

'Wait a sec. That's not absolutely accurate. He must have *taken* the stuff between those two times, but might have been *given* him earlier. Suppose, for instance, somebody had dropped a poisoned pill into his usual bottle of soda-mints or whatever he used to take. That could have been worked at any time.'

'Well—not too early on, Peter. Suppose he had died a lot too soon and Lady Dormer had heard about it.'

'It wouldn't have made any difference. She wouldn't need to alter her will, or anything. The bequest to Miss Dorland would just stand as before.'

'Quite right. I was being stupid. Well, then, we'd better find out if he did take anything of that kind regularly. If he did, who would have had the opportunity to drop the pill in?'

'Penberthy, for one.'

'The doctor?—yes, we must stick his name down as a possible, though he wouldn't have had the slightest motive. Still, we'll put him in the column headed Opportunity.'

'That's right, Charles. I do like your methodical ways.'

'Attraction of opposites,' said Parker, ruling a notebook into three columns. 'Opportunity. Number 1, Dr Penberthy. If the tablets or globules or whatever they were, were Penberthy's own prescription, he would have a specially good opportunity. Not so good, though, if they were the kind of things you get ready-made from the chemist in sealed bottles.'

'Oh, bosh! he could always have asked to have a squint at 'em to see if they were the right kind. I insist on having Penberthy in. Besides, he was one of the people who saw the General between the critical hours—during what we may call the administration period, so he had an extra amount of opportunity.'

'So he had. Well, I've put him down. Though there seems no reason for him—'

'I'm not going to be put off by a trifling objection like that. He had the opportunity, so down he goes. Well, then, Miss Dorland comes next.'

'Yes. She goes down under opportunity and also under motive. She certainly had a big interest in polishing off the old man, she saw him during the period of administration and she very likely gave him something to

eat or drink while he was in the house. So she is a very likely subject. The only difficulty with her is the difficulty of getting hold of the drug. You can't get digitalin just by asking for it, you know.'

'N—no. At least, not by itself. You can get it mixed up with other drugs quite easily. I saw an ad in the *Daily Views* only this morning, offering a pill with half a grain of digitalin in it.'

'Did you? where?—oh, that! Yes, but it's got nux vomica in it too, which is supposed to be an antidote. At any rate, it bucks the heart up by stimulating the nerves, so as to counteract the slowing-down action of the digitalin.'

'H'm. Well, put down Miss Dorland under Means with a query-mark. Oh, of course, Penberthy has to go down under Means too. He is the one person who could get the stuff without any bother.'

'Right. Means: No 1, Dr Penberthy. Opportunity: No 1, Dr Penberthy, No 2, Miss Dorland. We'll have to put in the servants at Lady Dormer's too, shan't we? Any of them who brought him food or drink, at any rate?'

'Put 'em in, by all means. They might have been in collusion with Miss Dorland. And how about Lady Dormer herself?'

'Oh, come, Peter. There wouldn't be any sense in that.'

'Why not? She may have been planning revenge on her brother all these years, camouflaging her feelings under a pretense of generosity. It would be rather fun to leave a terrific legacy to somebody you loathed, and then, just when he was feelin' nice and grateful and all over coals of fire, poison him to make sure he didn't get it. We simply must have Lady Dormer. Stick her down under Opportunity and under Motive.'

'I refuse to do more than Opportunity and Motive (query?).'

'Have it your own way. Well now—there are our friends the two taxi-drivers.'

'I don't think you can be allowed those. It would be awfully hard work poisoning a fare, you know.'

'I'm afraid it would. I say! I've just got a rippin' idea for poisoning a taxi-man, though. You give him a dud half-crown, and when he bites it—'

'He dies of lead poisoning. That one's got whiskers on it.'

'Juggins. You poison the half-crown with Prussic acid.'

'Splendid! And he falls down foaming at the mouth. That's frightfully brilliant. Do you mind giving your attention to the matter in hand?'

'You think we can leave out the taxi-drivers, then?'

'I think so.'

'Right-oh! I'll let you have them. That brings us, I'm sorry to say, to George Fentiman.'

'You've got rather a weakness for George Fentiman, haven't you?'

'Yes—I like old George. He's an awful pig in some ways, but I quite like him.'

'Well, I don't know George, so I shall firmly put him down. Opportunity № 3, he is.'

'He'll have to go down under Motive, too, then.'

'Why? What did he stand to gain by Miss Dorland's getting the legacy?'

'Nothing—if he knew about it. But Robert says emphatically that he didn't know. So does George. And if he didn't, don't you see, the General's death meant that he would immediately step into that two thousand quid which Dougal MacStewart was being so pressing about.'

'MacStewart?—oh, yes—the money-lender. That's one up to you, Peter; I'd forgotten him. That certainly does put George on the list of the possibles. He was pretty sore about things too, wasn't he?'

'Very. And I remember his saying one rather unguarded thing at least down at the Club on the very day the murder—or rather, the death—was discovered.'

'That's in his favour, if anything,' said Parker, cheerfully, 'unless he's very reckless indeed.'

'It won't be in his favour with the police,' grumbled Wimsey.

'My dear man!'

'I beg your pardon. I was forgetting for the moment. I'm afraid you are getting a little above your job, Charles. So much intelligence will spell either a Chief-Commissionership or ostracism if you aren't careful.'

'I'll chance that. Come on—get on with it. Who else is there?'

'There's Woodward. Nobody could have a better opportunity of tampering with the General's pill-boxes.'

'And I suppose his little legacy might have been a motive.'

Chapter 15

Shuffle the Cards and Deal Again

A hasty consultation with the powers that be at Scotland Yard put Detective-Inspector Parker in charge of the Fentiman case, and he promptly went into consultation with Wimsey.

'What put you on to this poison business?' he asked.

'Aristotle, chiefly,' replied Wimsey. 'He says, you know, that one should always prefer the probable impossible to the improbable possible. It was possible, of course, that the General should have died off in that near way at the most confusing moment. But how much nicer and more probable that the whole thing had been stage-managed. Even if it had seemed much more impossible I should have been dead nuts on murder. And there really was nothing impossible about it. Then there was Pritchard and the Dorland woman. Why should they have been so dead against compromise and so suspicious about things unless they had inside information from somewhere. After all, they hadn't seen the body as Penberthy and I did.'

'That leads on to the question of who did it. Miss Dorland is the obvious suspect, naturally.'

'She's got the biggest motive.'

'Yes. Well, let's be methodical. Old Fentiman was apparently as right as rain up till about half-past three when he started off for Portman Square, so that the drug must have been given him between then and eighthish, when Robert Fentiman found him dead. Now who saw him between those two times?'

'Thank you, Charles,' said Wimsey, dryly. 'I'm glad somebody appreciates me. Anyhow,' he added, viciously, 'I bet that's wiped old Pritchard's eye.'

And at this remark, even Mr Murbles showed signs of returning animation.

'Or he may have been in the enemy's pay. Sinister menservants so often are, you know. Look what a boom there has been lately in criminal butlers and thefts by perfect servants.'

'That's a fact. And now, how about the people at the Bellona?'

'There's Wetheridge. He's a disagreeable devil. And he has always cast covetous eyes at the General's chair by the fire. I've seen him.'

'Be serious, Peter.'

'I'm perfectly serious. I don't like Wetheridge. He annoys me. And then we mustn't forget to put down Robert.'

'Robert? Why, he's the one person we can definitely cross off. He knew it was to his interest to keep the old man alive. Look at the pains he took to cover up the death.'

'Exactly. He is the Most Unlikely Person, and that is why Sherlock Holmes would suspect him at once. He was, by his own admission, the last person to see General Fentiman alive. Suppose he had a row with the old man and killed him, and then discovered, afterwards, about the legacy.'

'You're scintillating with good plots to-day, Peter. If they'd quarreled, he might possibly have knocked his grandfather down—though I don't think he'd do such a rotten and unsportsmanlike thing—but he surely wouldn't have poisoned him.'

Wimsey sighed.

'There's something in what you say,' he admitted. 'Still, you never know. Now then, is there any name we've thought of which appears in all three columns of our list?'

'No, not one. But several appear in two.'

'We'd better start on those, then. Miss Dorland is the most obvious, naturally, and after her, George, don't you think?'

'Yes. I'll have a round-up among all the chemists who may possibly have supplied her with the digitalin. Who's her family doctor?'

'Dunno. That's your pigeon. By the way, I'm supposed to be meeting the girl at a cocoa-party or something of the sort to-morrow. Don't pinch her before then if you can help it.'

'No; but it looks to me as though we might need to put a few questions. And I'd like to have a look round Lady Dormer's house.'

'For heaven's sake, don't be flat-footed about it, Charles. Use tact.'

'You can trust your father. And, I say, you might take me down to the Bellona in a tactful way. I'd like to ask a question or two there.'

Wimsey groaned.

'I shall be asked to resign if this goes on. Not that it's much loss. But it would please Wetheridge so much to see the back of me. Never mind. I'll make a Martha of myself. Come on.'

The entrance of the Bellona Club was filled with an unseemly confusion. Culyer was arguing heatedly with a number of men and three or four members of the committee stood beside him with brows as black as thunder. As Wimsey entered, one of the intruders caught sight of him with a yelp of joy.

'Wimsey—Wimsey, old man! Here, be a sport and get us in on this. We've got to have the story some day. You probably know all about it, you old blighter.'

It was Salcombe Hardy of the *Daily Yell*, large and untidy and slightly drunk as usual. He gazed at Wimsey with child-like blue eyes. Barton of the *Banner*, red-haired and pugnacious, faced round promptly.

'Ah, Wimsey, that's fine. Give us a line on this, can't you? Do explain that if we get a story we'll be good and go.'

'Good lord,' said Wimsey, 'how do these things get into the papers?'

'I think it's rather obvious,' said Culyer, acidly.

'It wasn't me,' said Wimsey.

'No, no,' put in Hardy. 'You mustn't think that. It was my stunt. In fact, I saw the whole show up at the Necropolis. I was on a family vault, pretending to be a recording angel.'

'You would be,' said Wimsey. 'Just a moment, Culyer.' He drew the secretary aside. 'See here, I'm damned annoyed about this, but it can't be helped. You can't stop these boys when they're after a story. And anyway, it's all got to come out. It's a police affair now. This is Detective-Inspector Parker of Scotland Yard.'

'But what's the matter?' demanded Culyer.

'Murder's the matter, I'm afraid.'

'Oh, hell!'

'Sorry and all that. But you'd better grin and bear it. Charles, give these fellows as much story as you think they ought to have and get on with it.'

Dear Lord Peter,

I am sending you a line in advance to let you know the result of the autopsy on General Fentiman. As regards the ostensible reason for the investigation, I may say that there was no food in the stomach and that the last meal had been taken several hours previously. The important point, however, is that, following your own rather obscurely-expressed suggestion, I tested the viscera for poison and discovered traces of a powerful dose of digitalin, swallowed not very long previous to decease. As you know, with a subject whose heart was already in a weak state, the result of such a dose could not but be fatal. The symptoms would be a slowing-down of the heart's action and collapse—practically indistinguishable from a violent heart-attack.

I do not, of course, know what your attitude in this business is, though I congratulate you on the perspicacity which prompted you to suggest an analysis. In the meanwhile, of course, you will realize that I am obliged to communicate the result of the autopsy to the public prosecutor.

Mr Murbles sat petrified.

'My God!' cried Fentiman. And then again, 'My God!—Wimsey—if I'd known—if I'd had the faintest idea—I wouldn't have touched the body for twenty millions. Poison! Poor old blighter! What a damned shame! I remember now his saying that night he felt a bit sickish, but I never thought—I say, Wimsey—you do believe, don't you, that I hadn't the foggiest? I say—that awful female—I knew she was a wrong 'un. But poison! that is too thick. Good lord!'

Parker, who had hitherto preserved the detached expression of a friendly spectator, now beamed. 'Damn good, old man!' he cried, and smote Peter on the back. Professional enthusiasm overcame him. 'It's a real case,' he said, 'and you've handled it finely, Peter. I didn't know you had it in you to hang on so patiently. Forcing the exhumation on 'em through putting pressure on Major Fentiman was simply masterly! Pretty work! Pretty work!'

'Yes—that's a nuisance, isn't it? What are we going to do about it? Do I have to go and eat humble pie to old Pritchard? Or does Wimsey pretend to have discovered something frightfully abstruse from looking at the body?—Oh, good lord, by the way—what's happened about that confounded exhumation stunt? I never thought a word more about it. I say, Wimsey, was that the idea? Did you know then that I'd been trying to work this stunt and was it your notion you could get me out of it?'

'Partly.'

'Dammed decent of you. You know, I did tumble to it that you'd got a line on me when you sent me down with that detective fellow to Charing Cross. And, I say, you nearly had me there! I'd made up my mind to pretend to go after Oliver—you know—and then I spotted that second bloodhound of yours on the train with me. That gave me goose-flesh all over. The only thing I could think of—short of chucking up the whole show—was to accuse some harmless old bird of being Oliver—as a proof of good faith, don't you see.'

'That was it, was it? I thought you must have some reason.'

'Yes—and then, when I got that summons to Paris, I thought I must, somehow, have diddled the lot of you. But I suppose that was all arranged for. I say, Wimsey, why? Did you just want to get your own back, or what? Why did you want me out of England?'

'Yes, indeed, Lord Peter,' said Mr Murples, gravely. 'I think you owe *me* at least some explanation on that point.'

'Don't you see,' said Wimsey, 'Fentiman was his grandfather's executor. If I got him out of the way, you couldn't stop the exhumation.'

'Ghoul!' said Robert. 'I believe you batten on corpses.'

Wimsey laughed, rather excitedly.

'Fentiman,' he said, 'what would you give at this moment for your chance of that half-million?'

'Chance?' cried Fentiman. 'There's no chance at all. What do you mean?'

Wimsey slowly drew a paper from his pocket.

'This came last night,' he said. 'And, by jove, my lad, it's lucky for you that you had a good bit to lose by the old man's death. This is from Lubbock—'

And, Salcombe, if you'll call off your tripe-hounds, we'll let you have an interview and a set of photographs.'

'That's the stuff,' said Hardy.

'I'm sure,' agreed Parker, pleasantly, 'that you lads don't want to get in the way, and I'll tell you all that's advisable. Show us a room, Captain Culver, and I'll send out a statement and then you'll let us get to work.'

This was agreed, and, a suitable paragraph having been provided by Parker, the Fleet Street gang departed, bearing Wimsey away with them like a captured Sabine maiden to drink in the nearest bar, in the hope of acquiring picturesque detail.

But I wish you'd kept out of it, Sally,' mourned Peter.

'Oh, God,' said Salcombe, 'nobody loves us. It's a forsaken thing to be a poor bloody reporter.' He tossed a lank black lock of hair back from his forehead and wept.

Parker's first and most obvious move was to interview Penberthy, whom he caught at Harley Street, after surgery hours.

'Now I'm not going to worry you about that certificate, doctor,' he began, pleasantly. 'We're all liable to make mistakes, and I understand that a death resulting from an over-dose of digitalin would look very like a death from heart-failure.'

'It would *be* a death from heart-failure,' corrected the doctor, patiently. Doctors are weary of explaining that heart-failure is not a specific disease, like mumps or housemaid's knee. It is this incompatibility of outlook between the medical and the lay mind which involves counsel and medical witnesses in a fog of misunderstanding and mutual irritation.

'Just so,' said Parker. 'Now, General Fentiman had got heart disease already, hadn't he? Is digitalin a thing one takes for heart disease?'

'Yes; in certain forms of heart disease, digitalin is a very valuable stimulant.'

'Stimulant? I thought it was a depressant.'

'It acts as a stimulant at first; in later stages it depresses the heart's action.'

'Oh, I see.' Parker did not see very well, since, like most people, he had a vague idea that each drug has one simple effect appropriate to it, and is, specifically, a cure for something or the other. 'It first speeds up the heart and then slows it down.'

'Not exactly. It strengthens the heart's action by retarding the beat, so that the cavities can be more completely emptied and the pressure is relieved. We give it in certain cases of valvular disease—under proper safeguards, of course.'

'Were you giving it to General Fentiman?'

'I had given it to him from time to time.'

'On the afternoon of November 10th,—you remember that he came to you in consequence of a heart attack. Did you give him digitalin then? Dr Penberthy appeared to hesitate painfully for a moment. Then he turned to his desk and extracted a large book.

'I had better be perfectly frank with you,' he said. 'I did. When he came to me, the feebleness of the heart's action and the extreme difficulty in breathing suggested the urgent necessity of a cardiac stimulant. I gave him a prescription containing a small quantity of digitalin to relieve this condition. Here is the prescription. I will write it out for you.'

'A small quantity?' repeated Parker.

'Quite small, combined with other drugs to counteract the depressing after-effects.'

'It was not as large as the dose afterwards found in the body?'

'Good heavens, no—nothing like. In a case like General Fentiman's, digitalin is a drug to be administered with the greatest caution.'

'It would not be possible, I suppose, for you to have made a mistake in dispensing? To have given an over-dose by error?'

'That possibility occurred to me at once, but as soon as I heard Sir James Lubbock's figures, I realized that it was quite out of the question. The dose given was enormous; nearly two grains. But, to make quite certain, I have had my supply of the drug carefully checked, and it is all accounted for.'

'Who did that for you?'

'My trained nurse. I will let you have the books and chemists' receipts.'

'Thank you. Did your nurse make up the dose for General Fentiman?'

'Oh, no; it is a prescription I always keep by me, ready made up. If you'd like to see her, she will show it to you.'

'Thanks very much. Now, when General Fentiman came to see you, he had just had an attack. Could that have been caused by digitalin?'

why should he have died like that?—I did have a passing hope that the old girl might have pegged out first, and I was just going along to the telephone to find out, when—thinking of the telephone cabinet, you see—the whole thing popped into my head ready-made, as you might say. In three minutes I'd lugged him along and stuck him up on the seat, and then I hopped back to write a label for the door. I say, I thought I was jolly smart to remember not to blot that label on the library blotting-paper.'

'Believe me,' said Wimsey, 'I appreciated that point.'

'Good. I'm glad you did. Well, it was pretty plain sailing after that. I got the guy's nor's togs from the cloak-room and took 'em up to my room, and then I thought about old Woodward sittin' up waitin' for him. So I trundled out and went down to Charing Cross—how do you think?'

'By bus?'

'Not quite as bad as that. By Underground. I did realize it wouldn't work to call a taxi.'

'You show quite a disposition for fraud, Fentiman.'

'Yes, don't I?—Well, all that was easy. I must say, I didn't pass a frightfully good night.'

'You'll take it more calmly another time.'

'Yes—it was my maiden effort in crime, of course. The next morning—'

'Young man,' said Mr Murbles, in an awful voice, 'we will draw a veil over the next morning. I have listened to your shameless statement with a disgust which words cannot express. But I cannot, and I will not sit here and listen while you congratulate yourself, with a cynicism at which you should blush, on having employed those sacred moments when every thought should have been consecrated—'

'Oh, punk!' interrupted Robert, rudely. 'My old pals are none the worse because I did a little bit of self-help. I know fraud isn't altogether the clean potato, but, dash it all! surely we have a better right to the old boy's money than that girl. I bet *she* never did anything in the Great War, Daddy. Well, it's all gone bust—but it was a darn good stunt while it lasted.'

'I perceive,' replied Mr Murbles, icily, 'that any appeal to your better feelings would be waste of time. I imagine, however, you realize that fraud is a penal offence.'

of Olivers makes me shout with joy. It's almost as good as getting the half-million.'

'That reminds me,' said Wimsey. 'The one thing I don't know is how you knew about the half-million. Did Lady Dormer tell you about her will? Or did you hear of it from George?'

'George? Great Scott, no! George knew nothing about it. The old boy told me himself.'

'General Fentiman?'

'Of course. When he came back to the Club that night, he came straight up to see me.'

'And we never thought of that,' said Wimsey, crushed. 'Too obvious, I suppose.'

'You can't be expected to think of everything,' said Robert, condescendingly. 'I think you did very well, take it all round. Yes—the old boy toddled up to me and told me all about it. He said I wasn't to tell George, because he wasn't quite satisfied with George—about Sheila, you know—and he wanted to think it over and see what was best to be done, in the way of making a new will, you see.'

'Just so. And he went down to the library to do it.'

'That's right; and I went down and had some grub. Well then, afterwards I thought perhaps I hadn't said quite enough on behalf of old George. I mean, the guv'nor needed to have it pointed out to him that George's queerness was caused a great deal by bein' dependent on Sheila and all that, and if he had some tin of his own he'd be much better-tempered—you get me? So I hopped through to the library to find the guv'—and there he was—dead!'

'What time was that?'

'Somewhere round about eightish, I should think. Well, I was staggered. Of course, my first idea was to call for help, but it wasn't any go. He was quite dead. And then it jolly well came over me all at once how perfectly damnably we had missed the train. Just to think of that awful Dorland woman walking into all those thousands—I tell you, it made me so bally wild I could have exploded and blown the place up!... And then, you know, I began to get a sort of creepy feeling, alone there with the body and nobody in the library at all. We seemed cut off from the world, as the writing fellows say. And then it just seemed to take hold of my mind,

'You mean, had he been poisoned before he came to me? Well, of course, digitalin is rather an uncertain drug.'

'How long would a big dose like that take to act?'

'I should expect it to take effect fairly quickly. In the ordinary way it would cause sickness and vertigo. But with a powerful cardiac stimulant like digitalin, the chief danger is that any sudden movement, such as springing suddenly to one's feet from a position of repose, is liable to cause sudden syncope and death. I should say that this was what occurred in General Fentiman's case.'

'And that might have happened at any time after the administration of the dose?'

'Just so.'

'Well, I'm very much obliged to you, Dr Penberthy. I will just see your nurse and take copies of the entries in your books, if I may.'

This done, Parker made his way to Portman Square, still a little hazy in his mind as to the habits of the common foxglove when applied internally—a haziness which was in no way improved by a subsequent consultation of the *Materia Medica*, the *Pharmacopœia*, Dixon Mann, Taylor, Glaister, and others of those writers who have so kindly and helpfully published their conclusions on toxicology.

'Damnation!' burst out Fentiman, and then suddenly began to laugh. 'You cunning little devil! I began to think there was something fishy about it, you know. When that first wire came, I was delighted. Thought the sleuth-hound fellow had made a perfectly providential floater, don't you know. And the longer we kept tootin' round Europe the better I was pleased. But when the hare started to double back to England, home and beauty, I began to get the idea that somebody was pullin' my leg. By the way, was that why I was able to get all my visas with that uncanny facility at an unearthly hour overnight?'

'It was,' said Wimsey, modestly.

'I might have known there was something wrong about it. You devil! Well—what now?—if you've exploded Oliver, I suppose you've spilled all the rest of the beans, eh?'

'If you mean by that expression,' said Mr Murbles, 'that we are aware of your fraudulent and disgraceful attempt to conceal the true time of General Fentiman's decease, the answer is, Yes—we do know it. And I may say that it has come as a most painful shock to my feelings.'

Fentiman flung himself into a chair, slapping his thigh and roaring with laughter.

'I might have known you'd be on to it,' he gasped, 'but it was a damn good joke, wasn't it? Good lord! I couldn't help chuckling to myself, you know. To think of all those refrigerated old imbeciles at the Club sittin' solemnly round there, and comin' in and noddin' to the old guv'nor like so many mandarins, when he was as dead as a door-nail all the time. That leg of his was a bit of a slip-up, of course, but that was an accident. Did you ever find out where he was all the time?'

'Oh, yes—pretty conclusively. You left your marks on the cabinet, you know.'

'No, did we? Hell!'

'Yes—and when you stuck the old boy's overcoat back in the cloak-room, you forgot to stick a poppy in it.'

'Oh, lord! that *was* a bloomer. D'you know, I never thought of that. Oh, well! I suppose I couldn't hope to carry it off with a confounded bloodhound like you on the trail. But it was fun while it lasted. Even now, the thought of old Bunter solemnly callin' up two and a half columns