



# ANNE PERRY

A Charlotte and Thomas Pitt Novel

## THE WHITECHAPEL CONSPIRACY

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Anne Perry

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To Hugh and Anne Pinnock,  
in friendship

THE COURTROOM at the Old Bailey was crowded. Every seat was taken and the ushers were turning people back at the doors. It was April 18, 1892, the Monday after Easter, and the opening of the London Season. It was also the third day in the trial of distinguished soldier John Adinett for the murder of Martin Feters, traveler and antiquarian.

The witness on the stand was Thomas Pitt, superintendent of the Bow Street police station.

From the floor of the court Ardal Juster for the prosecution stood facing him.

"Let us start at the beginning, Mr. Pitt." Juster was a dark man of perhaps forty, tall and slender with an unusual cast of feature. He was handsome in some lights, in others a trifle feline, and there was an unusual grace in the way he moved.

He looked up at the stand. "Just why were you at Great Coram Street? Who called you?"

Pitt straightened up a little. He was also a good height, but he resembled Juster in no other way. His hair was too long, his pockets bulged, and his tie was crooked. He had testified in court since his days as a constable twenty years before, but it was never an experience he enjoyed. He was conscious that at the very least a man's reputation was at stake, possibly his liberty. In this case it was his life. He was not afraid to meet Adinett's cold, level stare from the dock. He would speak only the truth. The consequences were not within his control.

He had told himself that before he climbed the short flight of steps to the stand, but it had been of no comfort.

The silence had grown heavy. There was no rustling in the seats. No one coughed.

"Dr. Ibbs sent for me," he replied to Juster. "He was not satisfied with all the circumstances surrounding Mr. Feters's death. He had worked with me before on other matters, and he trusted me to be discreet should he be mistaken."

"I see. Would you tell us what happened after you received Dr. Ibbs's call?"

John Adinett sat motionless in the dock. He was a lean man, but strongly built, and his face was stamped with the confidence of both ability and privilege. The courtroom held men who both liked and admired him. They sat in stunned disbelief that he should be charged with such a crime. It had to be a mistake. Any moment the defense would move for a dismissal and the profoundest apologies would be offered.

Pitt took a deep breath.

"I went immediately to Mr. Feters's house in Great Coram Street," he began. "It was just after five in the afternoon. Dr. Ibbs was waiting for me in the hall and we went upstairs to the library, where the body of Mr. Feters had been found." As he spoke the scene came back to his mind so sharply he could have been climbing the sunlit stairs again and walking along the landing with its huge Chinese pot full of decorative bamboo, past the paintings of birds and flowers, the four ornate wooden doors with carved surrounds, and into the library. The late-afternoon light had poured in through the tall windows, splashing the Turkey rug with scarlet, picking out the gold lettering on the backs of the books that lined the shelves, and finding the worn surfaces of the big leather chairs.

Juster was about to prompt him again.

"The body of a man was lying in the far corner," Pitt continued. "From the doorway his head and shoulders were hidden by one of the large leather armchairs, although Dr. Ibbs told me it had been moved a little to enable the butler

to reach the body in the hope that some assistance could be given—”

Reginald Gleave for the defense rose to his feet. “My lord, surely Mr. Pitt knows better than to give evidence as to something he cannot know for himself? Did he see the chair moved?”

The judge looked weary. This was going to be a fiercely contested trial, as he was already uncomfortably aware. No point, however trivial, was going to be allowed past.

Pitt felt himself flushing with annoyance. He did know better. He should have been more careful. He had sworn to himself he would make no mistake whatever, and already he had done so. He was nervous. His hands were clammy. Juster had said it all depended upon him. They could not rely absolutely on anyone else.

The judge looked at Pitt.

“In order, Superintendent, even if it seems less clear to the jury.”

“Yes, my lord.” Pitt heard the tightness in his own voice. He knew it was tension but it sounded like anger. He cast his mind back to that vivid room. “The top shelf of books was well above arm’s reach, and there was a small set of steps on wheels for the purpose of making access possible. It lay on its side about a yard away from the body’s feet, and there were three books on the floor, one flat and closed, the other two open, facedown and several pages bent.” He could see it as he spoke. “There was a corresponding space on the top shelf.”

“Did you draw any conclusions from these things which caused you to investigate further?” Juster asked innocently.

“It seemed Mr. Feters had been reaching for a book and had overbalanced and fallen,” Pitt replied. “Dr. Ibbs had told me that there was a bruise on the side of his head, and his neck was broken, which had caused his death.”

“Precisely so. That is what he has testified,” Juster agreed. “Was it consistent with what you saw?”

“At first I thought so. . . .”

There was a sudden stirring of attention around the room, and something that already felt like hostility.

"Then, on looking more closely, I saw several small discrepancies that caused me to doubt, and investigate further," Pitt finished.

Juster raised his black eyebrows. "What were they? Please detail them for us so we understand your conclusions, Mr. Pitt."

It was a warning. The entire case rested upon these details, all circumstantial. The weeks of investigation had uncovered no motive whatsoever for why Adinett should have wished harm to Martin Feters. They had been close friends who seemed to have been similar in both background and beliefs. They were both wealthy, widely traveled, and interested in social reform. They had a wide circle of friends in common and were equally respected by all who knew them.

Pitt had rehearsed this in his mind many times, not for the benefit of the court, but for himself. He had examined every detail minutely before he had even considered pursuing the charge.

"The first thing was the books on the floor." He remembered stooping and picking them up, angry that they had been damaged, seeing the bruised leather and the bent pages. "They were all on the same subject, broadly. The first was a translation into English of Homer's *Iliad*, the second was a history of the Ottoman Empire, and the third was on trade routes of the Near East."

Juster affected surprise. "I don't understand why that should cause your doubt. Would you explain that for us?"

"Because the rest of the books on the top shelf were fiction," Pitt answered. "The Waverley novels of Sir Walter Scott, a large number of Dickens, and a Thackeray."

"And in your opinion the *Iliad* does not go with them?"

"The other books on the middle shelf were on the subjects of Ancient Greece," Pitt explained. "Particularly Troy, Mr. Schliemann's work and discourses, objects of art and historical interest, all except for three volumes of Jane Austen, which would more properly have belonged on the top shelf."

"I would have kept novels, especially Jane Austen, in a

more accessible place," Juster remarked with a shrug and a tiny smile.

"Perhaps not if you had already read them," Pitt argued, too tense to smile back. "And if you were an antiquarian, with particular interest in Homeric Greece, you would not keep most of your books on that subject on the middle shelves but three of them on the top with your novels."

"No," Juster agreed. "It seems eccentric, to say the least, and unnecessarily inconvenient. When you had noticed the books, what did you do then?"

"I looked more closely at the body of Mr. Fetters and I asked the butler, who was the one who found him, to tell me exactly what had happened." Pitt glanced at the judge to see if he would be permitted to repeat it.

The judge nodded.

Reginald Gleave sat tight-lipped, his shoulders hunched, waiting.

"Proceed, if it is relevant," the judge directed.

"He told me that Mr. Adinett had left through the front door and been gone about ten minutes or so when the bell rang from the library and he went to answer it," Pitt recounted. "As he approached the door he heard a cry and a thud, and on opening it in some alarm, he saw Mr. Fetters's ankles and feet protruding from behind the large leather chair in the corner. He went to him immediately to see if he was hurt. I asked him if he had moved the body at all. He said he had not, but in order to reach it he had moved the chair slightly."

People began to shift restlessly. This all seemed very unimportant. None of it suggested passion or violence, still less murder.

Adinett was staring steadily at Pitt, his brows drawn together, his lips slightly pursed.

Juster hesitated. He knew he was losing the jury. It was in his face. This was about facts, but far more than that it was about belief.

"Slightly, Mr. Pitt?" His voice was sharp. "What do you mean by 'slightly'?"

"He was specific," Pitt replied. "He said just as far as the edge of the rug, which was some eleven inches." He continued without waiting for Juster to ask. "Which meant it would have been at an awkward angle for the light either from the window or the gas bracket, and too close to the wall to be comfortable. It blocked off access to a considerable part of the bookshelves, where books on travel and art were kept, books the butler assured me Mr. Feters referred to often." He was looking directly at Juster. "I concluded it was not where the chair was normally kept, and I looked at the rug to see if there were indentations from the feet. There were." He took a deep breath. "There were also faint scuff marks on the pile and when I looked again at Mr. Feters's shoes, I found a piece of fluff caught in a crack in the heel. It seemed to have come from the rug."

This time there was a murmur from the court. Reginald Gleave's lips tightened, but it looked more like anger and resolution than fear.

Again Pitt went on without being asked. "Dr. Ibbs had told me he assumed Mr. Feters leaned too far, overbalanced, and fell off the steps, cracking his head against the shelves on the corner. The force of the blow, with his body weight behind it, not only caused bruising severe enough for him to lose consciousness, but broke his neck, and this was the cause of his death. I considered the possibility that he had been struck a blow which had rendered him insensible, and then the room had been arranged to look as if he had fallen." There was a sharp rustling in the front row, a hiss of indrawn breath. A woman gasped.

One of the jurors frowned and leaned forward.

Pitt continued without change of expression, but he could feel the tension mounting inside him, his palms sweaty.

"Books he would be likely to read had been pulled out and dropped. The empty spaces left by them had been filled from the top shelf, to explain his use of the ladder. The chair had been pushed close to the corner, and his body placed half concealed by it."

A look of comic disbelief filled Gleave's face. He gazed

at Pitt, then at Juster, and finally at the jury. As playacting it was superb. Naturally he had long known exactly what Pitt would say.

Juster shrugged. "By whom?" he asked. "Mr. Adinett had already left, and when the butler entered the room there was no one there except Mr. Feters. Did you disbelieve the butler?"

Pitt chose his words carefully. "I believe he was telling the truth as he knew it."

Gleave rose to his feet. He was a broad man, heavy shouldered. "My lord, Superintendent Pitt's thoughts as to the butler's veracity are irrelevant and out of place. The jury has had the opportunity to hear the butler's testimony for themselves, and to judge whether he was speaking the truth or not and whether he is an honest and competent person."

Juster kept his temper with obvious difficulty. There was a high color in his cheeks. "Mr. Pitt, without telling us why, since it seems to annoy my honorable friend so much, will you please tell us what you did after forming this unusual theory of yours?"

"I looked around the room to see if there was anything else that might be of relevance," Pitt replied, remembering, describing exactly. "I saw a salver on the small table at the far side of the library, and a glass on it half full of port wine. I asked the butler when Mr. Adinett had left the house and he told me. I then asked him to replace the chair where it had been when he came in, and to repeat his actions as exactly as he was able to." He could see in his mind's eye the man's startled expression and his unwillingness. Very obviously he felt it to be disrespectful to the dead. But he had obeyed, self-consciously, his limbs stiff, movement jerking, his face set in determined control of the emotions which raged through him.

"I stood behind the door," Pitt resumed. "When the butler was obliged to go behind the chair in order to reach Mr. Feters's head, I went out of the door and across the hall and in through the doorway opposite." He stopped, allowing Juster time to react.

Now all the jurors were listening intently. No one moved. No one's gaze wandered.

"Did the butler call out after you?" Juster also chose his words with exactness.

"Not immediately," Pitt answered. "I heard his voice from the library speaking in quite normal tones, then he seemed to realize I was not there, and came out to the landing and called me again."

"So you deduced that he had not seen you leave?"

"Yes. I tried the experiment again, with our roles reversed. Crouched behind the chair, I could not see him leave."

"I see." Now there was satisfaction in Juster's voice and he nodded very slightly. "And why did you go into the room opposite, Mr. Pitt?"

"Because the distance between the library door and the stairs is some twenty feet," Pitt explained, seeing the stretch of landing again, the bright bars of sunlight from the end window. He could remember the red and yellow of the stained glass. "Had the butler rung the bell for assistance, I would almost certainly have met with someone coming up before I could have made my way out of the house."

"Assuming you did not want to be seen?" Juster finished for him. "Which had you left rather ostentatiously some fifteen minutes earlier, and then returned through the side door, crept upstairs, and contrived to make murder look like an accident, you would . . ."

There were gasps and rustles around the room. One woman gave a muffled shriek.

Gleave was on his feet, his face scarlet. "My lord! This is outrageous! I . . ."

"Yes! Yes!" the judge agreed impatiently. "You know better than that, Mr. Juster. If I allow you such latitude, then I shall be obliged to do the same for Mr. Gleave, and you will not like that!"

Juster tried to look penitent, and did not remotely succeed. Pitt thought he had not tried very hard.

"Did you see anything unusual while you were in the room across the hall?" Juster enquired artlessly, turning gracefully

back towards the jury. "What manner of room was it, by the way?" He raised his black eyebrows.

"A billiard room," Pitt replied. "Yes, I saw that there was a very recent scar on the edge of the door, thin and curving upwards, just above the latch."

"A curious place to damage a door," Juster remarked. "Not possible while the door was closed, I should think?"

"No, only if it were open," Pitt agreed. "Which would make playing at the table very awkward."

Juster rested his hands on his hips. It was a curiously angular pose, and yet he looked at ease.

"So it was most likely to be caused by someone going in or coming out?"

Gleave was on his feet again, his face flushed. "As has been observed, it was awkward to play with the door open, surely that question answers itself, my lord? Someone scratched the open door with a billiard cue, precisely because, as Mr. Pitt has so astutely and uselessly pointed out, it was awkward." He smiled broadly, showing perfect teeth.

There was complete silence in the courtroom.

Pitt glanced up at Adinett, who was sitting forward in the dock now, motionless.

Juster looked almost childlike in his innocence, except that his unusual face was not cast for such an expression. He looked up at Pitt as if he had not thought of such a thing until this instant.

"Did you enquire into that possibility, Superintendent?"

Pitt stared back at him. "I did. The housemaid who dusted and polished the room assured me that there had been no such mark there that morning, and no one had used the room since." He hesitated. "The scar was raw wood. There was no polish in it, no wax or dirt."

"You believed her?" Juster held up his hand, palm towards Gleave. "I apologize. Please do not answer that, Mr. Pitt. We shall ask the housemaid in due course, and the jury will decide for themselves whether she is an honest and competent person . . . and knows her job. Perhaps Mrs. Feters, poor woman, can also tell us whether she was a good maid or not."

There was a rumble of embarrassment, irritation and laughter from the court. The tension was broken. For Gleave to have spoken now would have been a waste of time, and the knowledge of that was dark in his face, heavy brows drawn down.

The judge drew in his breath, then let it out again without speaking.

"Then what did you do, Superintendent?" Juster said lightly.

"I asked the butler if Mr. Adinett had carried a stick of any description," Pitt replied. Then, before Gleave could object, he added, "He did. The footman confirmed it."

Juster smiled. "I see. Thank you. Now, before my honorable friend asks you, I will ask you myself. Did you find anyone who had overheard any quarrel, any harsh words or differences of opinion, between Mr. Adinett and Mr. Feters?"

"I did ask, and no one had," Pitt admitted, remembering ruefully how very hard he had tried. Even Mrs. Feters, who had come to believe her husband had been murdered, could think of no instance when he and Adinett had quarreled, and no other reason at all why Adinett should have wished him harm. It was as utterly bewildering as it was horrible.

"Nevertheless, from these slender strands, you formed the professional opinion that Martin Feters had been murdered, and by John Adinett?" Juster pressed, his eyes wide, his voice smooth. He held up long slender hands, ticking off the points. "The moving of a library armchair, three books misplaced on the shelves, a scuff mark on a carpet and a piece of fluff caught in the crack of a heel, and a fresh scratch on a billiard room door? On this you would see a man convicted of the most terrible of crimes?"

"I would see him tried for it," Pitt corrected, feeling the color hot in his face. "Because I believe that his murder of Martin Feters is the only explanation that fits all the facts. I believe he murdered him in a sudden quarrel and then arranged it to look like—"

"My lord!" Gleave said loudly, again on his feet, his arms held up.

"No," the judge said steadily. "Superintendent Pitt is an

expert in the matter of evidence of crime. That has been established over his twenty years in the police force." He smiled very bleakly, a sad, wintry humor. "It is for the jury to decide for themselves whether he is an honest and competent person."

Pitt glanced over at the jury, and saw the foreman nod his head very slightly. His face was smooth, calm, his eyes steady.

A woman in the gallery laughed and then clapped her hands over her mouth.

Gleave's face flushed a dull purple.

Juster bowed, then waved his hand to Pitt to continue.

"To look like an accident," Pitt finished. "I believe he then left the library, locking the door from the outside. He went downstairs, said good-bye to Mrs. Feters and was shown out by the butler, and observed to leave by the footman also."

The foreman of the jury glanced at the man beside him, their eyes met, and then they both returned their attention to Pitt.

Pitt went on with his description of events as he believed them.

"Adinett went outside, down the road a hundred feet or so, then came back through the side entrance to the garden. A man answering his general description was seen at exactly that time. He went in through the side door of the house, upstairs to the library again, opened it, and immediately rang the bell for the butler."

There was utter silence in the courtroom. Every eye was on Pitt. It was almost as if everyone had held their breath.

"When the butler came, Adinett stood where the open door would hide him," he continued. "When the butler went behind the chair to Mr. Feters, as he had to, Adinett stepped out, going across the hall to the billiard room in case the butler should raise the alarm and the other servants came up the stairs. Then, when the landing was empty, he went out, in his haste catching his stick against the door. He left the house, this time unseen."

There was a sigh around the room and a rustle of fabric as people moved at last.