

A LORD PETER WIMSEY MYSTERY



Striding Folly

A COLLECTION OF
LORD PETER WIMSEY
MYSTERIES



DOROTHY L. SAYERS



A LORD PETER WIMSEY MYSTERY



Striding Folly

A COLLECTION OF
LORD PETER WIMSEY
MYSTERIES



DOROTHY L. SAYERS



Striding Folly

including three final Lord Peter Wimsey stories

Dorothy L. Sayers



NOTE

Two of the three final Lord Peter Wimsey stories, *Striding Folly* and *The Haunted Policeman* were previously published in *Detection Medley*, edited by John Rhode (Hutchinson & Co. Ltd.), in 1939. *Talboys*, written in 1942, has not been published before.

Contents

[Striding Folly.](#)

[The Haunted Policeman](#)

[Talboys](#)

[A Biography of Dorothy L. Sayers](#)

STRIDING FOLLY

A Lord Peter Wimsey Story



Lord Peter

‘SHALL I EXPECT YOU next Wednesday for our game as usual?’ asked Mr Mellilow.

‘Of course, of course,’ replied Mr Creech. ‘Very glad there’s no ill feeling, Mellilow. Next Wednesday as usual. Unless ...’ his heavy face darkened for a moment, as though at some disagreeable recollection. ‘There may be a man coming to see me. If I’m not here by nine, don’t expect me. In that case, I’ll come on Thursday.’

Mr. Mellilow let his visitor out through the french window and watched him cross the lawn to the wicket gate leading to the Hall grounds. It was a clear October night, with a gibbous moon going down the sky. Mr Mellilow slipped on his goloshes (for he was careful of his health and the grass was wet) and himself went down past the sundial and the fish-pond and through the sunk garden till he came to the fence that bounded his tiny freehold on the southern side. He leaned his arms on the rail and gazed across the little valley at the tumbling river and the wide slope beyond, which was crowned, at a mile’s distance, by the ridiculous stone tower known as the Folly. The valley, the slope and the tower all belonged to Striding Hall. They lay there, peaceful and lovely in the moonlight, as though nothing could ever disturb their fantastic solitude. But Mr Mellilow knew better.

He had bought the cottage to end his days in, thinking that here was a corner of England the same yesterday, today and for ever. It was strange that he, a chess-player, should not have been able to see three moves ahead. The first move had been the death of the old squire. The second had been the purchase by Creech of the whole Striding property. Even then, he had not been able to see why a rich business man – unmarried and with no rural interests – should have come to live in a spot so remote. True, there were

three considerable towns at a few miles' distance, but the village itself was on the road to nowhere. Fool! he had forgotten the Grid! It had come, like a great, ugly chess-rook swooping from an unconsidered corner, marching over the country, straddling four, six, eight parishes at a time, planting hideous pylons to mark its progress, and squatting now at Mr Mellilow's very door. For Creech had just calmly announced that he was selling the valley to the Electrical Company; and there would be a huge power-plant on the river and workmen's bungalows on the slope, and then Development – which, to Mr Mellilow, was another name for the devil. It was ironical that Mr Mellilow, alone in the village, had received Creech with kindness, excusing his vulgar humour and insensitive manners, because he thought Creech was lonely and believed him to be well-meaning, and because he was glad to have a neighbour who could give him a weekly game of chess.

Mr Mellilow came in sorrowful and restored his goloshes to their usual resting-place on the verandah by the french window. He put the chessmen away and the cat out and locked up the cottage – for he lived quite alone, with a woman coming in by the day. Then he went up to bed with his mind full of the Folly, and presently he fell asleep and dreamed.

He was standing in a landscape whose style seemed very familiar to him. There was a wide plain, intersected with hedgerows, and crossed in the middle distance by a river, over which was a small stone bridge. Enormous blue-black thunderclouds hung heavy overhead, and the air had the electric stillness of something stretched to snapping point. Far off, beyond the river, a livid streak of sunlight pierced the clouds and lit up with theatrical brilliance a tall, solitary tower. The scene had a curious unreality, as though of painted canvas. It was a picture, and he had an odd conviction that he recognised the handling and could put a name to the artist. 'Smooth and tight,' were the words that occurred to him. And then: 'It's bound to break

before long.’ And then: ‘I ought not to have come out without my goloshes.’

It was important, it was imperative that he should get to the bridge. But the faster he walked, the greater the distance grew, and without his goloshes the going was very difficult. Sometimes he was bogged to the knee, sometimes he floundered on steep banks of shifting shale; and the air was not merely oppressive – it was *hot* like the inside of an oven. He was running now, with the breath labouring in his throat, and when he looked up he was astonished to see how close he was to the tower. The bridge was fantastically small now, dwindled to a pin-point on the horizon, but the tower fronted him just across the river, and close on his right was a dark wood, which had not been there before. Something flickered on the wood’s edge, out and in again, shy and swift as a rabbit; and now the wood was between him and the bridge and the tower behind it, still glowing in that unnatural streak of sunlight. He was at the river’s brink, but the bridge was nowhere to be seen – and the tower, the tower was moving. It had crossed the river. It had taken the wood in one gigantic leap. It was no more than fifty yards off, immensely high, shining, and painted. Even as he ran, dodging and twisting, it took another field in its stride, and when he turned to flee it was there before him. It was a double tower – twin towers – a tower and its mirror image, advancing with a swift and awful stealth from either side to crush him. He was pinned now between them, panting. He saw their smooth, yellow sides tapering up to heaven, and about their feet went a monstrous stir, like the quiver of a crouching cat. Then the low sky burst like a sluice and through the drench of the rain he leapt at a doorway in the foot of the tower before him and found himself climbing the familiar stair of Striding Folly.





‘My goloshes will be here,’ he said, with a passionate sense of relief. The lightning stabbed suddenly through a loop-hole and he saw a black crow lying dead upon the stairs. Then thunder ... like the rolling of drums.

The daily woman was hammering upon the door. ‘You *have* slept in,’ she said, ‘and no mistake.’

Mr Mellilow, finishing his supper on the following Wednesday, rather hoped that Mr Creech would not come. He had thought a good deal during the week about the electric power scheme, and the more he thought about it, the less he liked it. He had discovered another thing which had increased his dislike. Sir Henry Hunter, who owned a good deal of land on the other side of the market town, had, it appeared, offered the Company a site more suitable than Striding in every way on extremely favourable terms. The

choice of Striding seemed inexplicable, unless on the supposition that Creech had bribed the surveyor. Sir Henry voiced his suspicions without any mincing of words. He admitted, however, that he could prove nothing. 'But he's crooked,' he said; 'I have heard things about him in Town. Other things. Ugly rumours.' Mr Mellilow suggested that the deal might not, after all, go through. 'You're an optimist,' said Sir Henry. 'Nothing stops a fellow like Creech. Except death. He's a man with enemies ...' He broke off, adding, darkly, 'Let's hope he breaks his damned neck one of these days – and the sooner the better.'

Mr Mellilow was uncomfortable. He did not like to hear about crooked transactions. Business men he supposed, were like that; but if they were, he would rather not play games with them. It spoilt things, somehow. Better, perhaps, not to think too much about it. He took up the newspaper, determined to occupy his mind, while waiting for Creech, with that day's chess problem. White to play and mate in three.

He had just become pleasantly absorbed when a knock came at the door front. Creech? As early as eight o'clock? Surely not. And in any case, he would have come by the lawn and the french window. But who else would visit the cottage of an evening? Rather disconcerted, he rose to let the visitor in. But the man who stood on the threshold was a stranger.

'Mr Mellilow?'

'Yes, my name is Mellilow. What can I do for you?'

(A motorist, he supposed, inquiring his way or wanting to borrow something.)

'Ah! that is good. I have come to play chess with you.'

'To play chess ?' repeated Mr Mellilow, astonished.

'Yes; I am a commercial traveller. My car has broken down in the village. I have to stay at the inn and I ask the good Potts if there is anyone

who can give me a game of chess to pass the evening. He tells me Mr Mellilow lives here and plays well. Indeed, I recognise the name. Have I not read *Mellilow on Pawn-Play*? It is yours, no?’

Rather flattered, Mr Mellilow admitted the authorship of this little work.

‘So. I congratulate you. And you will do me the favour to play with me, hey? Unless I intrude, or you have company.’

‘No,’ said Mr Mellilow. ‘I am more or less expecting a friend, but he won’t turn up till nine and perhaps he won’t come at all.’

‘If he come, I go,’ said the stranger. ‘It is very good of you.’ He had somehow oozed his way into the house without any direct invitation and was removing his hat and overcoat. He was a big man with a short, thick curly beard and tinted spectacles, and he spoke in a deep voice with a slight foreign accent. ‘My name,’ he added, ‘is Moses. I represent Messrs. Cohen & Gold of Farringdon Street, the manufacturers of electrical fittings.’

He grinned widely, and Mr Mellilow’s heart contracted. Such haste seemed almost indecent. Before the site was even taken! He felt an unreasonable resentment against this harmless Jew. Then, he rebuked himself. It was not the man’s fault. ‘Come in,’ he said, with more cordiality in his voice than he really felt, ‘I shall be very glad to give you a game.’

‘I am very grateful,’ said Mr Moses, squeezing his great bulk through into the sitting-room. ‘Ha! you are working out the *Record*’s two-mover. It is elegant but not profound. You will not take long to break his back. You permit that I disturb?’

Mr Mellilow nodded, and the stranger began to arrange the board for play.

‘You have hurt your hand?’ inquired Mr Mellilow.

‘It is nothing,’ replied Mr Moses, turning back the glove he wore and displaying a quantity of sticking-plaster. ‘I break my knuckles trying to start the dam’ car. She kick me. Bah! a trifle. I wear a glove to protect him. So, we begin?’

‘Won’t you have something to drink first?’

‘No, no, thank you very much. I have refreshed myself already at the inn. Too many drinks are not good. But do not let that prevent you.’

Mr Mellilow helped himself to a modest whisky and soda and sat down to the board. He won the draw and took the white pieces, playing his king’s pawn to king’s fourth.

‘So!’ said Mr Moses, as the next few moves and countermove followed their prescribed course, ‘the *giuco piano*, hey? Nothing spectacular. We try the strength. When we know what we have each to meet, then the surprises will begin.’

The first game proceeded cautiously. Whoever Mr Moses might be, he was a sound and intelligent player, not easily stampeded into indiscretions. Twice Mr Mellilow baited a delicate trap; twice, with a broad smile, Mr Moses stepped daintily out between the closing jaws. The third trap was set more carefully. Gradually, and fighting every step of the way, black was forced behind his last defences. Yet another five minutes and Mr Mellilow said gently, ‘Check;’ adding, ‘and mate in four.’ Mr Moses nodded. ‘That was good.’ He glanced at the clock. ‘One hour. You give me my revenge, hey? Now we know one another. Now we shall see.’

Mr Mellilow agreed. Ten minutes past nine. Creech would not come now. The pieces were set up again. This time, Mr Moses took white, opening with the difficult and dangerous Steinitz gambit. Within a few minutes Mr Mellilow realised that, up till now, his opponent had been playing with him in a double sense. He experienced that eager and

palpitating excitement which attends the process of biting off more than one can chew. By half-past nine, he was definitely on the defensive; at a quarter to ten, he thought he spied a way out; five minutes later, Mr Moses said suddenly: 'It grows late: we must begin to push a little,' and thrust forward a knight, leaving his queen *en prise*.

Mr Mellilow took prompt advantage of the oversight – and became aware, too late, that he was menaced by the advance of a white rook.

Stupid! How had he come to overlook that? There was an answer, of course ... but he wished the little room were not so hot and that the stranger's eyes were not so inscrutable behind the tinted glasses. If he could manoeuvre his king out of harm's way for the moment and force his pawn through, he had still a chance. The rook moved in upon him as he twisted and dodged; it came swooping and striding over the board, four, six, eight squares at a time; and now the second white rook had darted out from its corner; they were closing in upon him – a double castle, twin castles, a castle and its mirror-image: O God! it was his dream of striding towers, smooth and yellow and painted. Mr Mellilow wiped his forehead.

'Check!' said Mr Moses. And again, 'Check!' And then, 'Checkmate!'

Mr Mellilow pulled himself together. This would never do. His heart was thumping as though he had been running a race. It was ridiculous to be so much overwrought by a game of chess; and if there was one kind of man in the world that he despised, it was a bad loser. The stranger was uttering some polite commonplace – he could not tell what – and replacing the pieces in their box.

'I must go now,' said Mr Moses. 'I thank you very much for the pleasure you have so kindly given me ... Pardon me, you are a little unwell?'



‘No, no,’ said Mr Mellilow. ‘It is the heat of the fire and the lamp. I have enjoyed our games very much. Won’t you take anything before you go?’

‘No, I thank you. I must be back before the good Potts locks me out. Again, my hearty thanks.’

He grasped Mr Mellilow’s hand in his gloved grip and passed out quickly into the hall. In another moment he had seized hat and coat and was gone. His footsteps died away along the cobbled path.

Mr Mellilow returned to the sitting-room. A curious episode; he could scarcely believe that it had really happened. There lay the empty board, the pieces in their box, the *Record* on the old oak chest with a solitary tumbler beside it; he might have dozed off and dreamed the whole thing for all the

trace the stranger's visit had left. Certainly the room was very hot. He threw the french window open. A lop-sided moon had risen, chequering the valley and the slope beyond with patches of black and white. High up and distant, the Folly made a pale streak upon the sky. Mr Mellilow thought he would walk down to the bridge to clear his head. He groped in the accustomed corner for his goloshes. They were not there. 'Where on earth has that woman put them?' muttered Mr Mellilow. And he answered himself, irrationally but with complete conviction: 'My goloshes are up at the Folly.'

His feet seemed to move of their own accord. He was through the garden now, walking quickly down the field to the little wooden foot-bridge. His goloshes were at the Folly. It was imperative that he should fetch them back; the smallest delay would be fatal. 'This is ridiculous,' thought Mr Mellilow to himself. 'It is that foolish dream running in my head. Mrs Gibbs must have taken them away to clean them. But while I am here, I may as well go on; the walk will do me good.'

The power of the dream was so strong upon him that he was almost surprised to find the bridge in its accustomed place. He put his hand on the rail and was comforted by the roughness of the untrimmed bark. Half a mile uphill now to the Folly. Its smooth sides shone in the moonlight, and he turned suddenly, expecting to see the double image striding the fields behind him. Nothing so sensational was to be seen, however. He breasted the slope with renewed courage. Now he stood close beneath the tower – and with a little shock he saw that the door at its base stood open.

He stepped inside, and immediately the darkness was all about him like a blanket. He felt with his foot for the stair and groped his way up between the newel and the wall. Now in gloom, now in the gleam of a loophole, the stair seemed to turn endlessly. Then, as his head rose into the pale glimmer of the fourth window, he saw a shapeless blackness sprawled

upon the stair. With a sudden dreadful certainty that *this* was what he had come to see, he mounted further and stooped over it. Creech was lying there dead. Close beside the body lay a pair of goloshes. As Mr Mellilow moved to pick them up, something rolled beneath his foot. It was a white chess-rook.

The police surgeon said that Creech had been dead since about nine o'clock. It was proved that at eight-fifty he had set out towards the wicket gate to play chess with Mr Mellilow. And in the morning light the prints of Mr Mellilow's goloshes were clear, leading down the gravelled path on the far side of the lawn, past the sun-dial and the fish-pond and through the sunk garden and so over the muddy field and the footbridge and up the slope to the Folly. Deep footprints they were and close together, such as a man might make who carried a monstrous burden. A good mile to the Folly and half of it uphill. The doctor looked inquiringly at Mr Mellilow's spare form.



‘Oh, yes,’ said Mr Mellilow. ‘I could have carried him. It’s a matter of knack, not strength. You see –’ he blushed faintly, ‘I’m not really a gentleman. My father was a miller and I spent my whole boyhood carrying sacks. Only I was always fond of my books, and so I managed to educate myself and earn a little money. It would be silly to pretend I couldn’t have carried Creech. But I didn’t do it, of course.’

‘It’s unfortunate,’ said the superintendent, ‘that we can’t find no trace of this man Moses.’ His voice was the most unpleasant Mr Mellilow had ever heard – a sceptical voice with an edge like a saw. ‘He never come down to the Feathers, that’s a certainty. Potts never set eyes on him, let alone sent him up here with a tale about chess. Nor nobody saw no car neither. An odd gentleman this Mr Moses seems to have been. No

footmarks to the front door? Well it's cobbles, so you wouldn't expect none. That his glass of whisky by any chance, sir ? ... Oh? he wouldn't have a drink, wouldn't he? Ah! And you played two games of chess in this very room? Ah! very absorbing pursoot, so I'm told. You didn't hear poor Mr Creech come up the garden?'

'The windows were shut,' said Mr Mellilow, 'and the curtains drawn. And Mr Creech always walked straight over the grass from the wicket gate.'

'H'm!' said the superintendent. 'So he come, or somebody come, right up on to the verandah and sneaks a pair of goloshes; and you and this Mr Moses are so occupied you don't hear nothing.'

'Come, Superintendent,' said the Chief Constable, who was sitting on Mr Mellilow's oak chest and looked rather uncomfortable. 'I don't think that's impossible. The man might have worn tennis-shoes or something. How about fingerprints on the chessmen?'

'He wore a glove on his right hand,' said Mr Mellilow, unhappily. 'I can remember that he didn't use his left hand at all – not even when taking a piece.'

'A very remarkable gentleman,' said the superintendent again. 'No fingerprints, no footprints, no drinks, no eyes visible, no features to speak of, pops in and out without leaving no trace – a kind of a vanishing gentleman.' Mr Mellilow made a helpless gesture. 'These the chessmen you was using?' Mr Mellilow nodded, and the superintendent turned the box upside-down upon the board, carefully extending a vast enclosing paw to keep the pieces from rolling away. 'Let's see. Two big 'uns with crosses on the top and two big 'uns with spikes. Four chaps with split-open 'eads. Four 'orses. Two black 'uns – what d'you call these? Rooks, eh? Look more like

churches to me. One white church – rook if you like. What’s gone with the other one? Or don’t these rook-affairs go in pairs like the rest?’

‘They must both be there,’ said Mr Mellilow. ‘He was using two white rooks in the end-game. He mated me with them ... I remember ...’

He remembered only too well. The dream, and the double castle moving to crush him. He watched the superintendent feeling in his pocket and suddenly knew that name of the terror that had nickered in and out of the black wood.

The superintendent set down the white rook that had lain by the corpse at the Folly. Colour, height and weight matched with the rook on the board.

‘Staunton men,’ said the Chief Constable, ‘all of a pattern.’

But the superintendent, with his back to the french window, was watching Mr Mellilow’s grey face.

‘He must have put it in his pocket,’ said Mr Mellilow. ‘He cleared the pieces away at the end of the game.’

‘But he couldn’t have taken it up to Striding Folly,’ said the superintendent, ‘nor he couldn’t have done the murder, by your own account.’

‘Is it possible that you carried it up to the Folly yourself,’ asked the Chief Constable, ‘and dropped it there when you found the body?’

‘The gentleman has said that he saw this man Moses put it away,’ said the superintendent.

They were watching him now, all of them. Mr Mellilow clasped his head in his hands. His forehead was drenched. ‘Something must break soon,’ he thought.

Like a thunderclap there came a blow on the window; the superintendent leapt nearly out of his skin.

‘Lord, my lord!’ he complained, opening the window and letting a gust of fresh air into the room, ‘How you startled me!’

Mr Mellilow gaped. Who was this? His brain wasn’t working properly. That friend of the Chief Constable’s, of course, who had disappeared somehow during the conversation. Like the bridge in his dream. Disappeared. Gone out of the picture.

‘Absorbin’ game, detectin’,’ said the Chief Constable’s friend. ‘Very much like chess. People come creepin’ right up on to the verandah and you never even notice them. In broad daylight, too. Tell me, Mr Mellilow – what made you go up last night to the Folly?’

Mr Mellilow hesitated. This was the point in his story that he had made no attempt to explain. Mr Moses had sounded unlikely enough; a dream about goloshes would sound more unlikely still.

‘Come now,’ said the Chief Constable’s friend, polishing his monocle on his handkerchief and replacing it with an exaggerated lifting of the eyebrows. ‘What was it? Woman, woman, lovely woman? Meet me by moonlight and all that kind of thing?’

‘Certainly not,’ said Mr Mellilow, indignantly. ‘I wanted a breath of fresh –’ He stopped, uncertainly. There was something in the other man’s childish-foolish face that urged him to speak the reckless truth. ‘I had a dream,’ he said.

The superintendent shuffled his feet, and the Chief Constable crossed one leg awkwardly over the other.

‘Warned of God in a dream,’ said the man with the monocle, unexpectedly. ‘What did you dream of?’ He followed Mr Mellilow’s glance at the board. ‘Chess?’

‘Of two moving castles,’ said Mr Mellilow, ‘and the dead body of a black crow.’

‘A pretty piece of fused and inverted symbolism,’ said the other. ‘The dead body of a black crow become a dead man with a white rook.’

‘But that came afterwards,’ said the Chief Constable.

‘So did the end-game with the two rooks,’ said Mr Mellilow.

‘Our friend’s memory works both ways,’ said the man with the monocle, ‘like the White Queen’s. She, by the way, could believe as many as six impossible things before breakfast. So can I. Pharaoh tell your dream.’

‘Time’s getting on, Wimsey,’ said the Chief Constable.

‘Let time pass,’ retorted the other, ‘for, as a great chess-player observed, it helps more than reasoning.’

‘What player was that?’ demanded Mr Mellilow.

‘A lady,’ said Wimsey, ‘who played with living men and mated kings, popes and emperors.’

‘Oh,’ said Mr Mellilow. ‘Well –’ he told his tale from the beginning, making no secret of his grudge against Creech and his nightmare fancy of the striding electric pylons. ‘I think,’ he said, ‘that was what gave me the dream.’ And he went on to his story of the goloshes, the bridge, the moving towers and death on the stairs at the Folly.

‘A damned lucky dream for you,’ said Wimsey. ‘But I see now why they chose you. Look! it is all clear as daylight. If you had had no dream – if the murderer had been able to come back later and replace your goloshes – if someone else had found the body in the morning with the chess-rook beside it and your tracks leading back and home again, that might have been mate in one move. There are two men to look for, Superintendent. One of them belongs to Creech’s household, for he knew that Creech came every Wednesday through the wicket-gate to play chess with you; and he knew that Creech’s chessmen and yours were twin sets. The other was a stranger

– probably the man whom Creech half-expected to call upon him. One lay in wait for Creech and strangled him near the wicket gate as he arrived; fetched your goloshes from the verandah and carried the body down to the Folly. And the other came here in disguise to hold you in play and give you an alibi that no one could believe. The one man is strong in his hands and strong in the back – a sturdy, stocky man with feet no bigger than yours. The other is a big man, with noticeable eyes and probably clean-shaven, and he plays brilliant chess. Look among Creech’s enemies or those two men and ask them where they were between eight o’clock and ten-thirty last night.’

‘Why didn’t the strangler bring back the goloshes?’ asked the Chief Constable.

‘Ah!’ said Wimsey; ‘that was where the plan went wrong. I think he waited up at the Folly to see the light go out in the cottage. He thought it would be too great a risk to come up twice on to the verandah while Mr Mellilow was there.’

‘Do you mean,’ asked Mr Mellilow, ‘that he was there, *in* the Folly, watching me, when I was groping up those black stairs?’

‘He may have been,’ said Wimsey. ‘But probably, when he saw you coming up the slope, he knew that things had gone wrong and fled away in the opposite direction, to the high road that runs behind the Folly. Mr Moses, of course, went, as he came, by the road that passes Mr Mellilow’s door, removing his disguise in the nearest convenient place.’

‘That’s all very well, my lord,’ said the superintendent, ‘but where’s the proof of it?’

‘Everywhere,’ said Wimsey. ‘Go and look at the tracks again. There’s one set going outwards in goloshes, deep and short, made when the body was carried down. One, made later, in walking shoes, which is Mr

Mellilow's track going outwards towards the Folly. And the third is Mr Mellilow again, coming back, the track of a man running very fast. Two out and only one in. Where is the man who went out and never came back?'

'Yes,' said the superintendent, doggedly. 'But suppose Mr Mellilow made that second lot of tracks himself to put us off the scent, like? I'm not saying he did, mind you, but why couldn't he have?'

'Because,' said Wimsey, 'he had no time. The in-and-out tracks left by the shoes were made *after* the body was carried down. There is no other bridge for three miles on either side, and the river runs waist-deep. It can't be forded; so it must be crossed by the bridge. But at half-past ten, Mr Mellilow was in the Feathers, on *this* side of the river, ringing up the police. It couldn't be done, Super, unless he had wings. The bridge is there to prove it; for the bridge was crossed three times only.'

'The bridge,' said Mr Mellilow, with a great sigh. 'I knew in my dream there was something important about that. I knew I was safe if only I could get to the bridge.'

THE HAUNTED POLICEMAN

A Lord Peter Wimsey Story



The Haunted Policeman

‘GOOD GOD!’ SAID HIS lordship. ‘Did I do that?’

‘All the evidence points that way,’ replied his wife.

‘Then I can only say that I never knew so convincing a body of evidence produce such an inadequate result.’

The nurse appeared to take this reflection personally. She said in a tone of rebuke:

‘He’s a *beautiful* boy.’

‘H’m,’ said Peter. He adjusted his eyeglass more carefully. ‘Well, you’re the expert witness. Hand him over.’

The nurse did so, with a dubious air. She was relieved to see that this disconcerting parent handled the child competently; as, in a man who was an experienced uncle, was not, after all, so very surprising. Lord Peter sat down gingerly on the edge of the bed.

‘Do you feel it’s up to standard?’ he inquired with some anxiety. ‘Of course, *your* workmanship’s always sound – but you never know with these collaborate efforts.’

‘I think it’ll do,’ said Harriet, drowsily.

‘Good.’ He turned abruptly to the nurse. ‘All right; we’ll keep it. Take it and put it away and tell ’em to invoice it to me. It’s a very interesting addition to you, Harriet; but it would have been a hell of a rotten substitute.’ His voice wavered a little, for the last twenty-four hours had been trying ones, and he had had the fright of his life.

The doctor, who had been doing something in the other room, entered in time to catch the last words.

‘There was never any likelihood of that, you goop,’ he said, cheerfully. ‘Now, you’ve seen all there is to be seen, and you’d better run away and play.’ He led his charge firmly to the door. ‘Go to bed,’ he advised him in kindly accents; ‘you look all in.’

‘I’m all right,’ said Peter. ‘I haven’t been doing anything. And look here –’ He stabbed a belligerent finger in the direction of the adjoining room. ‘Tell those nurses of yours, if I want to pick my son up, I’ll pick him up. If his mother wants to kiss him, she can damn well kiss him. I’ll have none of your infernal hygiene in *my* house.’

‘Very well,’ said the doctor, ‘just as you like. Anything for a quiet life. I rather believe in a few healthy germs myself. Builds up resistance. No,

thanks, I won't have a drink. I've got to go on to another one, and an alcoholic breath impairs confidence.'

'Another one?' said Peter, aghast.

'One of my hospital mothers. You're not the only fish in the sea by a long chalk. One born every minute.'

'God! What a hell of a world.' They passed down the great curved stair. In the hall a sleepy footman clung, yawning, to his post of duty.

'All right, William,' said Peter. 'Buzz off now; I'll lock up.' He let the doctor out. 'Good-night – and thanks very much, old man. I'm sorry I swore at you.'

'They mostly do,' replied the doctor philosophically. 'Well, bung-ho, Flim. I'll look in again later, just to earn my fee, but I shan't be wanted. You've married into a good tough family, and I congratulate you.'

The car, spluttering and protesting a little after its long wait in the cold, drove off, leaving Peter alone on the doorstep. Now that it was all over and he could go to bed, he felt extraordinarily wakeful. He would have liked to go to a party. He leaned back against the wrought-iron railings and lit a cigarette, staring vaguely into the lamp-lit dusk of the square. It was thus that he saw the policeman.

The blue-uniformed figure came up from the direction of South Audley Street. He too was smoking and he walked, not with the firm tramp of a constable on his beat, but with the hesitating step of a man who has lost his bearings. When he came in sight, he had pushed back his helmet and was rubbing his head in a puzzled manner. Official habit made him look sharply at the bare-headed gentleman in evening dress, abandoned on a doorstep at three in the morning, but since the gentleman appeared to be sober and bore no signs of being about to commit a felony, he averted his gaze and prepared to pass on.

‘Morning, officer,’ said the gentleman, as he came abreast with him.

‘Morning, sir,’ said the policeman.

‘You’re off duty early,’ pursued Peter, who wanted somebody to talk to. ‘Come in and have a drink.’

This offer re-awakened all the official suspicion.

‘Not just now, sir, thank you,’ replied the policeman guardedly.

‘Yes, now. That’s the point,’ Peter tossed away his cigarette-end. It described a fiery arc in the air and shot out a little train of sparks as it struck the pavement. ‘I’ve got a son.’

‘Oh, ah!’ said the policeman, relieved by this innocent confidence. ‘Your first, eh?’

‘And last, if I know anything about it.’

‘That’s what my brother says, every time,’ said the policeman. ‘Never no more, he says. He’s got eleven. Well, sir, good luck to it. I see how you’re situated, I and thank you kindly, but after what the sergeant said I dunno as I better. Though if I was to die this moment not a drop ’as passed me lips since me supper beer.’

Peter put his head on one side and considered this.

‘The sergeant said you were drunk?’

‘He did, sir.’

‘And you were not?’

‘No, sir. I saw everything just the same as I told him, though what’s become of it now is more than I can say. But drunk I was not, sir, no more than you are yourself.’

‘Then,’ said Peter, ‘as Mr Joseph Surface remarked to Lady Teazle, what is troubling you is the consciousness of your own innocence. He insinuated that you had looked on the wine when it was red – you’d better come in and make it so. You’ll feel better.’

The policeman hesitated.

‘Well, sir, I dunno. Fact is, I’ve had a bit of a shock.’

‘So’ve I,’ said Peter. ‘Come in for God’s sake and keep me company.’

‘Well, sir –’ said the policeman again. He mounted the steps slowly.

The logs in the hall chimney were glowing a deep red through their ashes. Peter raked them apart, so that the young flame shot up between them. ‘Sit down,’ he said; ‘I’ll be back in a moment.’

The policeman sat down, removed his helmet, and stared about him, trying to remember who occupied the big house at the corner of the square. The engraved coat of arms upon the great silver bowl on the chimney-piece told him nothing, even though it was repeated in colour upon the backs of two tapestried chairs: three white mice skipping upon a black ground. Peter, returning quietly from the shadows beneath the stair, caught him as he traced the outlines with a thick finger.

‘A student of heraldry?’ he said. ‘Seventeenth-century work and not very graceful. You’re new to this beat, aren’t you? My name’s Wimsey.’

He put down a tray on the table.

‘If you’d rather have beer or whisky, say so. These bottles are only a concession to my mood.’

The policeman eyed the long necks and bulging silver-wrapped corks with curiosity. ‘Champagne?’ he said. ‘Never tasted it, sir. But I’d like to try the stuff.’

‘You’ll find it thin,’ said Peter, ‘but if you drink enough of it, you’ll tell me the story of your life.’ The cork popped and the wine frothed out into the wide glasses.

‘Well!’ said the policeman. ‘Here’s to your good lady, sir, and the new young gentleman. Long life and all the best. A bit in the nature of cider, ain’t it, sir?’

‘Just a trifle. Give me your opinion after the third glass, if you can put up with it so long. And thanks for your good wishes. You a married man?’

‘Not yet, sir. Hoping to be when I get promotion. If only the sergeant – but that’s neither here nor there. You been married long, sir, if I may ask.’

‘Just over a year.’

‘Ah! and do you find it comfortable, sir?’

Peter laughed.

‘I’ve spent the last twenty-four hours wondering why, when I’d had the blazing luck to get on to a perfectly good thing, I should be fool enough to risk the whole show on a damned silly experiment.’

The policeman nodded sympathetically.

‘I see what you mean, sir. Seems to me, life’s like that. If you don’t take risks, you get nowhere. If you do, things may go wrong, and then where are you? And ’alf the time, when things happen, they happen first, before you can even think about ’em.’

‘Quite right,’ said Peter, and filled the glasses again. He found the policeman soothing. True to his class and training, he turned naturally in moments of emotion to the company of the common man. Indeed, when the recent domestic crisis had threatened to destroy his nerve, he had headed for the butler’s pantry with the swift instinct of the homing pigeon. There, they had treated him with great humanity, and allowed him to clean the silver.

With a mind oddly clarified by champagne and lack of sleep, he watched the constable’s reaction to Pol Roger 1926. The first glass had produced a philosophy of life; the second produced a name – Alfred Burt – and a further hint of some mysterious grievance against the station sergeant; the third glass, as prophesied, produced the story.

‘You were right, sir’ (said the policeman) ‘when you spotted I was new to the beat. I only come on it at the beginning of the week, and that

accounts for me not being acquainted with you, sir, nor with most of the residents about here. Jessop, now, he knows everybody and so did Pinker – but he's been took off to another division. You'd remember Pinker – big chap, make two o' me, with a sandy moustache. Yes, I thought you would.

'Well, sir, as I was saying, me knowing the district in a general way, but not, so to speak, like the palm o' me 'and, might account for me making a bit of a fool of myself, but it don't account for me seeing what I did see. See it I did, and not drunk nor nothing like it. And as for making a mistake in the number, well, that might happen to anybody. All the same, sir, 13 was the number I see, plain as the nose on your face.'

'You can't put it stronger than that,' said Peter, whose nose was of a kind difficult to overlook.

'You know Merriman's End, sir?'

'I think I do. Isn't it a long cul-de-sac running somewhere at the back of South Audley Street, with a row of houses on one side and a high wall on the other?'

'That's right, sir. Tall, narrow houses they are, all alike, with deep porches and pillars to them.'

'Yes. Like an escape from the worst square in Pimlico. Horrible. Fortunately, I believe the street was never finished, or we should have had another row of the monstrosities on the opposite side. This house is pure eighteenth century. How does it strike you?'

P.C. Burt contemplated the wide hall – the Adam fireplace and panelling with their graceful shallow mouldings, the pedimented doorways, the high round-headed window lighting hall and gallery, the noble proportions of the stair. He sought for a phrase.

'It's a gentleman's house,' he pronounced at length. 'Room to breathe, if you see what I mean. Seems like you couldn't act vulgar in it.' He shook

his head. ‘Mind you, I wouldn’t call it cosy. It ain’t the place I’d choose to sit down to a kipper in me shirtsleeves. But it’s got class. I never thought about it before, but now you mention it I see what’s wrong with them other houses in Merriman’s End. They’re sort of squeezed-like. I been into more’n one o’ them tonight, and that’s what they are; they’re squeezed. But I was going to tell you about that.’

‘Just upon midnight it was’ (pursued the policeman) ‘when I turns into Merriman’s End in the ordinary course of my dooties. I’d got pretty near down toward the far end, when I see a fellow lurking about in a suspicious way under the wall. There’s back gates there, you know, sir, leading into some gardens, and this chap was hanging about inside one of the gateways. A rough-looking fellow, in a baggy old coat – might a’ been a tramp off the Embankment. I turned my light on him – that street’s not very well lit, and it’s a dark night – but I couldn’t see much of his face, because he had on a ragged old hat and a big scarf round his neck. I thought he was up to no good, and I was just about to ask him what he was doing there, when I hear a most awful yell come out o’ one o’ them houses opposite. Ghastly it was, sir. “Help!” it said. “Murder! help!”, fit to freeze your marrow.’



‘Man’s voice or woman’s?’

‘Man’s, sir. I think. More of a roaring kind of yell, if you take my meaning. I says, ‘Hullo! What’s up there ? Which house is it?’ The chap says nothing, but he points, and him and me runs across together. Just as we gets to the house, there’s a noise like as if someone was being strangled just inside, and a thump, as it might be something falling against the door.’

‘Good God!’ said Peter.

‘I gives a shout and rings the bell. ‘Hoy!’ I says. ‘What’s up here?’ and then I knocked on the door. There’s no answer, so I rings and knocks again. Then the chap who was with me, he pushed open the letter-flap and squints through it.’

‘Was there a light in the house?’

‘It was all dark, sir, except the fanlight over the door. That was lit up bright, and when I looks up, I see the number of the house – number 13, painted plain as you like on the transom. Well, this chap peers in, and all of a sudden he gives a kind of gurgle and falls back. “Here!” I says, “what’s amiss? Let me have a look.” So I puts me eye to the flap and I looks in.’

P.C. Burt paused and drew a long breath. Peter cut the wire of the second bottle.

‘Now, sir,’ said the policeman, ‘believe me or believe me not, I was as sober at that moment as I am now. I can tell you everything I see in that house, same as if it was wrote up there on that wall. Not as it was a great lot, because the flap wasn’t all that wide but by squinnying a bit, I could make shift to see right across the hall and a piece on both sides and part way up the stairs. And here’s what I see, and you take notice of every word, on account of what come after.’

He took another gulp of the Pol Roger to loosen his tongue and continued:

‘There was the floor of the hall. I could see that very plain. All black and white squares it was, like marble, and it stretched back a good long way. About half-way along, on the left, was the staircase, with a red carpet, and the figure of a white naked woman at the foot, carrying a big pot of blue and yellow flowers. In the wall next the stairs there was an open door, and a room all lit up. I could just see the end of a table, with a lot of glass and silver on it. Between that door and the front door there was a big black cabinet, shiny, with gold figures painted on it, like them things they had at the Exhibition. Right at the back of the hall there was a place like a conservatory, but I couldn’t see what was in it, only it looked very gay. There was a door on the right, and that was open, too. A very pretty drawing-room, by what I could see of it, with pale blue paper and pictures

on the walls. There were pictures in the hall, too, and a table on the right with a copper bowl, like as it might be for visitors' cards to be put in. Now, I see all that, sir, and I put it to you, if it hadn't a' been there, how could I describe so plain?'



'I have known people describe what wasn't there,' said Peter thoughtfully, 'but it was seldom anything of that kind. Rats, cats and snakes I have heard of, and occasionally naked female figures; but delirious lacquer cabinets and hall-tables are new to me.'

'As you say, sir,' agreed the policeman, 'and I see you believe me so far. But here's something else, what you mayn't find so easy. There was a man laying in that hall, sir, as sure as I sit here and he was dead. He was a big man and clean-shaven, and he wore evening dress. Somebody had stuck

a knife into his throat. I could see the handle of it – it looked like a carving knife, and the blood had run out, all shiny, over the marble squares.’

The policeman looked at Peter, passed his handkerchief over his forehead, and finished the fourth glass of champagne.

‘His head was up against the end of the hall table,’ he went on, ‘and his feet must have been up against the door, but I couldn’t see anything quite close to me, because of the bottom of the letter-box. You understand, sir, I was looking through the wire cage of the box, and there was something inside – letters, I suppose that cut off my view downwards. But I see all the rest – in front and a bit of both sides; and it must have been regularly burnt in upon me brain, as they say, for I don’t suppose I was looking more than a quarter of a minute or so. Then all the lights went out at once, same as if somebody has turned off the main switch. So I looks round, and I don’t mind telling you I felt a bit queer. And *when* I looks round, lo and behold! my bloke in the muffler had hopped it.’

‘The devil he had,’ said Peter.

‘Hopped it,’ repeated the policeman, ‘and there I was. And just there, sir, is where I made my big mistake, for I thought he couldn’t a’ got far, and I started off up the street after him. But I couldn’t see him, and I couldn’t see nobody. All the houses was dark, and it come over me what a sight of funny things may go on, and nobody take a mite o’ notice. The way I’d shouted and banged on the door, you’d a’ thought it’d a’ brought out every soul in the street, not to mention that awful yelling. But there – you may have noticed it yourself, sir. A man may leave his ground-floor windows open, or have his chimney a’ fire, and you may make noise enough to wake the dead, trying to draw his attention, and nobody give no heed. He’s fast asleep, and the neighbours say, “Blast that row, but, it’s no business of mine,” and stick their ’eads under the bedclothes.’

‘Yes,’ said Peter. ‘London’s like that.’

‘That’s right, sir. A village is different. You can’t pick up a pin there without somebody coming up to ask where you got it from – but London keeps itself to itself ... Well, something’ll have to be done, I thinks to myself, and I blows me whistle. They heard that all right. Windows started to go up all along the street. That’s London, too.’

Peter nodded. ‘London will sleep through the last trump. Puddley-in-the-Rut and Doddering-in-the-Dumps will look down their noses and put on virtuous airs. But God, who is never surprised, will say to his angel, “Whistle up ’em, Michael, whistle ’em up; East and West will rise from the dead at the sound of the policeman’s whistle”.’

‘Quite so, sir,’ said P.C. Burt; and wondered for the first time whether there might not be something in this champagne stuff after all. He waited for a moment and then resumed:

‘Well, it so happened that just when I sounded my whistle, Withers – that’s the man on the other beat – was in Audley Square, coming to meet me. You know, – sir we has times for meeting one another, arranged different-like every night; and twelve o’clock in the square was our rendy-voos tonight. So up he comes in, you might say, no time at all, and finds me there, with everyone a’ hollering at me from the windows to know what was up. Well, naturally, I didn’t want the whole bunch of ’em running out into the street and our man getting away in the crowd, so I just tells ’em there’s nothing, only a bit of an accident farther along. And then I see Withers and glad enough I was. We stands there at the top o’ the street, and I tells him there’s a dead man laying in the hall at Number 13, and it looks to me like murder. “Number 13,” he says, “you can’t mean Number 13. There ain’t no Number 13 in Merriman’s End, you fathead; it’s all even numbers.” And so it is, sir, for the houses on the other side were never built,

so there's no odd numbers at all barrin' Number 1, as is the big house on the corner.

'Well, that give me a bit of a jolt. I wasn't so much put out at not having remembered about the numbers, for as I tell you, I never was on the beat before this week. No; but I knew I'd seen that there number writ up plain as pie on the fanlight, and I didn't see how I could have been mistaken. But when Withers heard the rest of the story, he thought maybe I'd misread it for Number 12. It couldn't be 18, for there's only sixteen houses in the road; nor it couldn't be 16 neither, for I knew it wasn't the end house. But we thought it might be 12 or 10; so away we goes to look.

'We didn't have no difficulty about getting in at Number 12. There was a very pleasant old gentleman came down in his dressing-gown, asking what the disturbance was, and could he be of use. I apologised for disturbing him, and said I was afraid there'd been an accident in one of the houses, and had he heard anything. Of course, the minute he opened the door I could see it wasn't Number 12 we wanted; there was only a little hall with polished boards, and the walls plain panelled – all very bare and neat – and no black cabinet nor naked woman nor nothing. The old gentleman said, yes, his son had heard somebody shouting and knocking a few minutes earlier. He'd got up and put his head out of the window, but couldn't see nothing, but they both thought from the sound it was Number 14 forgotten his latch-key again. So we thanked him very much and went onto Number 14.

'We had a bit of a job to get Number 14 downstairs. A fiery sort of gentleman he was, something in the military way, I thought, but he turned out to be a retired Indian Civil Servant. A dark gentleman, with a big voice, and his servant was dark, too – some sort of a nigger. The gentleman wanted to know what the blazes all this row was about, why a decent citizen

wasn't allowed to get his proper sleep. He supposed that young fool at Number 12 was drunk again. Withers had to speak a bit sharp to him; but at last the nigger came down and let us in. Well, we had to apologise once more; The hall was not a bit like – the staircase was on the wrong side, for one thing, and though there was a statue at the foot of it, it was some kind of a heathen idol with a lot of heads and arms, and the walls were covered with all sorts of brass stuff and native goods you know the kind of thing. There was a black-and-white linoleum on the floor, and that was about all there was to it. The servant had soft sort of way with him I didn't half like. He said he slept at the back and had heard nothing till his master rang for him. Then the gentleman came to the top of the stairs and shouted out it was no use disturbing him; the noise came from Number 12 as usual, and if that young man didn't stop his blanky Bohemian goings-on, he'd have the law on his father. I asked if he'd seen anything, and he said, no, he hadn't. Of course, sir, me and that other chap was inside the porch, and you can't see anything what goes on inside those porches from the other houses, because they're filled in at the sides with coloured glass – all the lot of them.'

Lord Peter Wimsey looked at the policeman and then looked at the bottle, as though estimating the alcoholic content of each. With deliberation, he filled both glasses again.

'Well, sir,' said P.C. Burt after refreshing himself, 'by this time Withers was looking at me in rather an old-fashioned manner. However, he said nothing, and we went back to Number 10, where there was two maiden ladies and a hall full of stuffed birds and wallpaper like a florists' catalogue. The one who slept in the front was deaf as a post, and the one who slept at the back hadn't heard nothing. But we got hold of their maids, and the cook said she'd heard the voice calling "Help!" and thought it was in Number 12, and she'd hid her head in the pillow and said her prayers. The housemaid

was a sensible girl. She'd looked out when she heard me knocking. She couldn't see anything at first, owing to us being in the porch, but she thought something must be going on, so, not wishing to catch cold, she went back to put on her bedroom slippers. When she got back to the window, she was just in time to see a man running up the road. He went very quick and very silent, as if he had goloshes on, and she could see the ends of his muffler flying out behind him. She saw him run out of the street and turn to the right, and then she heard me coming along after him. Unfortunately her eye being on the man, she didn't notice which porch I came out of. Well, that showed I wasn't inventing the whole story at any rate, because there was my bloke in the muffler. The girl didn't recognise him at all, but that wasn't surprising, because she'd only just entered the old ladies' service. Besides, it wasn't likely the man had anything to do with it, because he was outside with me when the yelling started. My belief is, he was the sort as doesn't care to have his pockets examined too close, and the minute my back was turned he thought he'd be better and more comfortable elsewhere.'

'Now there ain't no need' (continued the policeman) 'for me to trouble you, sir, with all them houses what we went into. We made inquiries at the whole lot, from Number 2 to Number 16, and there wasn't one of them had a hall in any ways conformable to what that chap and I saw through the letter-box. Nor there wasn't a soul in 'em could give us any help more than what we'd had already. You see, sir, though it took me a bit o' time telling, it all went very quick. There was the yells; they didn't last beyond a few seconds or so, and before they was finished, we was across the road and inside the porch. Then there was me shouting and knocking; but I hadn't been long at that afore the chap with me looks through the box. Then I has my look inside, for fifteen seconds it might be, and while I'm doing that,

my chap's away up the street. Then I runs after him, and then I blows me whistle. The whole thing might take a minute or a minute and a half, maybe. Not more.

‘Well, sir; by the time we’d been into every house in Merriman’s End, I was feeling a bit queer again. I can tell you, and Withers, he was looking queerer. He says to me, “Burt,” he says, “is this your idea of a joke? Because if so, the ’Olborn Empire’s where you ought to be, not the police force.” So I tells him over again, most solemn, what I seen – “and,” I says, “if only we could lay hands on that chap in the muffler, he could tell you he seen it, too. And what’s more,” I says, “do you think I’d risk me job, playing a silly trick like that?” He says, “Well, it beats me,” he says, “If I didn’t know you was a sober kind of chap, I’d say you was seein’ things.” “Things?” I says to him, “I see that there corpse a-layin’ there with the knife in his neck, and that was enough for me. ’Orrible, he looked, and the blood all over the floor.” “Well,” he says, “maybe he wasn’t dead after all, and they’ve cleared him out of the way.” “And cleared the house away, too, I suppose,” I said to him. So Withers says, in an odd sort o’ voice, “You’re sure about the house? You wasn’t letting your imagination run away with you over naked females and such?” That was a nice thing to say. I said. “No, I wasn’t. There’s been some monkey business going on in this street and I’m going to get to the bottom of it, if we has to comb-out London for that chap in the muffler.” “Yes,” says Withers, nasty-like, “it’s a pity he cleared off so sudden.” “Well,” I says, “you can’t say I imagined *him*, anyhow, because that there girl saw him, and a mercy she did,” I said, “or you’d be saying next I ought to be in Colney Hatch.” “Well,” he says, “I dunno what you think you’re going to do about it. You better ring up the station and ask for instructions.”

‘Which I did. And Sergeant Jones, he come down himself, and he listens attentive-like to what we both has to say. And then he walks along the street, slow-like, from end to end. And then he comes back and says to me, “Now, Burt,” he says, “just you describe that hall to me again, careful.” Which I does, same as I described it to your, sir. And he says, “You’re sure there was the room on the left of the stairs with the glass and silver on the table; and the room on the right with the pictures in it?” And I says, “Yes, Sergeant, I’m quite sure of that.” And Withers says, “Ah!” in a kind of got-you-now voice, if you take my meaning. And the sergeant says, “Now, Burt,” he says, “pull yourself together and take a look at these here houses. Don’t you see they’re all single-fronted? There ain’t one on ’em has rooms *both* sides o’ the front hall. Look at the windows, you fool,” he says.’

Lord Peter poured out the last of the champagne.

‘I don’t mind telling you, sir’ (went on the policeman) ‘that I was fair knocked silly to think of me never noticing that! Withers had noticed it all right, and that’s what made him think I was drunk or barmy. But I stuck to what I’d seen. I said, there must be two of them houses knocked into one, somewhere, but that didn’t work, because we’d been into all of them, and there wasn’t no such thing – not without there was one o’ them concealed doors like you read about in crook stories. “Well, anyhow,” I says to the sergeant, “the yells was real all right, because other people heard ’em. Just you ask, and they’ll tell you.” So the sergeant says, “Well, Burt, I’ll give you every chance.” So he knocks up Number 12 again – not wishing to annoy Number 14 any more than he was already – and this time the son comes down. An agreeable gentleman he was, too; not a bit put out. He says, Oh, yes, he’d heard the yells and his father’d heard them too. “Number 14,” he says, “that’s where the trouble is. A very odd bloke, is Number 14, and I shouldn’t be surprised if he beats that unfortunate servant

of his. The Englishman abroad, you know! The outposts of Empire and all that kind of thing. They're rough and ready – and then the curry in them parts is bad for the liver." So I was inquiring at Number 14 again; but the sergeant, he loses patience, and says, "You know quite well," he says, "it ain't Number 14, and in my opinion, Burt, you're either dotty or drunk. You best go home straight away," he says, "and sober up, and I'll see you again when you can give a better account of yourself." So I argues a bit, but it ain't no use, and away he goes, and Withers goes back to his beat. And I walks up and down a bit till Jessop comes to take over, and then I comes away, and that's when I sees you, sir.

'But I ain't drunk, sir – at least, I wasn't then, though there do seem to be a kind of a swimming in me head at this moment. Maybe that stuff's stronger than it tastes. But I wasn't drunk then, and I'm pretty sure I'm not dotty. I'm haunted, sir, that's what it is – haunted. It might be there was someone killed in one of them houses many years ago, and that's what I see tonight. Perhaps they changed the numbering of the street on account of it – I've heard tell of such things – and when the same night comes round the house goes back to what it was before. But there I am, with a black mark against me, and it ain't a fair trick for no ghost to go getting a plain man into trouble. And I'm sure, sir, you'll agree with me.'

The policeman's narrative had lasted some time, and the hands of the grandfather clock stood at a quarter to five. Peter Wimsey gazed benevolently at his companion, for whom he was beginning to feel a positive affection. He was, if anything, slightly more drunk than the policeman, for he had missed tea and had no appetite for his dinner; but the wine had not clouded his wits; it had only increased excitability and postponed sleep. He said:

‘When you looked through the letter-box, could you see any part of the ceiling, or the lights?’

‘No, sir; on account, you see, of the flap. I could see right and left and straight forward; but not upwards, and none of the near part of the floor.’

‘When you looked at the house from outside, there was no light except through the fanlight. But when you looked through the flap, all the rooms were lit, right and left and at the back?’

‘That’s so, sir.’

‘Are there back doors to the houses?’

‘Yes, sir. Coming out of Merriman’s End, you turn to the right, and there’s an opening a little way along which takes you to the back doors.’

‘You seem to have a very distinct visual memory. I wonder if your other kinds of memory are as good. Can you tell me, for instance, whether any of the houses you went into had any particular smell? Especially 10, 12 and 14?’

‘Smell, sir?’ The policeman closed his eyes to stimulate recollection. ‘Why, yes, sir. Number 10, where the two ladies live, that had a sort of an old-fashioned smell. I can’t put me tongue to it. Not lavender – but something as ladies keeps in bowls and such – rose-leaves and what not. Pot-pourri, that’s the stuff. Pot-pourri. And Number 12 – well, no there was nothing particular there, except I remember thinking they must keep pretty good servants, though – we didn’t see anybody except the family. All that floor and panelling was polished beautiful – you could see your face in it. Beeswax and turpentine, I says to meself. And elbow-grease. What you’d call a clean house with a good, clean smell. But Number 14 – that was different. I didn’t like the smell of that. Stuffy, like as if the nigger had been burning some o’ that there incense to his idols, maybe. I never could abide niggers.’

‘Ah!’ said Peter. ‘What you say is very suggestive.’ He placed his finger-tips together and shot his last question over them:

‘Ever been inside the National Gallery?’

‘No, sir,’ said the policeman, astonished. ‘I can’t say as I ever was.’

“That’s London again,” said Peter. ‘We’re the last people in the world to know anything of our great metropolitan institutions. Now, what is the best way to tackle this bunch of toughs, I wonder? It’s a little early for a call. Still, there’s nothing like doing one’s good deed before breakfast, and the sooner you’re set right with the sergeant, the better. Let me see. Yes – I think that may do it. Costume pieces are not as a rule in my line, but my routine, has been so much upset already, one way and another, that an irregularity more or less will hardly matter. Wait there for me while I have a bath and change. I may be a little time; but it would hardly be decent to get there before six.’

The bath had been an attractive thought, but was perhaps ill-advised, for a curious languor stole over him with the touch of the hot water. The champagne was losing its effervescence. It was with an effort that he dragged himself out and re-awakened himself with a cold shower. The matter of dress required a little thought. A pair of grey flannel trousers was easily found, and though they were rather too well creased for the part he meant to play, he thought that with luck they would probably pass unnoticed. The shirt was a difficulty. His collection of shirts was a notable one, but they were mostly of an inconspicuous and gentlemanly sort. He hesitated for some time over a white shirt with an open sports collar, but decided at length upon a blue one, bought as an experiment and held to be not quite successful. A red tie, if he had possessed such a thing, would have been convincing. After some consideration, he remembered that he had seen his wife in a rather wide Liberty tie, whose prevailing colour was

orange. That, he felt, would do if he could find it. On her it had looked rather well; on him, it would be completely abominable. He went through into the next room; it was queer to find it empty. A peculiar sensation came over him. Here *he* was, rifling his wife's drawers, and there *she* was, spirited out of reach at the top of the house with a couple of nurses and an entirely new baby, which might turn into goodness knew what. He sat down before the glass and stared at himself. He felt as though he ought to have changed somehow in the night; but he only looked unshaven and, he thought, a trifle intoxicated. Both were quite good things to look at the moment, though hardly suitable for the father of a family. He pulled out all the drawers in the dressing table; they emitted vaguely familiar smells of face-powder and handkerchief-sachet. He tried the big built-in wardrobe: frocks, costumes and trays full of underwear, which made him feel sentimental. At last he struck a promising vein of gloves and stockings. The next tray held ties, the orange of the desired Liberty creation gleaming in a friendly way among them. He put it on, and observed with pleasure that the effect was Bohemian beyond description. He wandered out again, leaving all the drawers open behind him as though a burglar had passed through the room. An ancient tweed jacket of his own, of a very countrified pattern, suitable only for fishing in Scotland, was next unearthed, together with a pair of brown canvas shoes. He secured his trousers by a belt, searched for and found an old soft-brimmed felt hat of no recognisable colour, and, after removing a few trout-flies from the hat-band and tucking his shirt-sleeves well up inside the coat-sleeve, decided that he would do. As an afterthought, he returned to his wife's room and selected a wide woollen scarf in a shade of greenish blue. Thus equipped, he came downstairs again, to find P.C. Burt fast asleep, with his mouth open and snoring.

Peter was hurt. Here he was, sacrificing himself in the interests of this stupid policeman, and the man hadn't the common decency to appreciate it. However, there was no point in waking him yet. He yawned horribly and sat down.

It was the footman who wakened the sleepers at half-past six. If he was surprised to see his master, very strangely attired, slumbering in the hall in company with a large policeman, he was too well-trained to admit the fact even to himself. He merely removed the tray. The faint chink of glass roused Peter, who slept like a cat at all times.

'Hullo, William,' he said. 'Have I overslept myself? What's the time?'

'Five and twenty to seven, my lord.'

'Just about right.' He remembered that the footman slept on the top floor. 'All quiet on the Western Front, William?'

'Not altogether quiet, my lord.' William permitted himself a slight smile. 'The young master was lively about five. But all is satisfactory, I gather from Nurse Jenkyn.'

'Nurse Jenkyn? Is that the young one? Don't let yourself be run away with, William. I say, just give P.C. Burt a light prod in the ribs, would you? He and I have business together.'

In Merriman's End, the activities of the morning were beginning. The milkman came jingling out of the cul-de-sac; lights were twinkling in upper rooms; hands were withdrawing curtains; in front of Number 10, the house maid was already scrubbing the steps. Peter posted his policeman at the top of the street.

'I don't want to make my first appearance with official accompaniment,' he said. 'Come along when I beckon. What by the way is the name of the agreeable gentleman in Number 12? I think he may be of some assistance to us.'

‘Mr O’Halloran, sir.’

The policeman looked at Peter expectantly. He seemed to have abandoned all initiative and to place implicit confidence in this hospitable and eccentric gentleman. Peter slouched down the street with his hands in his trousers pocket and his shabby hat pulled rakishly over his eyes. At Number 12 he paused and examined the windows. Those on the ground floor were open; the house was awake. He marched up the steps, took a brief glance through the flap of the letter-box, and rang the bell. A maid in a neat blue dress and white cap and apron opened the door.

‘Good morning,’ said Peter, slightly raising the shabby hat; ‘is Mr O’Halloran in?’ He gave the *r* a soft continental roll. ‘Not the old gentleman. I mean young Mr O’Halloran?’

‘He’s in,’ said the maid, doubtfully, ‘but he isn’t up yet.’

‘Oh!’ said Peter. ‘Well it is a little early for a visit. But I desire to see him urgently. I am – there is a little trouble where I live. Could you entreat him – would you be so kind? I have walked all the way,’ he added, pathetically, and with perfect truth.

‘Have you, sir?’ said the maid. She added kindly, ‘You do look tired, sir, and that’s a fact.’

‘It is nothing,’ said Peter. ‘It is only that I forgot to have any dinner. But if I can see Mr O’Halloran it will be all right.’

‘You’d better come in, sir,’ said the maid. ‘I’ll see if I can wake him.’ She conducted the exhausted stranger in and offered him a chair. ‘What name shall I say, sir?’

‘Petrovinsky,’ said his lordship, hardily. As he had rather expected, neither the unusual name nor the unusual clothes of this unusually early visitor seemed to cause very much surprise. The maid left him in the tidy

little panelled hall and went upstairs without so much as a glance at the umbrella-stand.

Left to himself, Peter sat still, noticing that the hall was remarkably bare of furniture, and was lit by a single electric pendant almost immediately inside the front door. The letter-box was the usual wire cage the bottom of which had been carefully lined with brown paper. From the back of the house came a smell of frying bacon.

Presently there was the sound of somebody running downstairs. A young man appeared in a dressing-gown. He called out as he came: 'Is that you, Stefan? Your name came up as Mr Whisky. Has Marfa run away again, or – What the hell? Who the devil are you, sir?'

'Wimsey,' said Peter, mildly, 'not Whisky; Wimsey the policeman's friend. I just looked in to congratulate you on a mastery of the art of false perspective which I thought had perished with van Hoogstraten, or at least with Grace and Lambelet.'

'Oh!' said the young man. He had a pleasant countenance, with humorous eyes and ears pointed like a faun's. He laughed a little ruefully. 'I suppose my beautiful murder is out. It was too good to last. Those bobbies! I hope to God they gave Number 14 a bad night. May I ask how you come to be involved in the matter?'

'I,' said Peter, 'am the kind of person in whom distressed constables confide – I cannot imagine why. And when I had the picture of that sturdy blue-clad figure, led so persuasively by a Bohemian stranger and invited to peer through a hole, I was irresistibly transported in mind to the National Gallery. Many a time have I squinted sideways through those holes into the little black box, and admired that Dutch interior of many vistas painted so convincingly on the four flat sides of the box. How right you were to

preserve your eloquent silence! Your Irish tongue would have given you away. The servants, I gather, were purposely kept out of sight.'

'Tell me,' said Mr O'Halloran, seating himself sideways upon the hall table, 'do you know by heart the occupation of every resident in this quarter of London? I do not paint under my own name.'

'No,' said Peter. 'Like the good Dr Watson, the constable could observe, though he could not reason from his observation; it was the smell of turpentine that betrayed you. I gather that at the time of his first call the apparatus was not very far off.'

'It was folded together and lying under the stairs,' replied the painter. 'It has since been removed to the studio. My father had only just had time to get it out of the way and hitch down the "13" from the fanlight before the police reinforcements arrived. He had not even time to put back this table I am sitting on; a brief search would have discovered it in the dining room. My father is a remarkable sportsman; I cannot too highly recommend the presence of mind he displayed while I was hareing around the houses and leaving him to hold the fort. It would have been so simple and so unenterprising to explain; but my father, being an Irishman, enjoys treading on the coat-tails of authority.'

'I should like to meet your father. The only thing I do not thoroughly understand is the reason of this elaborate plot. Were you by any chance executing a burglary round the corner, and keeping the police in play while you did it?'

'I never thought of that,' said the young man, with regret in his voice. 'No. The bobby was not the predestined victim. He happened to be present at a full-dress rehearsal, and the joke was too good to be lost. The fact is, my uncle is Sir Lucius Preston, the R.A.'

'Ah!' said Peter, 'the light begins to break.'

‘My own style of draughtsmanship,’ pursued Mr O’Halloran, ‘is modern. My uncle has on several occasions informed me that I draw like that only because I do not know how to draw. The idea was that he should be invited to dinner tomorrow and regaled with a story of the mysterious “Number 13”, said to appear from time to time in this street and to be haunted by strange noises. Having thus detained him till close upon midnight, I should have set out to see him to the top of the street. As we went along, the cries would have broken out. I should have led him back –’

‘Nothing,’ said Peter, ‘could be clear After the preliminary shock, he would have been forced to confess that your draughtsmanship was a triumph of academic accuracy.’

‘I hope,’ said Mr O’Halloran, ‘the performance may still go forward as originally intended.’ He looked with some anxiety at Peter, who replied:

‘I hope so, indeed. I also hope that your uncle’s heart is a strong one. But may I, in the meantime, signal to my unfortunate policeman and relieve his mind? He is in danger of losing his promotion, through a suspicion that he was drunk on duty.’

‘Good God!’ said Mr O’Halloran. ‘No – I don’t want that to happen. Fetch him in.’

The difficulty was to make P.C. Burt recognise in the daylight what he had seen by night through the letter-flap. Of the framework of painted canvas, with its forms and figures oddly foreshortened and distorted, he could make little. Only when the thing was set up and lighted in the curtained studio was he at length reluctantly convinced.

‘It’s wonderful,’ he said. ‘It’s like Maskelyne and Devant. I wish the sergeant could a’ seen it.’

‘Lure him down here tomorrow night,’ said Mr O’Halloran. ‘Let him come as my uncle’s bodyguard. You –’ he turned to Peter – ‘you seem to

have a way with policemen. Can't you inveigle the fellow along? Your impersonation of starving and disconsolate Bloomsbury is fully as convincing as mine. How about it?

'I don't know,' said Peter. 'The costume gives me pain. Besides, is it kind to a p.b. policeman? I give you the R.A., but when it comes to the guardians of the law – Damn it all! I'm a family man, and I must have *some* sense of responsibility.'

TALBOYS

A Lord Peter Wimsey Story



‘FATHER!’

‘Yes, my son.’

‘You know those peaches of Mr Puffett’s, the whacking great big ones you said I wasn’t to take?’

‘Well?’

‘Well, I’ve taken them.’

Lord Peter Wimsey rolled over on his back and stared at his offspring in consternation. His wife laid down her sewing.

‘Oh, Bredon, how naughty! Poor Mr Puffett was going to exhibit them at the Flower-Show.’

‘Well, Mummy, I didn’t mean to. It was a dare.’

Having offered this explanation for what it was worth, Master Bredon Wimsey again turned candid eyes upon his father, who groaned and sat up.

‘And *must* you come and tell me about it? I hope, Bredon, you are not developing into a prig.’

‘Well, Father, Mr Puffett saw me. An’ he’s coming up to have a word with you when he’s put on a clean collar.’

‘Oh, I see,’ said his lordship, relieved. ‘And you thought you’d better come and get it over before my temper became further inflamed by hearing his version of the matter?’

‘Yes, please, sir.’

‘That is rational, at any rate. Very well, Bredon. Go up into my bedroom and prepare for execution. You will find the cane behind the dressing-table.’

‘Yes, Father. You won’t be long, will you, sir?’

‘I shall allow precisely the right time for apprehension and remorse. Off with you!’

The culprit vanished hastily in the direction of the house; the executioner heaved himself to his feet and followed at a leisurely pace, rolling up his sleeves as he went with a certain grimness.

‘My dear!’ exclaimed Miss Quirk. She gazed in horror through her spectacles at Harriet, who had placidly returned to her patchwork. ‘Surely, *surely* you don’t allow him to cane that mite of a child.’

‘Allow?’ said Harriet, amused. ‘That’s hardly the right word, is it?’

‘But Harriet, dear, he oughtn’t to do it. You don’t realise how dangerous it is. He may ruin the boy’s character for life. One must reason

with these little people, not break their spirits by brutality. When you inflict pain and humiliation on a child like that, you make him feel helpless and inferior, and all that suppressed resentment will break out later in the most extraordinary and shocking ways.'

'Oh, I don't think he resents it,' said Harriet. 'He's devoted to his father.'

'Well, if he is,' retorted Miss Quirk, 'it must be a sort of masochism, and it ought to be stopped – I mean, it ought to be led gently into some other direction. It's unnatural. How could any one feel a *healthy* devotion for a person who beats him?'

'I can't think; but it often seems to happen. Peter's mother used to lay into him with a slipper, and they've always been the best of friends.'

'If I had a child belonging to me,' said Miss Quirk, 'I would never permit anybody to lay a hand on him. All my little nephews and nieces have been brought up on enlightened modern lines. They never even hear the word, Don't. Now, you see what happens. Just *because* your boy was told *not* to pick the peaches, he picked them. If he hadn't been forbidden to do it, he wouldn't have been disobedient.'

'No,' said Harriet. 'I suppose that's quite true. He would have picked the peaches just the same, but it wouldn't have been disobedience.'

'Exactly,' cried Miss Quirk, triumphantly. 'You see – you manufacture a crime and then punish the poor child for it. Besides, if it hadn't been for the prohibition, he'd have left the fruit alone.'

'You don't know Bredon. He never leaves anything alone.'

'Of course not,' said Miss Quirk, 'and, he never will, so long as you surround him with prohibitions. His meddling with what doesn't belong to him is just an act of defiance.'

‘He’s not defiant very often,’ said Harriet, ‘but of course it’s very difficult to refuse a dare from a big boy like George Waggett. I expect it was George; it usually is.’

‘No doubt,’ observed Miss Quirk, ‘the village children are all brought up in an atmosphere of faultfinding and defiance. That kind of thing is contagious. Democratic principles are all very well, but I should scarcely have thought it wise to expose your little boy to contamination.’

‘Would you forbid him to play with George Waggett?’

‘I should *never forbid* anything. I should endeavour to suggest some more suitable companion. Bredon could be encouraged to look after his little brother; that would give him a useful outlet for his energies and allow him to feel himself important.’

‘Oh, but he’s really very good with Roger,’ said Harriet, equably. She looked up, to see chastiser and chastised emerging from the house, hand in hand. ‘They seem to be quite good friends. Bredon was rather uplifted when he was promoted to a cane; he thinks it dignified and grown-up ... Well, ruffian, how many did you get?’

‘Three,’ said Master Bredon, confidentially. ‘Awful hard ones. One for being naughty, an’ one for being young ass enough to be caught, and one for making a ’fernal nuisance of myself on a hot day.’

‘Oh, dear,’ said Miss Quirk, appalled by the immorality of all this. ‘And are you sorry for having taken poor Mr. Puffet’s peaches, so that he can’t get a prize at the Show.’

Bredon looked at her in astonishment.

‘We’ve done all that,’ he said, with a touch of indignation. His father thought it well to intervene.

‘It’s a rule in this household,’ he announced, ‘that once we’ve been whacked, nothing more can be said. The topic is withdrawn from

circulation.'

'Oh,' said Miss Quirk. She still felt that something ought to be done to compensate the victim of brutality and relieve his repressions. 'Well, as you're a good boy, would you like to come and sit on my knee?'

'No thank you,' said Bredon. Training, or natural politeness, prompted him to amplify the refusal. 'Thank you very much all the same.'

'A more tactless suggestion,' said Peter, 'I never heard.' He dropped into a deck-chair, picked up his son and heir by the waist-belt and slung him face downwards across his knees. 'You'll have to eat your tea on all-fours, like Nebuchadnezzar.'

'Who was Nebuchadnezzar?'

'Nebuchadnezzar, the King of the Jews –' began Peter. His version of that monarch's iniquities was interrupted by the appearance, from behind the house, of a stout figure, unsuitably clad for the season in sweater, corduroy trousers and bowler hat. 'The curse is come upon me, cried the Lady of Shalott.'

'Who was the Lady of Shalott?'

'I'll tell you at bedtime. Here is Mr. Puffett, breathing out threatenings and slaughter. We must now stand up and face the music. 'Afternoon, Puffett.'

'Afternoon, me lord and me lady,' said Mr Puffett. He removed his bowler and mopped his streaming brow. 'And miss,' he added, with a vague gesture in Miss Quirk's direction. 'I made bold, me lord, to come round –'

'That,' said Peter, 'was very kind of you. Otherwise, of course, we should have come to see you and say we were sorry. We were overcome by a sudden irresistible impulse, attributable, we think, to the beauty of the fruit and the exciting nature of the enterprise. We hope very much that we have left enough for the Flower-Show, and we will be careful not to do it

again. We should like to mention that a measure of justice has already been done, in the shape of three of the juiciest, but if there is anything further coming to us, we shall try to receive it in a becoming spirit of penitence.'

'Well, there!' said Mr Puffett. 'If I didn't say to Jinny, "Jinny," I says, "I 'ope the young gentleman doesn't tell 'is lordship. He'll be main angry," I says, "and I wouldn't wonder if 'e didn't wallop 'im." "Oh Dad," she says, "run up quick, never mind your Sunday coat, and tell 'is lordship as 'e didn't take only two peaches and there's plenty left," she says. So I comes as quick as I can, only I 'ad ter wash, what with doin' out the pigstyes, and jest to put on a clean collar; but not bein' as young as I was, and gettin' stout-like, I don't get up the 'ill as quick as I might. There wasn't no call to thrash the young gentleman, me lord, me 'avin' caught 'im afore much 'arm was done. Boys will be boys – and I'll lay what you like it was some of them other young devils put 'im up to it, begging your pardon, me lady.'

'Well, Bredon,' said his father; 'it's very kind of Mr Puffett to take that view of it. Suppose you go with him up to the house and ask Bunter to draw him a glass of beer. And on the way, you may say whatever your good feeling may suggest.'

He waited till the oddly-assorted couple were half-way across the lawn, and then called 'Puffett?'

'Me lord?' said Mr Puffett, returning alone.

'Was there really much damage done?'

'No, me lord. Only two peaches, like I said. I jest popped out from be'ind the potting-shed in time, and 'e was off like one o'clock.'

'Thank heaven! From what he said, I was afraid he had wolfed the lot. And, look here, Puffett. Don't ask him who put him up to it. I shouldn't imagine he'd tell, but he might fancy he was a bit of a hero for refusing.'

‘I get you,’ said Mr Puffett. ‘’E’s a proper ’igh-sperrited young gentleman, ain’t ’e?’ He winked, and went ponderously to rejoin his penitent robber.

The episode was considered closed; and everybody (except Miss Quirk) was surprised when Mr Puffett arrived next morning at breakfast-time and announced without preliminary:

‘Beg pardon, me lord, but all my peaches ’as bin took in the night, and I’d be glad to know ’oo done it.’

‘All your peaches taken, Puffett?’

‘Every blessed one on ’em, me lord, practically speakin.’ And the Flower-Show ter-morrer.’

‘Coo!’ said Master Bredon. He looked up from his plate, and found Miss Quirk’s eye fixed upon him.

‘That’s a dirty trick,’ said his lordship. ‘Have you any idea who it was? Or would you like me to come and look into the matter for you?’

Mr Puffett turned his bowler hat slowly over between his large hands.

‘Not wishin’ yer lordship ter put yerself out,’ he said slowly. ‘But it jest crossed me mind as summun at the ’ouse might be able ter throw light, as it were, upon the subjick.’

‘I shouldn’t think so,’ said Peter, ‘but it’s easy to ask. Harriet, do you by any chance know anything about the disappearance of Puffett’s peaches?’

Harriet shook her head.

‘Not a thing. Roger, dear, please eat your egg not quite so splashily. You’ve given yourself a moustache like Mr Billing’s.’

‘Can you give us any help, Bredon?’

‘No.’

‘No, what?’

‘No, sir. Please, Mummy, may I get down?’

‘Just a minute, darling. You haven’t folded up your napkin.’

‘Oh, sorry.’

‘Miss Quirk?’

Miss Quirk was so much aghast at hearing this flat denial, that she had remained staring at the eldest Master Wimsey, and started on hearing herself addressed.

‘Do *I* know anything? Well!’ She hesitated. ‘Now, Bredon, am I to tell Daddy? Wouldn’t you rather do it yourself?’ Bredon shot a quick look at his father, but made no answer. That was only to be expected. Beat a child, and you make him a liar and a coward. ‘Come now,’ said Miss Quirk, coaxingly, ‘it would be *ever* so much nicer and better and braver to own up, don’t you think? It’ll make Mummy and Daddy very very sad if you leave it to *me* to tell them.’

‘To tell us what?’ inquired Harriet.

‘My dear Harriet,’ said Miss Quirk, annoyed by this foolish question, ‘if I tell you *what*, then I’ve told you, haven’t I? And I’m quite *sure* Bredon would much rather tell you himself.’

‘Bredon,’ said his father, ‘have you any idea what Miss Quirk thinks you ought to tell us? Because, if so, you could tell us and we could get on.’

‘No, sir. I don’t know anything about Mr Puffett’s peaches. May I get down *now*, Mummy, please?’

‘Oh, Bredon!’ cried Miss Quirk, reproachingly. ‘When I saw you, you know, with my own eyes! Ever so early – at five o’clock this morning. Now, won’t you say what you were doing?’

‘Oh, that!’ said Bredon; and blushed. Mr Puffett scratched his head.

‘What were you doing?’ asked Harriet, gently. ‘Not anything naughty, darling, were you? Or is it a secret?’

Bredon nodded. 'Yes, it's a secret. Something we were doing.' He sighed. 'I don't think it's naughty, Mum.'

'I expect it is though,' said Peter in a resigned tone. 'Your secrets so often are. Quite unintentionally, no doubt, but they do have a tendency that way. Be warned in time, Bredon, and undo it, or stop doing it, before I discover it. I understand it had nothing to do with Mr Puffett's peaches?'

'Oh, no, Father. Please, Mummy, may I –'

'Yes, dear, you may get down. But you must ask Miss Quirk to excuse you.'

'Please, Miss Quirk, will you excuse me?'

'Yes, certainly,' said Miss Quirk in a mournful tone. Bredon scrambled down hastily, said, 'I'm *very* sorry about your peaches, Mr Puffett,' and made his escape.

'I am sorry to have to say it,' said Miss Quirk, 'but I think, Mr Puffett, you will find your peaches in the wood-shed. I woke up early this morning, and I saw Bredon and another little boy crossing the yard, carrying something between them in a bucket. I waved at them from the window, and they hurried off to the woodshed in what I *can* only call a furtive kind of way.'

'Well, Puffett,' said his lordship, 'I'm sorry about this. Shall I come up and take a look at the place? Or do you wish to search the woodshed? I am quite sure you will not find your peaches there, though I should hesitate to say what else you might not find.'

'I'd be grateful,' replied Mr Puffett, 'to 'ave yer advice, me lord, if so be as you could spare the time. What beats me, it's a wide bed, and yet there ain't no footprints, in a manner of speaking, except as it might be young master's, there. Which, footprints bein' in a manner your lordship's walk in life, I made bold to come. But, Master Bredon 'avin' said it weren't him, I

reckon them marks'll be wot 'e left yesterday, though 'ow a man or a boy either could cross that there bed of damp earth and not leave no sign of 'imself, unless 'e wos a bird, is more than I can make out, nor Jinny neither.'

Mr Tom Puffett was proud of his walled garden. He had built the wall himself (for he was a builder by trade), and it was a handsome brick structure, ten feet high, and topped on all four sides with a noble parapet of broken bottle-glass. The garden lay on the opposite side of the road from the little house where its owner lived with his daughter and son-in-law, and possessed a solid wooden gate, locked at night with a padlock. On either side of it were flourishing orchards; at the back ran a deeply rutted lane, still muddy – for the summer, up to the last few days, had been a wet one.

'That there gate,' said Mr Puffett, 'was locked last night at nine o'clock as ever is, 'an it was still locked when I came in at seven this mornin'; so 'ooever done it 'ad to climb this yer wall.'

'So I see,' replied Lord Peter. 'My demon child is of tender years; still, I admit that he is capable of almost anything, when suitably inspired and assisted. But I don't think he would have done it after yesterday's little incident, and I am positive that if he had done it, he'd have said so.'

'Reckon you're right,' agreed Mr Puffett, unlocking the door, 'though when I was a nipper like 'im, if I'd 'ad that old woman a-joring' at me, I'd a'said any-think.'

'So'd I,' said Peter. 'She's a friend of my sister-in-law's, said to need a country holiday. I feel we shall all shortly need a town holiday. Your plums seem to be doing well. H'm. A pebble path isn't the best medium for showing footprints.'

'That it's not,' admitted Mr Puffett. He led the way between the neat flower and vegetable beds to the far end of the garden. Here at the foot of

the wall was a border about nine feet wide, the middle section of which was empty except for some rows of late-sown peas. At the back, trained against the wall, stood the peach-tree, on which one great, solitary fruit glowed rosily among the dark leafage. Across the bed ran a double line of small footprints.

‘Did you hoe this bed over after my son’s visit yesterday?’

‘No, my lord.’

‘Then he hasn’t been here since. Those are his marks all right – I ought to know; I see enough of them on my own flower-beds.’ Peter’s mouth twitched a little. ‘Look! He came very softly, trying most honorably not to tread on the peas. He pinched a peach and bolted it where he stood. I enquire, with a parent’s natural anxiety, whether he ejected the stone, and observe, with relief, that he did. He moved on, he took a second peach, you popped out from the potting-shed, he started like a guilty thing and ran off in a hurry – this time, I am sorry to see, trampling on the peas. I hope he deposited the second peach-stone somewhere. Well, Puffett, you’re right; there are no other footprints. Could the thief have put down a plank and walked on that, I wonder?’

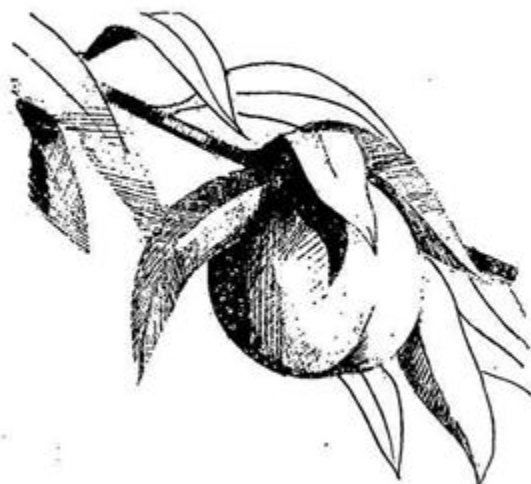
‘There’s no planks here,’ said Mr Puffett, ‘except the little ’un I uses meself for bedding-out. That’s three feet long or thereabouts. Would yer like ter look at it, me lord?’

‘No good. A little reflection shows that one cannot cross a nine-foot bed on a three-foot plank without shifting the plank, and that one cannot at the same time stand on the plank and shift it. You’re sure there’s only one? Yes? Then that’s washed out.’

‘Could ’e a’brought one with ’im?’

‘The orchard walls are high and hard to climb, even without the additional encumbrance of a nine-foot plank. Besides, I’m almost sure no

plank has been used. I think, if it had, the edges would have left some mark. No, Puffett, nobody crossed this bed. By the way, doesn't it strike you as odd that the thief should have left just one big peach behind? It's pretty conspicuous. Was that done merely to point the joke? Or – wait a minute, what's that?'



Something had caught his eye at the back of the box border, some dozen feet to the right of where they were standing. He picked it up. It was a peach; firm and red and not quite ripe. He stood weighing it thoughtfully in his hand.

'Having picked the peach, he found it wasn't ripe and chucked it away in a temper. Is that likely, Puffett, do you think? And unless I am mistaken,

there are quite a number of green leaves scattered about the foot of the tree. How often, when one picks a peach, does one break off the leaves as well?’

He looked expectantly at Mr Puffett, who returned no answer.

‘I think,’ went on Peter, ‘we will go and have a look in the lane.’

Immediately behind the wall ran a rough grass verge. Mr Puffett, leading the way to this, was peremptorily waved back, and was thereafter treated to a fine exposition of detective work in the traditional manner; his lordship, extended on his stomach, thrusting his long nose and long fingers delicately through each successive tuft of grass, Mr Puffett himself, stooping with legs well apart and hands on knees, peering anxiously at him from the edge of the lane. Presently the sleuth sat up on his heels and said:

‘Here you are, Puffett. There were two men. They came up the lane from the direction of the village, wearing hob-nailed boots and carrying a ladder between them. They set up the ladder *here*; the grass, you see, is still a little bent, and there are two deepish dents in the soil. One man climbed to the top and took the peaches, while the other, I think, stood at the foot to keep guard and receive the fruit in a bag or basket or something. This isn’t a case of larking youngsters, Puffett; from the length of the strides they were grown men. What enemies have you made in your harmless career? Or who are your chief rivals in the peach class?’

‘Well, there,’ said Mr Puffett, slowly. ‘There’s the Vicar shows peaches, and Dr Jellyband from Great Pagford, and Jack Baker – he’s the policeman, you know, came when Joe Sellon went off to Canada. And there’s old Critch; him and me had a dispute about a chimbley. And Maggs the blacksmith – ’e didn’t ’arf like it w’en I wiped ’is eye last year with me vegetable marrers. Oh, and Waggett the butcher, ’e shows peaches. But I dunno as any o’ them ’ud do me a turn like this ’ere. But ’ere, me lord, ’ow did they *get* the peaches? They couldn’t reach ’em from the top of the

ladder, nor yet off the wall, let alone sitting on them there bottles. The top o' the tree's five foot below the top o' the wall.'

'That's simple,' said Peter. 'Think of the broken leaves and the peach in the box border, and consider how *you* would have done it. By the way, if you want proof that the robbing was done from this side, get a ladder and look over. I'll lay you anything you like, you'll find that the one peach that was left is hidden by the leaves from anybody looking *down* on it, though it's clearly enough seen from the garden. No, there's no difficulty about how it was done; the difficulty is to put one's hand on the culprits. Unfortunately, there's no footprints clear enough to show the complete pattern of the hob-nails.'

He considered a moment, while Mr Puffett watched him with the air of one confidently expecting a good conjuring trick.

'One could make a house-to-house visitation,' went on his lordship, 'and ask questions, or search. But it's surprising how things disappear, and how people dry up when asked direct questions. Children especially. Look here, Puffett, I'm not at all sure my prodigal son mightn't be able to throw some light on this, after all. But leave me to conduct the examination, it may need delicate handling.'

There is one drawback about retreating to a really small place in the country and leaving behind you the stately publicity of town life in a house with ten servants. When you have tucked in yourselves, and your three children, and your indispensable man and your one equally indispensable and devoted maid, both time and space become rather fully occupied. You may, by taking your husband into your own room and accommodating the two elder boys in his dressing-room, squeeze in an extra person who, like Miss Quirk, has been wished upon you; but it is scarcely possible to run after her all day to see that she is not getting into mischief. This is more particularly the case

if you are a novelist by profession, and if moreover, your idea of a happy holiday is to dispose as completely and briskly as possible of children, book, servants and visitor, so as to snatch all the available moments for playing the fool with a congenial, but admittedly distracting, husband. Harriet Wimsey, writing for dear life in the sitting-room, kept one eye on her paper and the other on Master Paul Wimsey, who was disembowelling his old stuffed rabbit in the window-seat. Her ears were open for a yell from young Roger, whose rough-and-tumble with the puppy on the lawn might at any moment end in disaster. Her consciousness was occupied with her plot, her sub-consciousness with the fact that she was three months behind on her contract. If she gave an occasional vague thought to her first-born, it was only to wonder whether he was hindering Bunter at his work, or merely concocting, in his own quiet way, some more than usually hideous shock for his parents. Himself was the last person he ever damaged; he was a child with a singular talent for falling on his feet. She had no attention to spare for Miss Quirk.

Miss Quirk had tried the woodshed, but it was empty, and among its contents she could find nothing more suspicious than a hatchet, a saw, a rabbit-hutch, a piece of old carpet and a wet ring among the sawdust. She was not surprised that the evidence had been removed; Bredon had been extraordinarily anxious to leave the breakfast-table, and his parents had shut their eyes and let him go. Nor had Peter troubled to examine the premises; he had walked straight out of the house with that man Puffett, who naturally could not insist upon a search. Both Peter and Harriet were obviously burking inquiry; they did not want to admit the consequences of their wickedly mistaken system of training.

‘Mummy! come out an’ play wiv’ me an’ Bom-bom!’

‘Presently, darling. I’ve only got a little bit to finish.’

‘When’s presently, Mummy?’

‘Very soon. In about ten minutes.’

‘What’s ten minutes, Mummy?’

Harriet laid down her pen. As a conscientious parent, she could not let this opportunity pass. Four years old was said to be too early, but children differed and you never knew.

‘Look, darling. Here’s the clock. When this long hand gets to *that*, that’ll be ten minutes.’

‘When *this* gets to *that*?’

‘Yes, darling. Sit quiet just for a little bit and look after it and tell me when it gets there.’

An interval. Miss Quirk had by this time searched the garage, the greenhouse and the shed that housed the electric plant.

‘It isn’t moving, Mummy.’

‘Yes, it is, really, only it goes very, very slowly. You’ll have to keep a very sharp eye on it.’

Miss Quirk had reached the back parts of the house itself. She entered by the back door, and passed through the scullery into a passage, containing, among other things, the door of the boot-hole. In this retreat, she discovered a small village maiden, cleaning a pair of very youthful boots.

‘Have you seen –?’ began Miss Quirk. Then her eye fell on the boots. ‘Are those Master Bredon’s boots?’

‘Yes, miss,’ said the girl, with the startled look peculiar to young servants when suddenly questioned by strangers.

‘They’re very dirty,’ said Miss Quirk. She remembered that Bredon had worn clean sandals when he came in to breakfast. ‘Give those to me for a moment,’ said Miss Quirk.

The small maid looked round with a gasp for advice and assistance, but both Bunter and the maid seemed to be occupied elsewhere, and one could not refuse a request from a lady staying in the house. Miss Quirk took charge of the boots. 'I'll bring them back presently,' she said, with a nod, and passed on. Fresh, damp earth on Bredon's boots, and something secret brought home in a pail – it scarcely needed a Peter Wimsey to put two and two together. But Peter Wimsey was refusing to detect in the right place. Miss Quirk would show him.

Miss Quirk went on along the passage and came to a door. As she approached it, it opened and Bredon's face, very dirty, appeared round the edge. At sight of her, it popped in again like a bolting rabbit.

'Ah!' said Miss Quirk. She pushed the door briskly. But even a child of six, if he can reach it and is determined, can make proper use of a bolt.

'Roger, darling, no! Shaking won't make it go any faster. It'll only give the poor clock tummyache. Oh, look, what a dreadful mess Paul's made with his rabbit. Help him pick up the bits, dear, and then you'll see, the ten minutes will be up.'

Peter, returning from Mr Puffett's garden, found his wife and two-thirds of his family rolling vigorously about the lawn with Bom-bom. Being invited to roll, he rolled, but with only half his attention.

'It's a curious thing,' he observed plaintively, 'that though my family makes a great deal of noise and always seems to be on top of me' (this was, at the moment, a fact), 'I never can lay hands on the bit of it I want at the moment. Where is the pest, Bredon?'

'I haven't dared to ask.'

Peter rose up, with his youngest son clinging, leech-like, to his shoulder, and went in search of Bunter, who knew everything without asking.

‘Master Bredon, my lord, is engaged at present in an altercation with Miss Quirk through the furnace-room door.’

‘Good God, Bunter! Which of them is inside?’

‘Master Bredon, my lord.’

‘I breathe again. I feared we might have to effect a rescue. Catch hold of this incubus, will you, and hand him back to her ladyship.’

All Miss Quirk’s coaxing had been impotent to lure Bredon out of the furnace-room. At Peter’s voice she turned quickly.

‘Oh, Peter! Do get the child to come out. He’s got those peaches in there, and I’m sure he’ll make himself ill.’

Lord Peter raised his already sufficiently surprised eyebrows.

‘If your expert efforts fail,’ said he, ‘will my brutal threats have any effect, do you suppose? Besides, even if he *were* eating peaches, ought we, in this peremptory way, to suppress that natural expression of his personality? And whatever makes you imagine that we keep peaches in the furnace-room?’

‘I know he’s got them there,’ said Miss Quirk. ‘And I don’t blame the child. If you beat a boy for stealing, he’ll steal again. Besides, look at these boots he went out in this morning – all covered with damp mould.’

Lord Peter took the boots and examined them with interest.

‘Elementary, my dear Watson. But allow me to suggest that some training is necessary, even for the work of a practical domestic detective. This mould is not the same colour as the mould in Puffett’s garden, and in fact is not garden mould at all. Further, if you take the trouble to look at the flower-beds, you will see that they are not wet enough to leave as much mud as this on a pair of boots. Thirdly, I can do all the detective work required in this family. And fourthly, you might realise that it is rather discourteous of you to insist that my son is a liar.’

‘Very well,’ said Miss Quirk, a little red in the face. ‘Fetch him out of there, and you’ll see.’

‘But why should I fetch him out, and implant a horrible frustration-complex around the furnace-room?’

‘As you like,’ said Miss Quirk. ‘It’s no business of mine.’

‘True,’ said Peter. He watched her stride angrily away, and said:

‘Bredon! You can come out. She’s gone.’

There was a sound of the sliding of iron, and his son slithered out like an eel, pulling the door carefully to behind him.

‘You’re not very clean, are you?’ said his father, dispassionately. ‘It looks to me as though the furnace-room needed dusting. I’m not very clean myself, if it comes to that. I’ve been crawling in the lane behind Mr Puffett’s garden, trying to find out who stole his peaches.’

‘*She says I did.*’

‘I’ll tell you a secret, Bredon. Grown-up people don’t always know everything, though they try to pretend they do. That is called “prestige” and is responsible for most of the wars that devastate the continent of Europe.’

‘I think,’ said Bredon, who was accustomed to his father’s meaningless outbursts of speech, ‘she’s silly.’

‘So do I; but don’t say I said so.’

‘And rude.’

‘*And* rude. I, on the other hand, am silly, but seldom rude. Your mother is neither rude nor silly.’

‘Which am I?’

‘You are an egotistical extravert of the most irrepressible type. Why do you wear boots when you go mud-larking? It’s much less trouble to clean your feet than your boots.’

‘There’s thistles and nettles.’

‘True, O King! Yes, I know the place now. Down by the stream, at the far end of the paddock ... Is that the Secret you’ve got in the furnace-room?’

Bredon nodded, his mouth obstinately shut.

‘Can’t you let me in on it?’

Bredon shook his head.

‘No, I don’t think so,’ he explained candidly. ‘You see, you might feel you ought to stop it.’

‘That’s awkward. It’s so often my duty to stop things. Miss Quirk thinks I oughtn’t ever to stop anything, but I don’t feel I can go quite as far as that. I wonder what the devil you’ve been up to. We’ve had newts and frogs and sticklebacks, and tadpoles are out of season. I hope it isn’t adders, Bredon, or you’ll swell up and turn purple. I can stand for most livestock, but not adders.’

‘‘Tisn’ *tadders*,’ replied his son, with dawning hope. ‘Only very nearly. An’ I don’t know what it lives on. I say, if you will let me keep it, d’you mind coming in quick, ’cos I ’spect it’s creeped out of the bucket.’

‘In that case,’ said his lordship, ‘I think we’d better conduct a search of the premises instantly. My nerves are fairly good; but if it were to go up the flue and come out in the kitchen –’

He followed his offspring hastily into the furnace-room.

‘I wish,’ said Harriet, a little irritably, for she strongly disliked being lectured about her duties and being thus prevented from attending to them, ‘you wouldn’t always talk about “a” child, as if all children were alike. Even my three are all quite different.’

‘Mothers always think their own children are different,’ said Miss Quirk. ‘But the fundamental principles of child-psychology are the same in

all, I have studied the subject. Take this question of punishment. When you punish a child –’

‘Which child?’

‘Any child – you harm the delicate mechanism of its reaction to life. Some become hardened, some become cowed, but in either case you set up a feeling of inferiority.’

‘It’s not so simple. Don’t take any child – take mine. If you reason with Bredon, he gets obstinate. He knows perfectly well when he’s been naughty, and sometimes he prefers to be naughty and take the consequences. Roger’s another matter. I don’t think we shall ever whip Roger, because he’s sensitive and easily frightened and rather likes having his feelings appealed to. But he’s already beginning to feel a little inferior to Bredon, because he isn’t allowed to be whipped. I suppose we shall have to persuade him that whipping is part of the eldest son’s prerogative. Which will be all right provided we don’t have to whip Paul.’

There were so many dreadful errors in this speech, that Miss Quirk scarcely knew where to begin.

‘I think it’s such a mistake to let the younger ones fancy that there is anything superior in being the eldest. My little nephews and nieces –’

‘Yes,’ said Harriet. ‘But one’s got to prepare people for life, hasn’t one? The day is bound to come when they realise that all Peter’s real property is entailed.’

Miss Quirk said she so much preferred the French custom of dividing all property equally. ‘It’s so much better for the children.’

‘Yes; but it’s very bad for the property.’

‘But Peter wouldn’t put his property before his children!’

Harriet smiled.

‘My dear Miss Quirk! Peter’s fifty-two, and he’s reverting to type.’

Peter at that moment was not looking or behaving like fifty-two, but he was rapidly reverting to a much more ancient and early type than the English landed gentleman. He had, with some difficulty, retrieved the serpent from the ash-hole, and now sat on a heap of clinker, watching it as it squirmed at the bottom of the bucket.

‘Golly, what a whopper!’ he said, reverently. ‘How did you catch him, old man?’

‘Well, we went to get minnows, and he came swimming along, and Joey Maggs caught him in his net. And he wanted to kill him along of biting, but I said he couldn’ bite, ’cos you told us the difference between snakes. And Joe bet me I wouldn’t let him bite me, an’ I said I didn’ mind and he said, is it a dare ? an’ I said, Yes, if I can have him afterwards, so I let him bite me, only of course he didn’ bite an’ George helped me bring him back in the bucket.’

‘So Joey Maggs caught him in his net, did he?’

‘Yes, but *I* knew he wasn’t a nadder. And please, sir, will you give me a net, ’cos Joe’s got a lovely big one, only he was awfully late this morning and we thought he wasn’t coming, and he said somebody had hidden his net.’

‘Did he? That’s very interesting.’

‘Yes. May I have a net, please?’

‘You may.’

‘Oh, thank-you, Father. May I keep him, please, and what does he live on?’

‘Beetles, I think.’ Peter plunged his hand into the bucket, and the snake wound itself about his wrist and slithered along his arm. ‘Come on, Cuthbert. You remind me of when I was at my prep school, and we put one the dead spit of you into –’ He caught himself up, too late.

‘Where, Father?’

‘Well, there was a master we all hated, and we put a snake in his bed. It’s rather frequently done. In fact, I believe it’s what grass-snakes are for.’

‘Is it very naughty to put snakes in people you don’t like’s beds?’

‘Yes. Exceedingly naughty. No nice boy would ever think of doing such a thing ... I say, *Bredon* –’

Harriet Wimsey sometimes found her eldest son disconcerting. ‘You know, Peter, he’s a most unconvincing-looking child. *I* know he’s yours, because there is nobody else’s he could be. And the colour’s more or less right. But where on earth did he get that square, stolid appearance, and that incredible snub nose?’

But at that instant, in the furnace-room, over the body of the writhing Cuthbert, square-face and hatchet-face stared at one another and grew into an awful, impish likeness.

‘Oh, Father!’

‘I don’t know what your mother will say. We shall get into most frightful trouble. You’d better leave it to me. Cut along now, and ask Bunter if he’s got such a thing as a strong flour-bag and a stout piece of string, because you’ll never make Cuthbert stay in this bucket. And for God’s sake, don’t go about looking like Guy Fawkes and Gunpowder Treason. When you’ve brought the bag, go and wash yourself. I want you to run down with a note to Mr Puffet.’

Mr Puffett made his final appearance just after dinner, explaining that he had not been able to come earlier, ‘along of a job out Lopsley way.’ He was both grateful and astonished.

‘To think of it being old Billy Maggs and that brother of his, and all along o’ them perishin’ old vegetable marrers. You wouldn’t think a chap

cud 'arbour a grievance that way, would yer? 'Tain't even as though 'e wor a'showin' peaches of his own. It beat me. Said 'e did it for a joke. "Joke?" I says to 'im. "I'd like to 'ear wot the magistrate 'ud say to that there kinder joke." Owsumdever, I got me peaches back, and the Show being ter-morrer, mebbe they won't 'ave took no 'arm. Good thing 'im and they boys 'adn't 'ave ate the lot.'

The household congratulated Mr Puffett on this happy termination to the incident. Mr Puffett chuckled.

'Ter think o' Billy Maggs an' that good-fer-nothin' brother of 'is a-standin' on that there ladder a-fishin' for any peaches with young Joey's stickle-back net. A proper silly sight they'd a-bin if anybody'd come that way. "Think yerselves clever," I says to Bill. "W'y, 'is lordship didn't only cast one eye over the place afore 'e says, 'W'y, Puffett,' 'e says, "'ere's Billy Maggs an' that there brother of 'is been a-wallerin' all over your wall like a 'erd of elephants.'" Ah! An' a proper fool 'e looked. 'Course, I see now it couldn't only a'been a net, knockin' the leaves about that way. But that there unripe 'un got away from 'im all right. "Bill," I says, "you'll never make no fisherman, lettin' 'em get away from you like that." Pulled 'is leg proper, I did. But see 'ere, me lord, 'ow did you come ter know it was Billy Maggs's Joey's net? 'E ain't the only one.'

'A little judicious inquiry in the proper quarter,' replied his lordship. 'Billy Maggs's Joe gave the show away, unbeknownst. But see here, Puffett, don't blame Joe. He knew nothing about it, nor did my boy. Only from something Joe said to Bredon I put two and two together.'

'Ah!' said Mr Puffett, 'an' that reminds me. I've got more peaches back nor I wants for the Show, so I made bold to bring 'arf-a-dozen round for Master Bredon. I don't mind tellin' you, I did think for about 'arf a

minute it might a' bin 'im. Only 'arf a minute, mind you – but knowin' wot boys is, I did jest think it might be.'

'It's very kind of you,' said Harriet. 'Bredon's in bed now, but we'll give them to him in the morning. He'll enjoy them so much and be so pleased to know you've quite forgiven him for those other two.'

'Oh, *them*? replied Mr Puffett. 'Don't you say nothing more about them. Jest a bit o' fun, that wos. Well, goodnight all, and many thanks to your lordship. Coo!' said Mr Puffett, as Peter escorted him to the door, 'ter think o' Billy Maggs and that there spindle-shanked brother of 'is a-fishin' for peaches with a kid's net a-top o' my wall. I didden 'arf make 'em all laugh round at the Crown.'

Miss Quirk had said nothing, Peter slipped upstairs by the back way, through Harriet's bedroom into his own. In the big four-poster, one boy was asleep, but the other sat up at his cautious approach.

'Have you done the deed, Mr Scatterblood?'

'No, Cap'n Teach, but your orders shall be carried out in one twirl of a marlin spike. In the meantime, the bold Mr Puffett has recovered his lost treasure and has haled the criminals up before him and had them hanged at the yardarm after a drum-head court-martial. He has sent you a share of the loot.'

'Oh, good egg! what did *she* say?'

'Nothing. Mind you, Bredon, if she apologises, we'll have to call Cuthbert off. A guest is a guest, so long as she behaves like a gentleman.'

'Yes, I see. Oh, I do hope she won't apologise!'

'That's a very immoral thing to hope. If you bounce like that, you'll wake your brother.'

'Father! Do you think she'll fall down in a fit an' foam at the mouth?'

‘I sincerely hope not. As it is, I’m taking my life in my hands. If I perish in the attempt, remember I was true to the Jolly Roger. Good night, Cap’n Teach.’

‘Good-night, Mr Scatterblood. I *do* love you.’

Lord Peter Wimsey embraced his son, assumed the personality of Mr Scatterblood and crept softly down the back way to the furnace-room. Cuthbert, safe in his bag, was drowsing upon a hot-water bottle, and made no demonstration as he was borne upstairs.

Miss Quirk did not apologise, and the subject of peaches was not mentioned again. But she may have sensed a certain constraint in the atmosphere, for she rose rather earlier than usual, saying she was tired and thought she would go to bed.

‘Peter,’ said Harriet, when they were alone: ‘what *are* you and Bredon up to? You have both been so unnaturally quiet since lunch. You must be in some sort of mischief.’

‘To a Teach or a Scatterblood,’ said Peter with dignity, ‘There is no such word as mischief. We call it piracy on the high seas.’

‘I knew it,’ replied Harriet, resignedly. ‘If I’d realised the disastrous effect sons would have on your character, I’d never have trusted you with any. Oh, dear! I’m thankful that woman’s gone to bed; she’s so in the way.’

‘Isn’t she? I think she must have picked up her infant psychology from the Woman’s page in the *Morning Mercury*. Harriet, absolve me now from all my sins of the future, so that I may enjoy them without remorse.’

His wife was not unmoved by this appeal, only observing after an interval, ‘There’s something deplorably frivolous about making love to one’s wife after seven years of marriage. Is it my lord’s pleasure to come to bed?’

‘It is your lord’s very great pleasure.’

My lord, who in the uncanonical process of obtaining absolution without confession or penitence, had almost lost sight of the sin, was recalled to himself by his wife's exclamation as they passed through the outer bedroom:

‘Peter! Where is Bredon?’

He was saved from having to reply by a succession of long and blood-curdling shrieks, followed by a confused outcry.

‘Heavens!’ said Harriet. ‘Something’s happened to Paul!’ She shot through her own room on to the Privy Stair, which, by a subsidiary flight, communicated with the back bedrooms. Peter followed more slowly.

On the landing stood Miss Quirk in her nightgown. She had Bredon’s head tucked under her arm, and was smacking him with impressive though ill-directed energy. She continued to shriek as she smacked. Bredon, accustomed to a more scientific discipline, was taking the situation stolidly, but the nursemaid, with her head thrust out of an adjacent door, was crying, ‘Lor’, whatever is it?’ Bunter, clattering down from the attic in his pyjamas with a long pair of fire-tongs in his hand, pulled up short in observing his master and mistress, and, with some dim recollection of his military service, brought his weapon to the present.

Peter seized Miss Quirk by the arm and extricated his son’s head from chancery.

‘Dear me!’ he said. ‘I thought you objected to corporal chastisement.’

Miss Quirk was in no mood for ethical discussion.

‘That horrible boy!’ she said, panting. ‘He put a snake in my bed. A disgusting, slimy snake. A snake!’

‘Another erroneous inference,’ said Peter. ‘I put it there myself.’

‘You? *You* put a snake in my bed?’

‘But I knew all about it,’ put in Bredon, anxious that the honour and blame should be equitably distributed. ‘It was all his idea, but it was my snake.’

His father rounded upon him. ‘I didn’t tell *you* to come wandering out of your bed.’

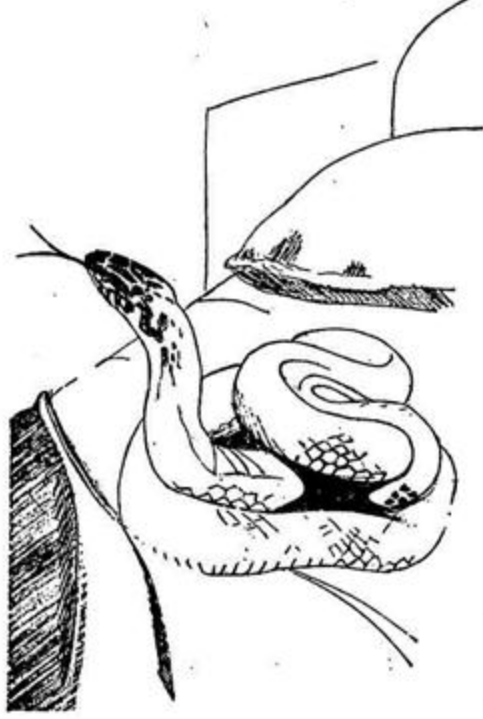
‘No, sir: but you didn’t tell me not to.’

‘Well,’ said Peter, with a certain grimness, ‘You got what you came for.’ He rubbed his son’s rump in a comforting manner.

‘Huh!’ said Bredon. ‘*She* can’t whack for toffee.’

‘May I ask,’ demanded Miss Quirk with trembling dignity, ‘*why* I should have been subjected to this abominable outrage?’

‘I fancy,’ said Peter, ‘I must have been suffering from in-growing resentment. It’s better to let these impulses have their natural outlet, don’t you agree? Repression is always so dangerous. Bunter, find Master Bredon’s snake for him and return it carefully to the furnace-room. It answers to the name of Cuthbert.’



A Biography of Dorothy L. Sayers

Dorothy L. Sayers (1893–1957) was a playwright, scholar, and acclaimed author of mysteries, best known for her books starring the gentleman sleuth Lord Peter Wimsey. The *Los Angeles Times* hailed Sayers as “one of the greatest mystery story writers of [the twentieth] century.”

Born in Oxford, England, she was the only child of Reverend Henry Sayers, headmaster of Christ Church Cathedral School and then rector of Bluntisham village. Sayers grew up in the Bluntisham rectory, then won a scholarship to Oxford University, where she studied modern languages and worked at the publishing house Blackwell’s, which in 1916 published *Op. 1*, Sayers’ first book of poetry.

In 1922 Sayers took a job as a copywriter for London advertising firm S. H. Benson, forerunner to the famous Ogilvy & Mather. There she created several popular slogans and campaigns, including the iconic, animal-theme Guinness advertisements that are still used today.

While working as a copywriter, Sayers began work on *Whose Body?* (1923), a mystery novel featuring dapper detective Lord Peter Wimsey. Over the next two decades, Sayers published ten more Wimsey novels and several short stories, crafting a character whose complexity was unusual for the mystery novels of the time. Handsome, brave, and charming, Wimsey has a few defining flaws, including his tendency to prattle, fear of responsibility, and perpetual nervousness caused by shell shock inflicted during World War I. Sayers once described him as a cross between Fred Astaire and Bertie Wooster. Her writing was praised by fellow mystery writers Ruth Rendell and P. D. James; James said that Sayers “brought to the detective novel originality, intelligence, energy and wit.”

Set between the two World Wars, the Wimsey novels are more than typical manor-house mysteries. Sayers used her knowledge of various topics—including advertising, women’s education, and veterans’ health—to give her books realistic details. In 1936, she brought Wimsey to the stage in *Busman’s Honeymoon*, a story which Sayers would publish as a novel the following year. The play was so successful that she gave up mystery writing to focus on the stage, producing a series of religious works culminating in *The Man Born to Be King* (1941), a radio drama about the life of Jesus.

Sayers continued writing theological essays and criticism during and after World War II. In 1949, she published the first volume of a translation of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. She was halfway through the third volume when she died of a heart attack in 1957. Although she considered this translation to be her best work, it is for her elegantly constructed detective fiction that Sayers remains best remembered.



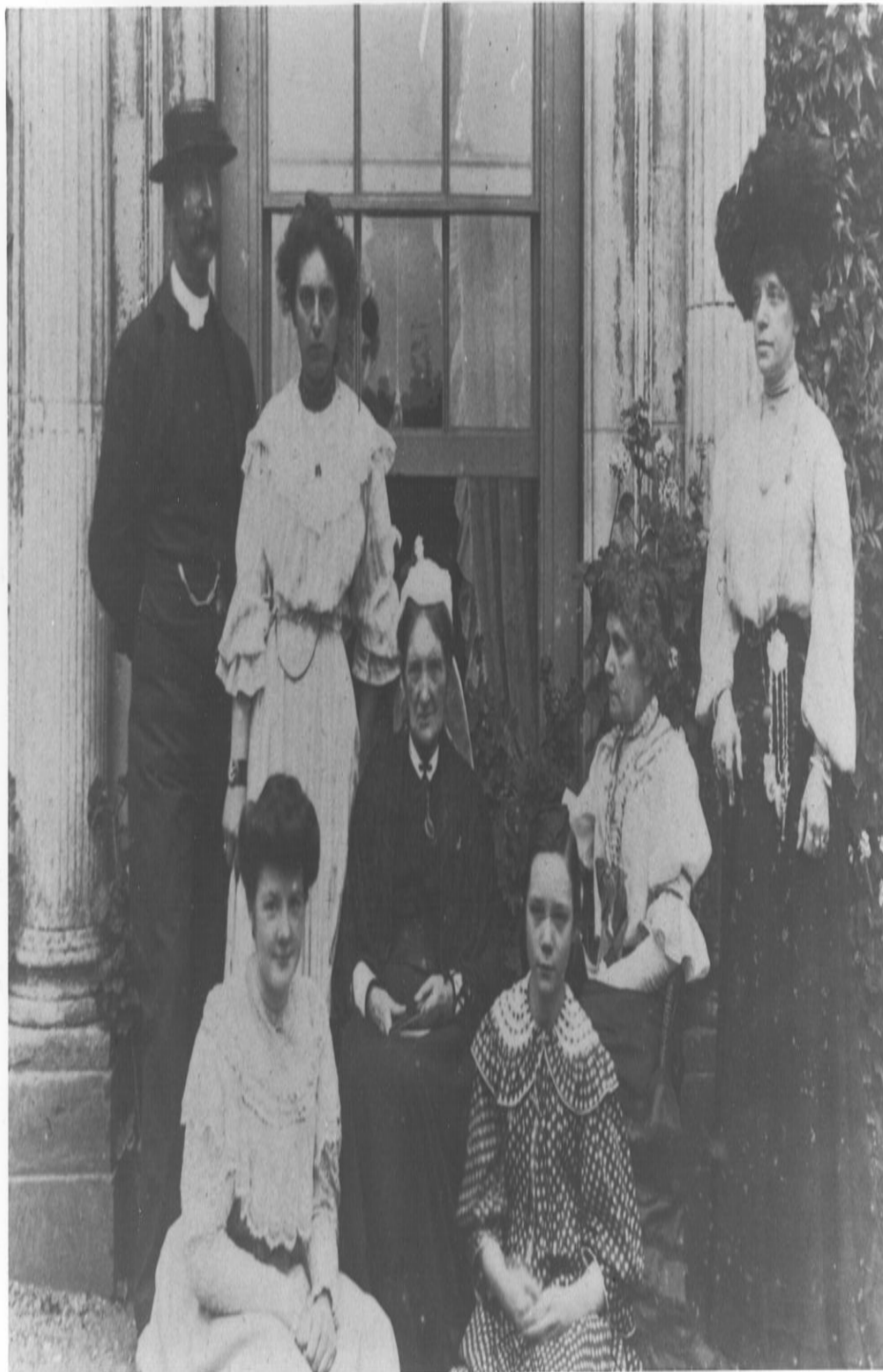


Sayers in the garden of her Oxford home, around 1897. She holds her two toy monkeys, Jocko and Jacko.





An 1899 studio portrait of Sayers, around six years old. (Photo courtesy of I. Palmer Clarke/Cambridge.)



The Sayers family circa 1905. Dorothy (about age twelve) posed with her family outside their home at the Bluntisham rectory. First row, left to right: Gertrude Sayers (aunt), Dorothy. Second row, left to right: Anna Breakey Sayers

(grandmother), Mabel Leigh (aunt). Back row, left to right: Reverend Henry Sayers (father), Ivy Shrimpton (cousin), Helen Mary Leigh Sayers (mother).





Seventeen-year-old Sayers wearing a pageant costume in 1908.



Sayers with friends, posing as shipping magnate Sir Hugh Allen, in 1915.





A studio portrait of Sayers taken in 1926.





Sayers's husband, "Mac" Fleming, at home in 1930 behind overflowing boxes of Sayers's fan mail. A family friend sits to the right. (Photo courtesy of the Tropical Press Agency.)





Sayers's husband, "Mac" Fleming, standing in doorway.





Sayers in 1950, at the unveiling of a plaque at the S. H. Benson advertising agency, where she once worked as a copywriter. The plaque was placed at the foot of a spiral staircase in the agency, a tribute to a character in *Murder Must Advertise* who plunges down a similar staircase.

All images used by permission of the Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois.

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this ebook onscreen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of the publisher.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

copyright © 1972 by Dorothy L. Sayers

cover design by Katrina Damkoehler

978-1-4532-5898-9

This edition published in 2012 by Open Road Integrated Media

180 Varick Street

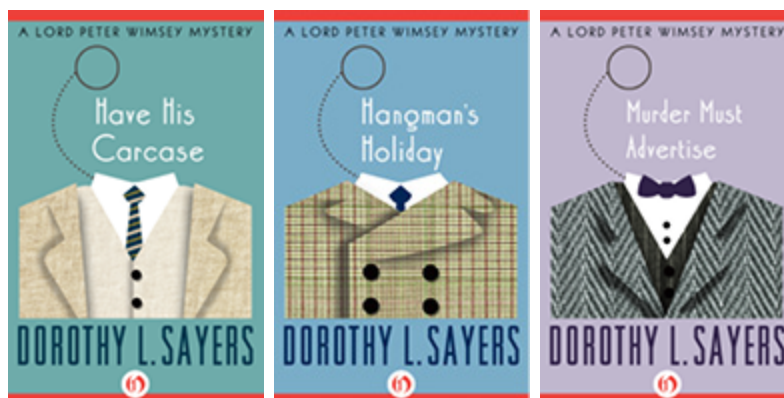
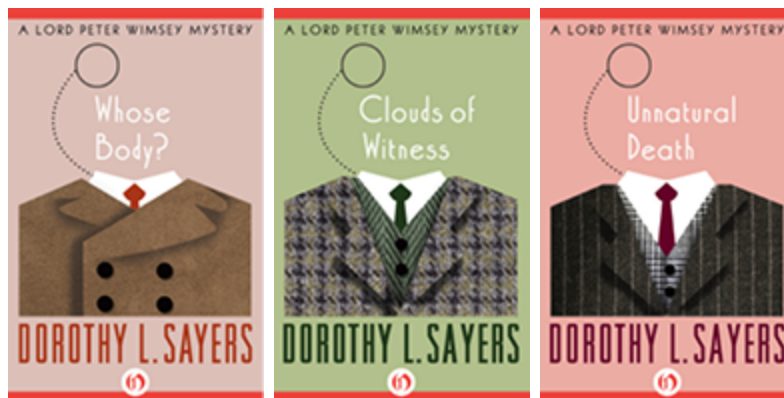
New York, NY 10014

www.openroadmedia.com



EBOOKS BY DOROTHY L. SAYERS

FROM OPEN ROAD MEDIA



Available wherever ebooks are sold





Open Road Integrated Media is a digital publisher and multimedia content company. Open Road creates connections between authors and their audiences by marketing its ebooks through a new proprietary online platform, which uses premium video content and social media.

Videos, Archival Documents, and New Releases

Sign up for the Open Road Media newsletter and get news delivered straight to your inbox.

Sign up now at
www.openroadmedia.com/newsletters

FIND OUT MORE AT
WWW.OPENROADMEDIA.COM

FOLLOW US:
[@openroadmedia](https://twitter.com/openroadmedia) and
Facebook.com/OpenRoadMedia