

‘I don’t despair of getting all the evidence necessary,’ said Parker, coldly, ‘provided you don’t keep me here *all* day.’ He slammed the taxi-door.

‘What a beast of a case this is,’ thought Wimsey. ‘That makes two silly, sordid rows to-day. Well, what next?’ He considered a moment.

‘My spirit needs soothing,’ he decided. ‘Feminine society is indicated. Virtuous feminine society. No emotions. I’ll go and have tea with Marjorie Phelps.’

Chapter 20

Ann Dorland Goes Misere

THE studio door was opened by a girl he did not know. She was not tall, but compactly and generously built. He noticed the wide shoulders and the strong swing of the thighs before he had taken in her face. The uncurtained window behind her threw her features into shadow, he was only aware of thick black hair, cut in a square bob, with a bang across the forehead.

‘Miss Phelps is out.’

‘Oh!—will she be long?’

‘Don’t know. She’ll be in to supper.’

‘Do you think I might come in and wait?’

‘I expect so, if you’re a friend of hers.’

The girl fell back from the doorway and let him pass. He laid his hat and stick on the table and turned to her. She took no notice of him, but walked over to the fireplace and stood with one hand on the mantelpiece. Unable to sit down, since she was still standing, Wimsey moved to the modeling-board, and raised the wet cloth that covered the little mound of clay.

He was gazing with an assumption of great interest at the half-modeled figure of an old flower-seller, when the girl said:

‘I say!’

She had taken up Marjorie Phelps' figurine of himself, and was twisting it over in her fingers.

'Is this you?'

'Yes—rather good of me, don't you think?'

'What do you want?'

'Want?'

'You've come here to have a look at me, haven't you?'

'I came to see Miss Phelps.'

'I suppose the policeman at the corner comes to see Miss Phelps too.'

Winsey glanced out of the window. There *was* a man at the corner—an elaborately indifferent lounge.

'I am sorry,' said Winsey, with sudden enlightenment. 'I'm really awfully sorry to seem so stupid, and so intrusive. But honestly, I had no idea who you were till this moment.'

'Haden't you? Oh, well, it doesn't matter.'

'Shall I go?'

'You can please yourself.'

'If you really mean that, Miss Dorland, I should like to stay. I've been wanting to meet you, you know.'

'That was nice of you,' she mocked. 'First you wanted to defraud me, and now you're trying to—'

'To what?'

She shrugged her wide shoulders.

'Yours is not a pleasant hobby, Lord Peter Winsey.'

'Will you believe me,' said Winsey, 'when I assure you that I was never a party to the fraud. In fact, I showed it up. I did, really.'

'Oh, well. It doesn't matter now.'

'But do please believe that.'

'Very well. If you say so, I must believe it.'

She threw herself on the couch near the fire.

'That's better,' said Winsey. 'Napoleon or somebody said that you could always turn a tragedy into a comedy, by sittin' down.'

the answer in the crib and had to fudge in the middle part. I've been a fool. I ought to have known about Penberthy. But I don't believe this story about bribing and corrupting him, and getting him to do the murder. It doesn't fit.'

'Doesn't fit what?'

'Doesn't fit the portrait. Or the books. Or the way Nurse Armstrong described Ann Dorland. Or your description of her. It's a mechanically perfect explanation, but I swear it's all wrong.'

'If it's mechanically perfect,' said Parker, 'that's good enough. It's far more than most explanations are. You've got that portrait on the brain. It's because you're artistic, I suppose.'

For some reason, the word 'artistic' produces the most alarming reactions in people who know anything about art.

'Artistic be damned!' said Winsey, spluttering with fury, 'it's because I'm an ordinary person, and have met women, and talked to them like ordinary human beings—'

'You and your women,' said Parker, rudely.

'Well—I and my women, what about it? One learns something. You're on the wrong tack about this girl!'

'I've met her and you haven't,' objected Parker. 'Unless you're suppressing something. You keep on hinting things. Anyhow, I've met the girl, and she impressed me as being guilty.'

'And I haven't met her, and I'll swear she isn't guilty.'

'You must know, of course.'

'I do happen to know about this.'

'I'm afraid your unsupported opinion will hardly be sufficient to refute the weight of evidence.'

'You haven't any real evidence, if it comes to that. You don't know that they were ever alone together; you don't know that Ann Dorland knew about the will; you can't prove that Penberthy administered the poison—'

know that Penberthy's connection with the Dorland girl must be smothered up at all costs. They know she did it, all right, but they aren't going to compromise him.'

'Of course not,' said Parker, rather shortly. 'The mother probably knows nothing, anyway. It's a different matter if we get the girl in the witness-box—'

'You won't,' said Waffles Newton. 'At least, you'll have to be jolly quick.'

'Why?'

Newton waved an apologetic hand.

'They're being married to-morrow,' he said, 'special license. I say, that's not to go further, Sally.'

'That's all right, old man.'

'Married?' said Parker. 'Good lord! that forces our hand a bit. Perhaps I'd better pop off. So long—and thanks very much for the tip, old man.'

Winsey followed him into the street.

'We'll have to put the stopper on this marriage business, quick,' said Parker, madly waving to a taxi, which swooped past and ignored him. 'I didn't want to move just at present, because I wasn't ready, but it'll be the devil and all if the Rushworth girl gets hitched up to Penberthy and we can't take her evidence. Devil of it is, if she's determined to go on with it, we can't stop it without arresting Penberthy. Very dangerous, when there's no real proof. I think we'd better have him down to the Yard for interrogation and detain him.'

'Yes,' said Winsey. 'But—look here, Charles.'

A taxi drew up.

'What?' said Parker, sharply, with his foot on the step. 'I can't wait, old man. What is it?'

'I—look here, Charles—this is all wrong,' pleaded Winsey. 'You may have got the right solution, but the working of the sum's all wrong. Same as mine used to be at school, when I'd looked up

Perfectly true, isn't it? Let's talk about something ordinary till Miss Phelps comes in. Shall we?'

'What do you want to talk about?'

'Oh, well—that's rather embarrassing'. Books.' He waved a vague hand. 'What have you been readin' lately?'

'Nothing much.'

'Don't know what I should do without books. Fact, I always wonder what people did in the old days. Just think of it. All sorts of bothers goin' on—matrimonial rows and love-affairs—prodigal sons and servants and worries—and no books to turn to.'

'People worked with their hands instead.'

'Yes—that's frightfully jolly for the people who can do it. I envy them myself. You paint, don't you?'

'I try to.'

'Portraits?'

'Oh, no—figure and landscape chiefly.'

'Oh!... A friend of mine—well, it's no use disguising it—he's a detective—you've met him, I think...'

'That man? Oh, yes. Quite a polite sort of detective.'

'He told me he'd seen some stuff of yours. It rather surprised him, I think. He's not exactly a modernist. He seemed to think your portraits were your best work.'

'There weren't many portraits. A few figure-studies...'

'They worried him a bit.' Winsey laughed. 'The only thing he understood, he said, was a man's head in oils...'

'Oh, that!—just an experiment—a fancy thing. My best stuff is some sketches I did of the Wiltshire Downs a year or two ago. Direct painting, without any preliminary sketch.'

She described a number of these works.

'They sound ever so jolly,' said Winsey. 'Great stuff. I wish I could do something of that kind. As I say, I have to fall back on books for my escape. Reading is an escape to me. Is it to you?'

‘How do you mean?’

‘Well—it is to most people, I think. Servants and factory hands read about beautiful girls loved by dark, handsome men, all covered over with jewels and moving in scenes of gilded splendour. And passionate spinsters read Ethel M. Dell. And dull men in offices read detective stories. They wouldn’t, if murder and police entered into their lives.’

‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘When Crippen and Le Neve were taken on the steamer, they were reading Edgar Wallace.’ Her voice was losing its dull harshness; she sounded almost interested.

‘Le Neve was reading it,’ said Wimsey, ‘but I’ve never believed she knew about the murder. I think she was fighting desperately to know nothing about it—reading horrors, and persuading herself that nothing of that kind had happened, or could happen, to her. I think one might do that, don’t you?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Ann Dorland. ‘Of course, a detective story keeps your brain occupied. Rather like chess. Do you play chess?’

‘No good at it. I like it—but I keep on thinking about the history of the various pieces, and the picturesqueness of the moves. So I get beaten. I’m not a player.’

‘Nor am I. I wish I were.’

‘Yes—that would keep one’s mind off things with a vengeance. Draughts or dominoes or patience would be even better. No connection with anything. I remember,’ added Wimsey, ‘one time when something perfectly grinding and hateful had happened to me. I played patience all day. I was in a nursing home—with shell-shock—and other things. I only played one game, the very simplest ... the demon ... a silly game with no ideas in it at all. I just went on laying it out and gathering it up ... hundred times in an evening ... so as to stop thinking.’

‘Then you too...’

Wimsey waited; but she did not finish the sentence.

‘Oh, well—it doesn’t matter—I *think* so, that’s all. And any way, they would take jolly good care not to communicate, once the alarm was given.’

‘Hullo!’ broke in Hardy, ‘here’s Waffles. Late again. Waffles!—what *have* you been doing, old boy?’

‘Interviewing the Rushworths,’ said Waffles, edging his way into a chair by Hardy. He was a thin, sandy person, with a tired manner. Hardy introduced him to Wimsey and Parker.

‘Got your story in?’

‘Oh, yes. Awful lot of cats these women are. Ma Rushworth—she’s the sloppy sort of woman with her head in the clouds all the time, who never sees anything till it’s struck right under her nose—she pretends, of course, that she always thought Ann Dorland was an unwholesome kind of girl. I nearly asked why, in that case, she had her about the house; but I didn’t. Anyway, Mrs Rushworth said, they didn’t know her very intimately. They wouldn’t, of course. Wonderful how these soulful people sheer off at the least suggestion of unpleasantness.’

‘Did you get anything about Penberthy?’

‘Oh, yes—I got something.’

‘Good?’

‘Oh, yes.’

Hardy, with Fleet Street’s delicate reticence towards the man with an exclusive story, did not press the question. The talk turned back and went over the old ground. Waffles Newton agreed with Salcombe Hardy’s theory.

‘The Rushworths must surely know something. Not the mother, perhaps—but the girl. If she’s engaged to Penberthy, she’ll have noticed any other woman who seemed to have an understanding with him. Women see these things.’

‘You don’t suppose that they’re going to confess that dear Dr Penberthy ever had an understanding with anybody but dear Naomi,’ retorted Newton. ‘Besides, they aren’t such fools as not to

—rich old woman's heiress—and he goes after her. It's all fixed up. He's to accommodate her by removing the obstacle to the fortune, and she obligingly responds by putting the money into his clinic. In order not to make it too obvious, she had to pretend to get a dickens of an interest in glands. So she drops painting and takes to medicine. What could be clearer?'

'But that means,' put in Wimsey, 'that she must have known all about the will at least a year ago.'

'Why not?'

'Well that brings us back to the old question: Why the delay?'

'And it gives us the answer,' said Parker. 'They waited till the interest in the glands and things was so firmly established and recognized by everybody that nobody would connect it with the General's death.'

'Of course,' said Wimsey. He felt that matters were rushing past him at a bewildering rate. But George was safe, anyhow.

'How soon do you think you'll be able to take action?' asked Hardy. 'I suppose you'll want a bit more solid proof before you actually arrest them.'

'I'd have to be certain that they don't wriggle out of it,' said Parker, slowly. 'It's not enough to prove that they were acquainted. There may be letters, of course, when we go over the girl's things. Or Penberthy's—though he's hardly the man to leave compromising documents lying about.'

'You haven't detained Miss Dorland?'

'No, we've let her loose—on a string. I don't mind telling you one thing. There's been no communication of any kind with Penberthy.'

'Of course there hasn't,' said Wimsey. 'They've quarrelled.'

The others stared at him.

'How do you know that?' demanded Parker, annoyed.

'It's a kind of drug, of course. That's an awfully trite thing to say, but it's quite true.'

'Yes, quite.'

'I read detective stories too. They were about the only thing I could read. All the others had the war in them—or love ... or some damn thing I didn't want to think about.'

She moved restlessly.

'You've been through it, haven't you?' said Wimsey, gently.

'Me? ... well ... all this ... it isn't pleasant, you know ... the police ... and ... and everything.'

'You're not really worried about the police, are you?'

She had cause to be, if she only knew it, but he buried this knowledge at the bottom of his mind, defying it to show itself.

'Everything's pretty hateful, isn't it?'

'Something's hurt you ... all right ... don't talk about it if you don't want to ... a man?'

'It usually is a man, isn't it?'

Her eyes were turned away from him, and she answered with a kind of shamefaced defiance.

'Practically always,' said Wimsey. 'Fortunately, one gets over it.'

'Depends what it is.'

'One gets over everything,' repeated Wimsey, firmly. 'Particularly if one tells somebody about it.'

'One can't always tell things.'

'I can't imagine anything really unreliable.'

'Some things are so beastly.'

'Oh, yes—quite a lot of things. Birth is beastly—and death—and digestion, if it comes to that. Sometimes when I think of what's happening inside me to a beautiful *suprême de sole*, with the caviare in boats, and the *croûtons* and the jolly little twists of potato and all the gadgets—I could cry. But there it is, don't you know.'

Ann Dorland suddenly laughed.

'That's better,' said Wimsey. 'Look here, you've been brooding over this and you're seeing it all out of proportion. Let's be practical and frightfully ordinary. Is it a baby?'

'Oh, no!'

'Well—that's rather a good thing, because babies, though no doubt excellent in their way, take a long time and come expensive. Is it blackmail?'

'Good heavens, no!'

'Good. Because blackmail is even longer and more expensive than babies. Is it Freudian, or sadistic, or any of those popular modern amusements?'

'I don't believe you'd turn a hair if it was.'

'Why should I?—I can't think of anything worse to suggest, except what Rose Macaulay refers to as "nameless orgies." Or diseases, of course. It's not leprosy or anything?'

'What a mind you've got,' she said, beginning to laugh. 'No, it isn't leprosy.'

'Well, what *did* the blighter do?'

Ann Dorland smiled faintly: 'It's nothing, really.'

'If only Heaven prevents Marjorie Phelps from coming in,' thought Wimsey, 'I'm going to get it now.... It must have been something, to upset you like this,' he pursued aloud, 'you're not the kind of woman to be upset about nothing.'

'You don't think I am?' She got up and faced him squarely. 'He said ... he said ... I imagined things ... he said ... he said I had a mania about sex. I suppose you would call it Freudian, really,' she added hastily, flushing an ugly crimson.

'Is that all?' said Wimsey. 'I know plenty of people who would take that as a compliment.... But obviously you don't. What exact form of mania did he suggest...?'

'Oh, the gibbering sort that hangs round church doors for curates,' she broke out, fiercely. 'It's a lie. He did—he *did*—pretend

'What was that?' demanded Hardy again. Parker told him, and he listened, grinding his teeth. Another good story gone west. But it would all come out at the trial, and would be worth a headline.

'Robert Fentiman ought to be given a medal,' said Hardy. 'If he hadn't gone butting in—'

'Robert Fentiman?' inquired Parker, distantly.

Hardy grinned.

'If he didn't fix up the old boy's body, who did? Give us credit for a little intelligence.'

'One admits nothing,' said Parker, 'but—'

'But everybody says he did it. Leave it at that. Somebody did it. If Somebody hadn't butted in, it would have been jam for the Dorland.'

'Well, yes. Old Fentiman would just have gone home and pegged out quietly—and Penberthy would have given the certificate.'

'I'd like to know how many inconvenient people are polished off that way. Damn it—it's so easy.'

'I wonder how Penberthy's share of the boodle was to be transferred to him.'

'I don't,' said Hardy. 'Look here—here's this girl. Calls herself an artist. Paints bad pictures. Right. Then she meets this doctor fellow. He's mad on glands. Shrewd man—knows there's money in glands. *She* starts taking up glands. Why?'

'That was a year ago.'

'Precisely. Penberthy isn't a rich man. Retired Army surgeon, with a brass plate and a consulting-room in Harley Street—shares the house with two other hard-up brass-plateers. Lives on a few old dodderers down at the Bellona. Has an idea, if only he could start one of these clinics for rejuvenating people, he could be a millionaire. All these giddy old goats who want their gay time over again—why, they're a perfect fortune to the man with a bit of capital and a hell of a lot of cheek. Then this girl comes along

'They must have got a thundering shock when the body turned up the next morning at the Bellona. I suppose you gave Penberthy a good grueling about that rigour.'

'Pretty fair. He fell back on professional caution, naturally.'

'It's coming to him in the witness-box. Does he admit knowing the girl?'

'He says he just knows her to speak to. But one's got to find somebody who has seen them together. You remember the Thompson case. It was the interview in the tea-shop that clinched it.'

'What I want to know,' said Wimsey, 'is why—'

'Why what?'

'Why didn't they compromise?' It was not what he had been going to say, but he felt defeated, and those words would end the sentence as well as any others.

'What's that?' asked Hardy, quickly.

Peter explained.

'When the question of survivorship came up, the Fentimans were ready to compromise and split the money. Why didn't Miss Dorland agree? If your idea is the right one, it was much the safest way. But it was she who insisted on an inquiry.'

'I didn't know that,' said Hardy. He was annoyed. All kinds of 'stories' were coming his way to-day, and to-morrow there would probably be an arrest, and he wouldn't be able to use them.

'They *did* agree to compromise in the end,' said Parker. 'When was that?'

'After I told Penberthy there was going to be an exhumation,' said Wimsey, as though in spite of himself.

'There you are! They saw it was getting too dangerous.'

'Do you remember how nervous Penberthy was at the exhumation?' said Parker. 'That man—what's his name's—joke about Palmer, and knocking over the jar?'

to—want me and all that. The beast!... I can't tell you the things he said ... and I'd made such a fool of myself....'

She was back on the couch, crying, with large, ugly, streaming tears, and snorting into the cushions. Wimsey sat down beside her.

'Poor kid,' he said. This, then, was at the back of Marjorie's mysterious hints, and those scratchcat sneers of Naomi Rushworth's. The girl had wanted love-affairs, that was certain; imagined them perhaps. There had been Ambrose Ledbury. Between the normal and the abnormal, the gulf is deep, but so narrow that misrepresentation is made easy.

'Look here.' He put a comforting arm round Ann's heaving shoulders. 'This fellow—was it Penberthy, by the way?'

'How did you know?'

'Oh!—the portrait, and lots of things. The things you liked once, and then wanted to hide away and forget. He's a rotter, anyway, for saying that kind of thing—even if it was true, which it isn't. You got to know him at the Rushworth's, I take it—when?'

'Nearly two years ago.'

'Were you keen on him then?'

'No. I—well, I was keen on somebody else. Only that was a mistake too. He—he was one of those people, you know.'

'They can't help themselves,' said Wimsey, soothingly. 'When did the change-over happen?'

'The other man went away. And later on, Dr Penberthy—oh! I don't know! He walked home with me once or twice, and then he asked me to dine with him—in Soho.'

'Had you at that time told any one about this comic will of Lady Dormer's?'

'Of course not. How could I? I never knew anything about it till after she died.'

Her surprise sounded genuine enough.

'What did you think? Did you think the money would come to you?'

'I knew that some of it would; Auntie told me she would see me provided for.'

'There were the grandsons, of course.'

'Yes; I thought she would leave most of it to them. It's a pity she didn't, poor dear. Then there wouldn't have been all this dreadful bother.'

'People so often seem to lose their heads when they make wills. So you were a sort of dark horse at that time. H'm. Did this precious Penberthy ask you to marry him?'

'I thought he did. But he says he didn't. We talked about founding his clinic; I was to help him.'

'And that was when you chucked painting for books about medicine and first-aid classes. Did your aunt know about the engagement?'

'He didn't want her told. It was to be our secret, till he got a better position. He was afraid she might think he was after the money.'

'I daresay he was.'

'He made out he was fond of me,' she said, miserably.

'Of course, my dear child; your case is not unique. Didn't you tell any of your friends?'

'No.' Wimsey reflected that the Ledbury episode had probably left a scar. Besides—did women tell things to other women? He had long doubted it.

'You were still engaged when Lady Dormer died, I take it?'

'As engaged as we ever were. Of course, he told me that there was something funny about the body. He said you and the Fentimans were trying to defraud me of the money. I shouldn't have minded for myself—it was more money than I should have known what to do with. But it would have meant the clinic, you see.'

'Tell us your own version, Sally. Your opinion's as good as anybody's.'

'Oh, mine!—Same as yours—same as everybody's. The girl was in league with the doctor, of course. Pretty obvious, isn't it?'

'Maybe,' said Parker, cautiously. 'But that's a hard thing to prove. We know, of course, that they both sometimes went to Mrs Rushworth's house, but there's no evidence that they knew each other well.'

'But, you ass, she—' Wimsey blurred out. He shut his mouth again with a snap. 'No, I won't. Fish it out for yourselves.'

Illumination was flooding in on him in great waves. Each point of light touched off a myriad others. Now a date was lit up, and now a sentence. The relief in his mind would have been overwhelming, had it not been for that nagging central uncertainty. It was the portrait that worried him most. Painted as a record, painted to recall beloved features—thrust face to the wall and covered with dust.

Sally and Parker were talking.

'... moral certainty is not the same thing as proof.'

'Unless we can show that she knew the terms of the will....'

'... why wait till the last minute? It could have been done safely any time....'

'They probably thought it wasn't necessary. The old lady looked like seeing him into his grave easily. If it hadn't been for the pneumonia.'

'Even so, they had five days.'

'Yes—well, say she didn't know till the very day of Lady Dormer's death....'

'She might have told her then. Explained ... seeing the thing had become a probability....'

'And the Dorland girl arranged for the visit to Harley Street....'

'... plain as the nose on your face.'

Hardy chuckled.