Chapter 17

The Eloquent Dead

Je connaissais Manon : pourquoi m'affliger tant d'un malheur que j'avais dû prévoir.

Manon Lescaut

THE gale had blown itself out into a wonderful fresh day, with clear spaces of sky, and a high wind rolling boulders of cumulus down the blue slopes of air.

The prisoner had been wrangling for an hour with his advisers when finally they came into court, and even Sir Impey's classical face showed flushed between the wings of his wig.

'I'm not going to say anything,' said the Duke obstinately. 'Rotten thing to do. I suppose I can't prevent you callin' her if she insists on comin'—damn' good of her—makes me feel no end of a beast.'

'Better leave it at that,' said Mr Murbles. 'Makes a good impression, you know. Let him go into the box and behave like a perfect gentleman. They'll like it.'

Sir Impey, who had sat through the small hours altering his speech, nodded.

The first witness that day came as something of a surprise. She gave her name and address as Eliza Briggs, known as Madame Brigette of New Bond Street, and her occupation as beauty specialist and perfumer. She had a large and aristocratic clientele of both sexes, and a branch in Paris.

Deceased had been a client of hers in both cities for several years. He had massage and manicure. After the war he had come

to her about some slight scars caused by grazing with shrapnel. He was extremely particular about his personal appearance, and, if you called that vanity in a man, you might certainly say he was vain. Thank you. Sir Wigmore Wrinching made no attempt to cross-examine the witness, and the noble lords wondered to one another what it was all about.

At this point Sir Impey Biggs leaned forward, and, tapping his brief impressively with his forefinger, began:

'My lords, so strong is our case that we had not thought it necessary to present an alibi— ' when an officer of the court rushed up from a little whirlpool of commotion by the door and excitedly thrust a note into his hand. Sir Impey read, coloured, glanced down the hall, put down his brief, folded his hands over it, and said in a sudden, loud voice which penetrated even to the deaf ear of the Duke of Wiltshire:

'My lords, I am happy to say that our missing witness is here. I call Lord Peter Wimsey.'

Every neck was at once craned, and every eye focused on the very grubby and oily figure that came amiably trotting up the long room. Sir Impey Biggs passed the note down to Mr Murbles, and, turning to the witness, who was yawning frightfully in the intervals of grinning at all his acquaintances, demanded that he should be sworn.

The witness's story was as follows:

'I am Lord Peter Wimsey, brother of the accused. I live at 110 Piccadilly. In consequence of what I read on that bit of blotting-paper which I now identify, I went to Paris to look for a certain lady. The name of the lady is Mademoiselle Simone Vonderaa. I found she had left Paris in company with a man named Van Humperdinck. I followed her, and at length came up with her in New York. I asked her to give me the letter Cathcart wrote on the night of his death.' (Sensation). 'I produce that letter, with Mademoiselle Vonderaa's signature on the corner, so that it

'The best thing we can do, I think,' said Sir Impey, 'is to put in the evidence, and, if necessary, arrange for some kind of protection for this lady. In the meantime— '

'She is coming round with me to mother,' said Lady Mary determinedly.

'My dear lady,' expostulated Mr Murbles, 'that would be very unsuitable in the circumstances. I think you hardly grasp— '

'Mother said so,' retorted her ladyship. 'Bunter, call a taxi.'

Mr Murbles waved his hands helplessly, but Sir Impey was rather amused. 'It's no good, Murbles,' he said. 'Time and trouble will tame an advanced young woman, but an advanced old woman is uncontrollable by any earthly force.'

So it was from the Dowager's town house that Lady Mary rang up Mr Charles Parker to tell him the news.

'It was a quarter past twelve by the kitchen clock—'tis a very good clock.'

'And he left you at— '

'About five minutes past two.'

'And how long would it take a man, walking quickly, to get back to Riddlesdale Lodge?'

'Oh, wellnigh an hour. It's rough walking, and a steep bank up and down to the beck.'

'You mustn't let the other counsel upset you on those points, Mrs Grimethorpe, because they will try to prove that he had time to kill Cathcart either before he started or after he returned, and by admitting that the Duke had something in his life that he wanted kept secret we shall be supplying the very thing the prosecution lack—*a motive for murdering anyone who might have found him out.*'

There was a stricken silence.

'If I may ask, madam,' said Sir Impey, 'has any person any suspicion?'

'My husband guessed,' she answered hoarsely. 'I am sure of it. He has always known. But he couldn't prove it. That very night— '

'What night?'

'The night of the murder—he laid a trap for me. He came back from Stapley in the night, hoping to catch us and do murder. But he drank too much before he started, and spent the night in the ditch, or it might be Gerald's death you'd be inquiring into, and mine, as well as the other.'

It gave Mary an odd shock to hear her brother's name spoken like that, by that speaker and in that company. She asked suddenly, apropos of nothing, 'Isn't Mr Parker here?'

'No, my dear,' said Mr Murbles reprovingly, 'this is not a police matter.'

can be identified if Wiggy there tries to put it over you.' (Joyous sensation, in which the indignant protests of prosecuting counsel were drowned.) 'And I'm sorry I've given you such short notice of this, old man, but I only got it the day before yesterday. We came as quick as we could, but we had to come down near Whitehaven with engine trouble, and if we had come down half a mile sooner I shouldn't be here now.' (Applause, hurriedly checked by the Lord High Steward.)

'My lords,' said Sir Impey, 'your lordships are witnesses that I have never seen this letter in my life before. I have no idea of its contents; yet so positive am I that it cannot but assist my noble client's case, that I am willing—nay, eager—to put in this document immediately, as it stands, without perusal, to stand or fall by the contents.'

'The handwriting must be identified as that of the deceased,' interposed the Lord High Steward.

The ravening pencils of the reporters tore along the paper. The lean young man who worked for the *Daily Trumpet* scented a scandal in high life and licked his lips, never knowing what a much bigger one had escaped him by a bare minute or so.

Miss Lydia Cathcart was recalled to identify the handwriting, and the letter was handed to the Lord High Steward, who announced:

'The letter is in French. We shall have to swear an interpreter.'

'You will find,' said the witness suddenly, 'that those bits of words on the blotting-paper come out of the letter. You'll 'scuse my mentioning it.'

'Is this person put forward as an expert witness?' inquired Sir Wigmore witheringly.

'Right ho!' said Lord Peter. 'Only, you see, it has been rather sprung on Biggy as you might say.

Biggy and Wiggy

Were two pretty men,
They went into court
When the clock—

,

'Sir Impey, I must really ask you to keep your witness in order.'

Lord Peter grinned, and a pause ensued while an interpreter was fetched and sworn. Then, at last, the letter was read, amid a breathless silence:

Riddlesdale Lodge,
Stapley,
N.E. Yorks.
le 13 Octobre, 192—

SIMONE,—Je viens de recevoir ta lettre. Que dire? Inutiles, les prières ou les reproches. Tu ne comprendras—tu ne liras même pas.

N'ai-je pas toujours su, d'ailleurs, que tu devais infailliblement me trahir? Depuis huit ans déjà je souffre tous les torments que puisse infliger la jalousie. Je comprends bien que tu n'as jamais voulu me faire de la peine. C'est tout justement cette insouciance, cette légèreté, cette façon séduisante d'être malhonnête, que j'adorais en toi. J'ai tout su, et je t'ai aimée.

Ma foi, non, ma chère, jamais je n'ai eu la moindre illusion. Te rappelles-tu cette première rencontre, un soir au Casino? Tu avais dix-sept ans, et tu étais jolie à ravir. Le lendemain tu fus à moi. Tu m'as dit, si gentiment, que tu m'aimais bien, et que j'étais, moi, le premier. Ma pauvre enfant, tu en as menti. Tu riais, toute seule, de ma naïveté—il y avait bien de quoi rire! Dès notre premier baiser, j'ai prévu ce moment.

'Can you come round to 110 Piccadilly?'

'Straight away.'

It was a strange little party gathered round Lord Peter's fire—the white-faced woman, who started at every sound; the men of law, with their keen, disciplined faces; Lady Mary; Bunter, the efficient. Mrs Grimethorpe's story was simple enough. She had suffered the torments of knowledge ever since Lord Peter had spoken to her. She had seized an hour when her husband was drunk in the 'Lord in Glory', and had harnessed the horse and driven in to Stapley.

'I couldn't keep silence. It's better my man should kill me, for I'm unhappy enough, and maybe I couldn't be any worse off in the Lord's hand—rather than they should hang him for a thing he never done. He was kind, and I was desperate miserable, that's the truth, and I'm hoping his lady won't be hard on him when she knows it all.'

'No, no,' said Mr Murbles, clearing his throat. 'Excuse me a moment, madam. Sir Impey— '

The lawyers whispered together in the window-seat.

'You see,' said Sir Impey, 'she has burnt her boats pretty well now by coming at all. The great question for us is, Is it worth the risk? After all, we don't know what Wimsey's evidence amounts to.'

'No, that is why I feel inclined—in spite of the risk—to put this evidence in,' said Mr Murbles.

'I am ready to take the risk,' interposed Mrs Grimethorpe starkly.

'We quite appreciate that,' replied Sir Impey. 'It is the risk to our client we have to consider first of all.'

'Risk?' cried Mary. 'But surely this clears him!'

'Will you swear absolutely to the time when his grace of Denver arrived at Grider's Hole, Mrs Grimethorpe?' went on the lawyer, as though he had not heard her.

fluttered away. But whether the news was good or bad Lord Peter could not tell.

Mr Murbles was aroused a little after midnight by a thunderous knocking upon his door. Thrusting his head out of the window in some alarm, he saw the porter with his lantern steaming through the rain, and behind him a shapeless figure which for the moment Mr Murbles could not make out.

'What's the matter?' said the solicitor.

'Young lady askin' urgently for you, sir.'

The shapeless figure looked up, and he caught the spangle of gold hair in the lantern-light under the little tight hat.

'Mr Murbles, please come. Bunter rang me up. There's a woman come to give evidence. Bunter doesn't like to leave her—she's frightened—but he says it's frightfully important, and Bunter's always right, you know.'

'Did he mention the name?'

'A Mrs Grimethorpe.'

'God bless me! Just a moment, my dear young lady, and I will let you in.'

And, indeed, more quickly than might have been expected, Mr Murbles made his appearance in a Jaeger dressing-gown at the front door.

'Come in, my dear. I will get dressed in a very few minutes. It was quite right of you to come to me. I'm very, very glad you did. What a terrible night! Perkins, would you kindly wake up Mr Murphy and ask him to oblige me with the use of his telephone?'

Mr Murphy—a noisy Irish barrister with a hearty manner—needed no waking. He was entertaining a party of friends, and was delighted to be of service.

'Is that you Biggs? Murbles speaking. That alibi— '

'Yes!'

'Has come along of its own accord.'

'My God! You don't say so!'

Mais écoute, Simone. J'ai la faiblesse de vouloir te montrer exactement ce que tu as fait de moi. Tu regretteras peut-être en peu. Mais, non—si tu pouvais regretter quoi que ce fût, tu ne serais plus Simone.

Il y a huit ans, la veille de la guerre, j'étais riche—moins riche que ton Américain, mais assez riche pour te donner l'établissement qu'il te fallait. Tu étais moins exigeante avant la guerre, Simone—qui est-ce qui, pendant mon absence, t'a enseigné le goût du luxe ? Charmante discrétion de ma part de ne jamais te le demander ! Eh bien, une grande partie de ma fortune se trouvant placée en Russie et en Allemagne, j'en ai perdu plus des trois-quarts. Ce que m'en restait en France a beaucoup diminué en valeur. Il est vrai que j'avais mon traitement de capitaine dans l'armée britannique, mais c'est peu de chose, tu sais. Avant même la fin de la guerre, tu m'avais mangé toutes mes économies. C'était idiot, quoi ? Un jeune homme qui a perdu les trois-quarts de ses rentes ne se permet plus une maîtresse et un appartement Avenue Kléber. Ou il congédie madame, ou bien il lui demande quelques sacrifices. Je n'ai rien osé demander. Si j'étais venu un jour te dire, 'Simone, je suis pauvre'—que m'aurais-tu répondu ?

Sais-tu ce que j'ai fait ? Non—tu n'as jamais pensé à demander d'où venait cet argent. Qu'est-ce que cela pouvait te faire que j'ai tout jeté—fortune, honneur, bonheur—pour te posséder ? J'ai joué, désespérément, éperdument—j'ai fait pis : j'ai triché au jeu. Je te vois hausser les épaules—tu ris—tu dis, 'Tiens, c'est malin, ça !' Oui, mais cela ne se fait pas. On m'aurait chassé du régiment. Je devenais le dernier des hommes.

D'ailleurs, cela ne pouvait durer. Déjà un soir à Paris on m'a fait une scène désagréable, bien qu'on n'ait rien pu prouver. C'est alors que je me suis fiancé avec cette demoiselle dont je t'ai parlé, la fille du duc anglais. Le beau projet, quoi! Entretenir ma maîtresse avec l'argent de ma femme! Et je l'aurais fait—et je le ferais encore demain, si c'était pour te reposséder.

Mais tu me quittes. Cet Américain est riche—archi-riche. Depuis longtemps tu me répètes que ton appartement est trop petit et que tu t'ennuies à mourir. Cet 'ami bienveillant' t'offre les autos, les diamants, les mille-et-une nuits, la lune! Auprés de ces merveilles, évidemment, que valent l'amour et l'honneur?

Enfin, le bon duc est d'une stupidité très commode. Il laisse traîner son révolver dans le tiroir de son bureau. D'ailleurs, il vient de me demander une explication à propos de cette histoire de cartes. Tu vois qu'en tout cas la partie était finie. Pourquoi t'en vouloir? On mettra sans doute mon suicide au compte de cet exposé. Tant mieux, je ne veux pas qu'on affiche mon histoire amoureuse dans les journaux.

Adieu, ma bien-aimée—mon adorée, mon adorée, ma Simone. Sois heureuse avec ton nouvel amant. Ne pense plus à moi. Qu'est-ce tout cela peut bien te faire? Mon Dieu, comme je t'ai aimée—comme je t'aime toujours, malgré moi. Mais c'en est fini. Jamais plus tu ne me perceras le coeur. Oh! J'enrage—je suis fou de douleur! Adieu.

Denis Cathcart.

'Mademoiselle, I implore you to be serious. My brother is accused, and will be standing his trial— '

Once her attention had been caught she had been all sympathy. Her blue eyes had a curious and attractive trick—a full lower lid that shut them into glimmering slits.

'Mademoiselle, I implore you, try to remember what was in his letter.'

'But, mon pauvre ami, how can I? I did not read it. It was very long, very tedious, full of histoires. The thing was finished—I never bother about what cannot be helped, do you?'

But his real agony at this failure had touched her.

'Listen, then; all is perhaps not lost. It is possible the letter is still somewhere about. Or we will ask Adèle. She is my maid. She collects letters to blackmail people—oh, yes, I know! But she is habile comme tout pour la toilette. Wait—we will look first.'

Tossing out letters, trinkets, endless perfumed rubbish from the little gimcrack secretaire, from drawers full of lingerie ('I am so untidy—I am Adèle's despair') from bags—hundreds of bags—and at last Adèle, thin-lipped and wary-eyed, denying everything till her mistress suddenly slapped her face in a fury, and called her ugly little names in French and German.

'It is useless, then,' said Lord Peter. 'What a pity that Mademoiselle Adèle cannot find a thing so valuable to me.'

The word 'valuable' suggested an idea to Adèle. There was Mademoiselle's jewel-case which had not been searched. She would fetch it.

'C'est cela que cherche monsieur?'

After that the sudden arrival of Mr Cornelius van Humperdinck, very rich and stout and suspicious, and the rewarding of Adèle in a tactful, unobtrusive fashion by the elevator shaft.

Grant shouted, but the words flipped feebly away into the blackness and were lost. 'What?' bawled Wimsey in his ear. He shouted again, and this time the word 'juice' shot into sound and

There had been a lamp on a low table; he remembered the gleam through the haze of short gold hair. She was a tall girl, but slender, looking up at him from the huge black-and-gold cushions.

'Mademoiselle, it is incredible to me that you should ever—dine or dance—with a person called Van Humperdinck.'

Now what had possessed him to say that—when there was so little time, and Jerry's affairs were of such importance?

'Monsieur van Humperdinck does not dance. Did you seek me through two continents to say that?'

'No, I am serious.'

'*Eh bien*, sit down.'

She had been quite frank about it.

'Yes, poor soul. But life was very expensive since the war. I refused several good things. But always *des histoires*. And so little money. You see, one must be sensible. There is one's old age. It is necessary to be provident, *hein*?'

'Assuredly.' She had a little accent—very familiar. At first he could not place it. Then it came to him—Vienna before the war, that capital of incredible follies.

'Yes, yes, I wrote. I was very kind, very sensible. I said, *"Je ne suis pas femme à supporter de gros ennuis." Cela se comprend, n'est-ce pas?*'

That was readily understood. The 'plane dived sickly into a sudden pocket, the propeller whirring helplessly in the void, then steadied and began to nose up the opposite spiral.

'I saw it in the papers—yes. Poor boy! Why should anybody have shot him?'

'Mademoiselle, it is for that I have come to you. My brother, whom I dearly love, is accused of the murder. He may be hanged.'

'Brr!'

'For a murder he did not commit.'

'Mon pauvre enfant— '

TRANSLATION

SIMONE,—I have just got your letter. What am I to say? It is useless to entreat or reproach you. You would not understand, or even read the letter.

Besides, I always knew you must betray me some day. I have suffered a hell of jealousy for the last eight years. I know perfectly well you never meant to hurt me. It was just your utter lightness and carelessness and your attractive way of being dishonest which was so adorable. I knew everything, and loved you all the same.

Oh, no, my dear, I never had any illusions. You remember our first meeting that night at the Casino. You were seventeen, and heartbreakingly lovely. You came to me the very next day. You told me, very prettily, that you loved me and that I was the first. My poor little girl, that wasn't true. I expect, when you were alone, you laughed to think I was so easily taken in. But there was nothing to laugh at. From our very first kiss I foresaw this moment.

I'm afraid I'm weak enough, though, to want to tell you just what you have done for me. You may be sorry. But no—if you could regret anything, you wouldn't be Simone any longer.

Eight years ago, before the war, I was rich—not so rich as your new American, but rich enough to give you what you wanted. You didn't want quite so much before the war, Simone. Who taught you to be so extravagant while I was away? I think it was very nice of me never to ask you. Well, most of my money was in Russian and German securities, and more than three-quarters of it went west. The re-

mainder in France went down considerably in value. I had my captain's pay, of course, but that didn't amount to much. Even before the end of the war you had managed to get through all my savings. Of course, I was a fool. A young man whose income has been reduced by three-quarters can't afford an expensive mistress and a flat in the Avenue Kléber. He ought either to dismiss the lady or to demand a little self-sacrifice. But I didn't dare demand anything. Suppose I had come to you one day and said, 'Simone, I've lost my money'—what would you have said to me?

What do you think I did? I don't suppose you ever thought about it at all. You didn't care if I was chucking away my money and my honour and my happiness to keep you. I gambled desperately. I did worse, I cheated at cards. I can see you shrug your shoulders and say, 'Good for you!' But it's a rotten thing to do—a rotter's game. If anybody had found out they'd have cashiered me.

Besides, it couldn't go on for ever. There was one row in Paris, though they couldn't prove anything. So then I got engaged to the English girl I told you about—the duke's daughter. Pretty, wasn't it? I actually brought myself to consider keeping my mistress on my wife's money! But I'd have done it, and I'd do it again, to get you back.

And now you've chucked me. This American is colossally rich. For a long time you've been dinning into my ears that the flat is too small and that you're bored to death. Your 'good friend' can offer you cars, diamonds—Aladdin's palace—the moon! I

Chapter 16

The Second String

O, whan he came to broken briggs
He bent his bow and swam,
And whan he came to the green grass growin'
He slacked his shoone and ran.

O, whan he came to Lord William's gates
He baed na to chap na ca',
But set his bent bow till his breast,
An' lightly lap the wa'.

Ballad Of Lady Maisry

Lord Peter peered out through the cold scurry of cloud. The thin struts of steel, incredibly fragile, swung slowly across the gleam and glint far below, where the wide country dizzied out and spread like a revolving map. In front the sleek leather back of his companion humped stubbornly, sheeted with rain. He hoped that Grant was feeling confident. The roar of the engine drowned the occasional shout he threw to his passenger as they lurched from gust to gust.

He withdrew his mind from present discomforts and went over that last, strange, hurried scene. Fragments of conversation spun through his head.

'Mademoiselle, I have scoured two continents in search of you.'

'*Voyons*, then, it is urgent. But be quick for the big bear may come in and be grumpy, and I do not like *des histoires*.'