It's not... seemly."

"Um. Very prudent," said the policeman indifferently, and handed a card to Edward. "Will you be good enough to tell Mister Carfax that Inspector Uriah Ames is desirous of speaking with him at his earliest convenience?"

Edward took the card, holding it gingerly. "May I tell him what this is about?" he asked, curiosity and dread warring within him.

Inspector Ames coughed diplomatically. "A body was found washed up on the Isle of Dogs. It has no identification, no clothing. It is likely the deceased was the victim of foul play. The dead woman has not been claimed or anyone of her description reported missing." He watched Edward closely. "We are asking all businesses along the docks, for it is likely that she was thrown into the water somewhere in this area, and we are hoping that someone noticed something." He paused, his pencil poised over his well-thumbed notebook. "Have you noticed any suspicious activities in this area in the last week or so?"

Edward shook his head. "I have been in the office, or on the floor, making an inventory for Mister Carfax. I take my tea inside." He shrugged apologetically. "I wish I could tell you something more."

"Provide me with your direction, and I suppose that will do for now," said Inspector Ames.

"Edward Hitchin, Beeks House, White Horse Road, Stepney," he said promptly, knowing that the address was far from impressive.

"Lived there long, have you?" Inspector Ames asked as he wrote.

"Mum and I have been there for ten years and more." He did his best not to sound defensive.

"Your Mum still there, is she?" Inspector Ames asked.

"Yes; she's not in good health." It was a convenient mendacity, for the melancholy which held her in its grip seemed as crippling as any misfortune or disease.

"Sorry to hear that," said Inspector Ames with the habitual sympathy of one used to bad news. "Stays in, does she?"

"Most of the time. I tend to her needs," Edward informed Inspector Ames, at once proud and wary.

"And you work here for long hours," said Inspector Ames.

"I am well-paid for my time," Edward insisted. "Mister Carfax is a generous employer."

"Worked for him long, have you?" Inspector Ames seemed disinterested in the answer, but Edward

knew enough about the police not to be deceived by this ploy.

"Not long, no. Mister Carfax is a foreigner but recently arrived in London. He keeps a house somewhere in the country, but he has a place in London, probably in the toffy part of town— Mayfair, or Berkeley Square or some such. He's rich enough, and he has the manner." He felt that volunteering this information would show his willingness to cooperate with the police inquiries. "He comes here three or four times a week to tend to business and to instruct me in my duties." "Then you expect to see him shortly," said Inspector Ames.

"Tomorrow, about four or five," said Edward promptly.

"Then you will give him my card and pass along my message, and I shall expect a call from Mister Carfax before the end of the week." This affable request, Edward knew, was an order. He nodded.

"I'll attend to it, first thing he arrives," Edward said, and tried to contain his fidgets.

"That's good of you," said Inspector Ames as he put his pencil and notebook away, and with an uneasy glance at the stacked coffins and caskets said, "I'll let myself out."

By the time Carfax arrived the next afternoon, Edward had become distressed about what the Inspector had told him; dead women, murdered women, brought back memories of the Ripper, and with it, other, more personal recollections, as well as the uncomfortable awareness that the Ripper had never been brought to justice. So Edward was nervous when he passed on Inspector Ames's card and request. "The police are nothing to fash with, Mister Carfax," he added when he finished explaining the situation. "When there are dead bodies involved, the police are... are persistent."

"Ah, yes. English police. We hear many things about them in my native land," said Mister Carfax, examining the inspector's card. "What does he want of me, this Inspector Ames? You say there is a body—what has that to do with me?"

"There's an investigation into the woman's death. The police are gathering information about the circumstances," said Edward, wondering how Mister Carfax would doubt that: foreigners were unaccountable.

"What has that to do with me?" Mister Carfax repeated with supreme indifference. "I know nothing of this woman. Why should the police need to know that?"

"They want you to go along to the station and tell them what you can. You may know nothing, but they will want to hear of it from you." Edward tried not to sound too apprehensive, but he suspected he failed.

"But I have nothing to tell them. Dead women do not interest me." His accent grew stronger, as if his emotions had loosened his control over the English tongue. "It is most unseemly, to have to answer to the police, a man of my position."

Although Edward was not sure what that position might be, he said, "They just need to have you tell them you were not on the docks when the woman was killed—that's all."

Carfax looked indignant as he pulled himself up to his full, and considerable, height. "It is for the police to wait upon me. Send this Ames word that I will receive him the day after tomorrow in the early evening." He looked toward the newest arrivals. "How many in this load?"

"Twenty-three of the fancy, eleven of the plain," said Edward, grateful to have this opportunity to show his efficiency. "The ones with brass fittings are in the row at the center."

"Just so," Carfax approved. "Did you open any of them?"

Edward shook his head. "You said I should not."

"So I did," Carfax mused, then went on more briskly, "You have done well, Hitchin. I will pay you a bonus for your work." He strode toward the stairs. "Oh. I suppose you should know I will take nine of them, for delivery. Tomorrow a drayer will come to fetch them."

"You have a customer, then?" Edward said, relieved to hear it.

Carfax smiled. "In a manner of speaking." He paused. "I will tell you which are to be taken, so you will not load the wrong ones."

"Very good, sir," said Edward, secretly glad to know some of the stock would be leaving the warehouse.

As he climbed up the stairs, Carfax said, "This is going very well. By winter I should be established."

"There's always a market for coffins," said Edward, deliberately echoing Carfax's sentiments as he followed him up the stairs.

"When did Carfax say he would arrive?" Inspector Ames asked, glancing at his pocketwatch for the third time. It was twenty minutes past the hour Carfax had said he would be at his warehouse for their meeting. The afternoon was closing toward evening already; fall was beginning.

"He said four, but he was coming in from the country, and he may have been delayed on the road." Edward felt acute embarrassment at this predicament. "You may have to be patient. He was determined to meet with you, or so he said when he left day before yesterday."

"Well, I will wait a while longer," Inspector Ames said with a ponderous sigh. "He's the last one I have to interview from this area."

"Any progress?" Edward did not want to know, but he was determined to keep the inspector entertained during his wait for Mister Carfax.

"Not much," Inspector Ames admitted. "The woman is still unidentified, which hampers our work. We are doing our best."

Edward thought that did not sound promising, but he said, "No doubt you'll find the murderer, eh, Inspector?"

"Are you mocking me?" Inspector Ames asked suspiciously.

Shocked, Edward shook his head. "No, sir. Nothing of the sort. I only meant what I said, that you will catch the criminal."

Inspector Ames looked slightly mollified, but he glowered at Edward. "You... you poor people have no respect for the police."

"I am not one such. My father worked for the police, in the stationhouse. It got him killed," said Edward stiffly.

"Oh, yes?" said Inspector Ames, regarding Edward with slightly more interest. "How did it happen?"

Edward guessed that the inspector wanted to know so he could check out the story more than he had any genuine interest. "It was during the Ripper days. A man was brought into the stationhouse for Stepney, where my father clerked. He was under suspicion for savaging a... street woman, and some thought he might be the Ripper—the man in custody, not my father. The thing was, the fellow had a knife on him that no one knew about, and when he was being written up, he grabbed my father and used him for a shield to escape. Cut his throat on the stationhouse steps." He swallowed hard. "My father said that police are the best hope we have to make life safe. No, Inspector, I would not mock you, for his sake if no other."

"Just so," said Inspector Ames, making it serve as an apology.

"I won't say as police don't make me nervous," Edward went on, thinking he was saying too much, but unable to stop himself. "You said right when you said poor people—" He broke off. "Well, thanks to Carfax, I am not poor any longer."

Inspector Ames nodded and was about to speak when Carfax himself came striding in out of the foggy, fading day. "Mister Carfax," he said with energy. "I had about given you up."

"I apologize for my tardiness," said Carfax. "I have been at the zoological gardens. Most unusual. I must go again when I am at leisure to appreciate its occupants. I am afraid I forgot the time." He glanced at Edward. "I trust Hitchin has been looking after you in a satisfactory manner?"

"He has, sir," said Inspector Ames, not quite deferential, but less accusing than he had been with Edward. "I am sorry I must intrude, but there has been a—"

"—killing of a young woman," Carfax finished for him. "Yes. So Hitchin told me." He indicated the steps to the office. "Perhaps you would be more comfortable if I offered you a chair?" Without waiting for an answer he went up the stairs.

"I am coming, sir," said Inspector Ames, tagging after Carfax.

Edward watched them go, feeling at loose ends. He had only the coffins for company, and he began to wander the aisles between the stacks of coffins. They no longer bothered him as they had done at first, although he was a long way from comfortable with them. He consulted his pocketwatch several times before he saw Inspector Ames emerge on the landing.

"Very good, Mister Carfax. I am grateful for your time." He bowed slightly and started down the stairs.

"If I think of anything that has bearing on your investigation, I will be sure to inform you," came Carfax's voice after the policeman.

"Much obliged," said Inspector Ames as he made his way down the stairs, pausing as Edward approached him to see him off the premises. He looked at Edward, his expression revealing nothing. "Odd sort of chap, your Mister Carfax."

"Well, he's foreign, isn't he," said Edward as he opened the door.

"That he is," Inspector Ames agreed as he left the building.

* * *

The next body was found six days later: an amah coming from India with a military family was supposed to accompany the luggage from the docks to the family's house. She never arrived, although the luggage did. Now the waterfront began to hum with rumors, and the police sent more constables to patrol the narrow, noisome streets where warehouses sat chock-a-block with ancient inns and houses of dubious reputation.

Edward admitted Inspector Ames a day after the ghastly discovery was made. He noticed the dark circles around the policeman's eyes, and the downward turn of his mouth. "A terrible thing, Inspector."

"That it is," Inspector Ames agreed. "You know why I've come."

Nodding, Edward said, "You think it is the same killer, then."

"Yes. We have good reason to." He said nothing more specific as he glanced around the warehouse. "Carfax has moved out more coffins."

"That he has," said Edward, taking indirect satisfaction in this turn of events. He permitted himself to boast a bit. "He has sent more than a dozen out of the city. He tells me that more are to go before the week is out."

"He must be pleased," said Inspector Ames, and exhausted his capacity for small talk. "Hitchin, what have you seen? What have you heard?"

"Nothing that you haven't heard, or seen, sir," said Edward as a cold fist closed on his guts. "Why should I? I am indoors all the day long, and into the night."

"Do not tell me you do not while away the hours alone in that office upstairs?" The inspector's incredulity was insulting enough to sting.

"I will not tell you, if you are not prepared to believe me.

But it is what I do." He could feel the heat in his face, and hear it in his voice. He struggled to cool his temper. "Why do you doubt me?"

"Well, you know, I checked up on your father, and on you. Your report of his death was reasonably accurate, but I must tell you that the scrapes you have been in since his death are very troublesome to me, very troublesome." He studied Edward a short while in silence. "You have been caught stealing, have you not?"

"Food. Only food. For my Mum," muttered Edward. "The pension doesn't go very far, and sometimes she's gone hungry."

"Very commendable, I'm sure." Inspector Ames's sarcasm was as bad as his disbelief. "You spent a month in gaol, my lad."

"That I did. Two years since." He could not conceal his bitterness. "My Mum nearly starved to death. No one cared for her."

"An unfortunate circumstance," said Inspector Ames smoothly. "You must be very grateful to Mister Carfax. Not many would employ the likes of you, not once you've been in gaol."

"Probably not," Edward said, keenly aware that the inspector was right. "But Mister Carfax, being foreign, is not so worried about these things as you are. He hired me—and I did tell him about what I had done." He did his best to look unconcerned, though the memory of that interview still rankled. "Mister Carfax is willing to give a man a chance."

"No doubt," said Inspector Ames. "And you are loyal to him for this."

"Certainly," said Edward staunchly.

"Good," said the inspector. "It would be unfortunate to see the man served a perfidious turn by one who should have only gratitude."

"I understand you, Inspector Ames," Edward told him. "I will not abuse Mister Carfax's faith in me."

Inspector Ames frowned at him. "I shall hope you do not. For I shall make it my task to be watching you."

By the time the fourth body was discovered, only five days after the third, fear was all but palpable in the air. Activity on the docks became hasty, furtive. More constables patrolled, and fewer businesses kept their offices open past seven in the evening except when it was absolutely necessary. Everyone looked upon strangers as dangerous, and occasional fights broke out as a result of quickened tempers and unlucky mistakes.

After sustaining a third visit from the police in as many days, Edward found himself wandering

restlessly around the main floor of the warehouse, looking at the stacked coffins and trying to steady his chaotic thoughts. He knew Inspector Uriah Ames was suspicious of him; his experience of the police told him that once they had settled on a man, they were tenacious in their purpose, no matter how much in error they might be; the implications worried him. Why did Inspector Ames think he was guilty of some criminal act? How could any policeman believe that he was a murderer? He paused beside the largest stack of caskets, noticing that one or two of them were slightly out of alignment. Sighing with a sense of ill-use, but secretly glad to have something to take his mind off his problems, Edward did his best to shove the coffins back into position.

The uppermost coffin teetered, rocked, and fell, crashing onto the rough planking with an ominous crack as the lid split open at the lock, spilling out a load of dark-red earth on the warehouse floor.

Edward stood in silence, staring at the fallen casket and its unaccountable contents. He could not bring himself to move. *What was earth doing inside a coffin?* he asked himself, and found no answer. Very slowly he let his breath out, unaware until that instant that he had been holding it. He noticed that this coffin was one of the ones that had been tagged to be picked up by the drayage firm the next day, and that made him more puzzled than ever. Who wanted the earth, and what would he do with it? He had no answer, so he approached the matter from a different angle: why should any undertaker buy a coffin filled with earth? To whom was Carfax selling these coffins, and why?

The sound of a carriage in the street brought him back to himself. He swore obscenely and comprehensively under his breath as he resisted the panic that threatened to overcome him. He was aware that he had to clean up the dirt and make some attempt to repair the coffin before Mister Carfax could see what a mess had been made. This galvanized him into action: in a flurry of activity, he removed his jacket and turned up his sleeves in preparation for all he had to do, searched for the wide broom he used every night before he left to make a pile of the dirt, and he improvised a dustpan to collect it and stuff it back in the carved wooden box. The lock was a trickier problem, and it so engrossed him as he glued the various bits back together that he did not notice when the door opened and Carfax himself slipped into the warehouse, taking refuge in the shadows where Edward could not see him.

When he was satisfied that he had repaired the worst of the damage, Edward hurried off to the washroom to clean his hands and neaten himself up. He combed his hair with his fingers and patted cold water on his face to diminish the flush of exercise, then straightened his collar and tie before going to fetch his jacket. He stopped still when he saw Carfax standing in the doorway. "Good afternoon, sir," he said nervously. "I did not hear you arrive."

"I daresay," said Carfax, strolling into the center of the warehouse, his voluminous European-style cloak swinging around him. "Is all well?"

"The police still haven't caught the murderer, but your business is thriving," said Edward uneasily. He hoped that Carfax would not notice that the caskets were not stacked as they had been.

"Five bodies, is it?" Carfax asked.

"Four, actually," said Edward.

"Oh, yes. Four." He paused beside the first stack of coffins. "How sad." Then he turned abruptly. "If you will fetch the accounting books down from the office? I want to assure myself that our records are accurate. There have been enough orders for these coffins for a review of our stock."

Glad to be doing something useful, Edward bolted for the stairs; he did not see Carfax open the nearest coffin, take rumpled, stained clothing from under his cloak, and thrust the clothing inside; he closed the lid carefully, making almost no sound. Smiling slightly, he waited for Edward to come down with the account book.

"Here it is," said Edward, holding out the ledger. "You'll see I've ticked off all the coffins and caskets you have already shipped, and entered the date they were shipped here—" he pointed out the place in

the columned paper.

"Ah, yes," said Carfax. "A good arrangement." He pointed to the inventory numbers of the next lot that would be shipped. "These are the ones that will be transported tomorrow?"

"Yes, sir," said Edward, unable to keep from glancing at the earth-filled casket.

"Very good," said Carfax, and turned his attention to other matters, which quieted Edward's dismay.

"I'll see the coffins get off all right and tight," Edward promised Mister Carfax shortly before that worthy left him that evening. "It will be good to have them gone," he said with genuine emotion.

"He denies everything. He claims to know nothing about the clothing or the earth. If you had not told us where to search, he might have got away with it," said Inspector Ames as his men struggled to return some order to the chaos they had created. "We expect that of such criminals. This one was no different, claiming someone had planted what we found, to fix the blame on him. I am sorry that we had to do this." He nodded as an indication of why he was apologizing: coffins and caskets were strewn about, most of them opened, as if a terrible desecration had taken place in an unlikely graveyard. The constables were doing their best to restack the coffins and caskets now that Hitchin had been taken into custody.

Carfax heard this out with every sign of distress. "But what did you find?"

"Enough to give the hangman employment," said Inspector Ames heavily. "In his drawer in the office there were some things he had hidden—of course, he denies any knowledge of them. They will be enough for the Queen's Counsel to make an unbreakable case."

"Are you so certain he is the man?" Carfax shook his head.

"Well," said Inspector Ames knowingly, "it's often the cooperative ones who prove the most dangerous in the end. No doubt he holds the police to blame for his father's death and his mother's decline." He held out his hand to Carfax. "And speaking of cooperation, I thank you for all you have given us, sir. Without your help, this case might not have ended so quickly."

Carfax accepted the inspector's hand. "I must admit I did not think it would come to this when I first admitted you to my warehouse." He sighed. "I can hardly stand to look at the place now."

"Give it time, sir; give it time," Inspector Ames recommended with a touch of sympathy.

"No doubt that is excellent advice." Carfax nodded as he looked about in mild distraction. "At least my business will keep me away from here for a while, so I may accustom myself to what has happened here." He stared up at the office above them. "I shall have to find someone else to manage this place for me, someone who can assume more of my duties in my absence."

"I can recommend an agency, sir," said Inspector Ames. "I feel a bit to blame for all the disruption you have endured."

"You have only done as you must. It is the murderer who has brought all this." He gestured to the disarray of coffins and caskets.

"Right you are, sir," Inspector Ames agreed. "But we're the ones as did the search, and we're the ones to put it right again." He did not add that this was a courtesy rarely extended to men in the visitor's position: had the search been unsuccessful, or had the owner of D. Carfax been less imposing, the police would have left the disorder for him to deal with.

"For which I am most appreciative," said Mister Carfax. "I could not look upon dealing with this without being appalled. I fear I should have had to hire others to do it."

"Understandable, sir," said Inspector Ames.

An uncomfortable silence fell between them.

"Inspector," said Carfax suddenly, "do you need me for anything more? If you do not, I will give you a key and ask you to lock up when you and your men are done."

"Of course, sir," said Inspector Ames, thinking that these foreigners were odd coves, going queasy over the damndest things. "I'll return your key as soon as you ask for it."

"Thank you, Inspector." He turned his back on all the activity, then reached into his waistcoat pocket and drew out his key on a long chain. "I will go into the country for a few days, I think. To recruit myself. This has left me quite shaken."

"More's the pity, sir," said Inspector Ames, taking the key-and-chain from the visitor. "Just you rest up a bit. Don't let this unpleasantness spoil your taste for England." He wanted to ease Carfax's mind, so he added, "Hire an experienced manager and let him handle the business for a while. Take your time."

"Time," Carfax echoed. "You give excellent advice, Inspector. I have other matters to attend to just now. I would be imprudent to neglect them." He pressed his lips together, musing. "Your point is well-taken. With a competent manager, this place should prosper, whether I am here to run it or not."

Inspector Ames smiled. "Sounds the very thing." Very probably, he thought, there was nothing more pressing than the desire to get away from this place, but he could not blame Carfax for that, after such a grisly discovery. He would have patted the foreigner on the arm, but that would have been much too familiar a gesture. "What did Hitchin say you call this place—a long-term investment?"

Carfax paused in the act of leaving. "That's right, Inspector," he said with an expression that was not a smile, "so I did."