

Bunter, being out of his element, had, for once, no good counsel to offer.

‘Well, we can’t be much worse off than we are,’ said Lord Peter. ‘We’ll try it, and keep on shouting.’

He grasped Bunter’s hand, and they strode gingerly forward into the thick coldness of the fog.

How long that nightmare lasted neither could have said. The world might have died about them. Their own shouts terrified them; when they stopped shouting the dead silence was more terrifying still. They stumbled over tufts of thick heather. It was amazing how, deprived of sight, they exaggerated the inequalities of the ground. It was with very little confidence that they could distinguish uphill from downhill. They were shrammed through with cold, yet the sweat was running from their faces with strain and terror.

Suddenly—from directly before them as it seemed, and only a few yards away—there rose a long, horrible shriek—and another—and another.

‘My God! What’s that?’

‘It’s a horse, my lord.’

‘Of course.’ They remembered having heard horses scream like that. There had been a burning stable near Poperinghe—

‘Poor devil,’ said Peter. He started off impulsively in the direction of the sound, dropping Bunter’s hand.

‘Come back, my lord,’ cried the man in a sudden agony. And then, with a frightened burst of enlightenment:

‘For God’s sake stop, my lord—the bog!’

A sharp shout in the utter blackness.

‘Keep away there—don’t move—it’s got me!’

And a dreadful sucking noise.

Chapter 12

The Alibi

When actually in the embrace of a voracious and powerful wild animal, the desirability of leaving a limb is not a matter to be subjected to lengthy consideration.

The Waller Of Kai-Lung

‘He tripped right into it,’ said Wimsey’s voice steadily, out of the blackness. ‘One sinks very fast. You’d better not come near, or you’ll go too. We’ll yell a bit. I don’t think we can be very far from Grider’s Hole.’

‘If your lordship will keep shouting,’ returned Mr Bunter, ‘I think—I can—get to you,’ he panted, untying with his teeth the hard knot of a coil of string.

‘Oy!’ cried Lord Peter obediently. ‘Help! Oy! Oy!’

Mr Bunter groped towards the voice, feeling cautiously before him with his walking-stick.

‘Wish you’d keep away, Bunter,’ said Lord Peter peevishly. ‘Where’s the sense of both of us—?’ He squelched and floundered again.

‘Don’t do that, my lord,’ cried the man entreatingly. ‘You’ll sink farther in.’

‘I’m up to my thighs now,’ said Lord Peter.

‘I’m coming,’ said Bunter. ‘Go on shouting. Ah, here’s where it gets soggy.’

He felt the ground carefully, selected a tussocky bit which seemed reasonably firm, and drove his stick well into it.

‘Oy! Hi! Help!’ said Lord Peter, shouting lustily.

Mr Bunter tied one end of the string to the walking-stick, belted his Burberry tightly about him, and, laying himself cautiously down upon his belly, advanced, clue in hand, like a very Gothic Theseus of a late and degenerate school.

The bog heaved horribly as he crawled over it, and slimy water squelched up into his face. He felt with his hands for tussocks of grass, and got support from them when he could.

‘Call out again, my lord!’

‘Here!’ The voice was fainter and came from the right. Bunter had lost his line a little, hunting for tussocks. ‘I daren’t come faster,’ he explained. He felt as though he had been crawling for years.

‘Get out while there’s time,’ said Peter. ‘I’m up to my waist. Lord! this is rather a beastly way to peg out.’

‘You won’t peg out,’ grunted Bunter. His voice was suddenly quite close. ‘Your hands now.’

For a few agonizing minutes two pairs of hands groped over the invisible slime. Then:

‘Keep yours still,’ said Bunter. He made a slow, circling movement. It was hard work keeping his face out of the mud. His hands slid over the slobbery surface—and suddenly closed on an arm.

‘Thank God!’ said Bunter. ‘Hang on here, my lord.’

He felt forward. The arms were perilously close to the sucking mud. The hands crawled clingingly up his arms and rested on his shoulders. He grasped Wimsey beneath the armpits and heaved. The exertion drove his own knees deep into the bog. He straightened himself hurriedly. Without using his knees he could get no purchase, but to use them meant certain death. They could only hang on desperately till help came—or till the strain became too great. He could not even shout, it was almost more than he could do to keep his mouth free of water. The dragging strain on his shoulders was intolerable; the mere effort to breathe meant an agonizing crick in the neck.

‘You must go on shouting, my lord.’

‘I’m a fool, Bunter,’ said Lord Peter.

‘Not at all, my lord.’

‘Don’t move; go on speaking.’

‘Yes, my lord.’

Peter groped to the right and clutched the other’s sleeve.

‘Ah! Now what are we to do?’

‘I couldn’t say, my lord, having no experience. Has the—er—phenomenon any habits, my lord?’

‘No regular habits, I believe. Sometimes it moves. Other times it stays in one place for days. We can wait all night, and see if it lifts at daybreak.’

‘Yes, my lord. It is unhappily somewhat damp.’

‘Somewhat—as you say,’ agreed his lordship, with a short laugh. Bunter sneezed, and begged pardon politely.

‘If we go on going south-east,’ said his lordship, ‘we shall get to Grider’s Hole all right, and they’ll jolly well *have* to put us up for the night—or give us an escort. I’ve got my torch in my pocket, and we can go by compass—oh, hell!’

‘My lord?’

‘I’ve got the wrong stick. This beastly ash! No compass, Bunter—we’re done in.’

‘Couldn’t we keep on going downhill, my lord?’

Lord Peter hesitated. Recollections of what he had heard and read surged up in his mind to tell him that uphill or downhill seems much the same thing in a fog. But man walks in a vain shadow. It is hard to believe that one is really helpless. The cold was icy. ‘We might try,’ he said weakly.

‘I have heard it said, my lord, that in a fog one always walked round in a circle,’ said Mr Bunter, seized with a tardy diffidence.

‘Not on a slope, surely,’ said Lord Peter, beginning to feel bold out of sheer contrariness.

pointed out the track down towards Riddlesdale. The stranger had then vanished, leaving a shilling in his hand. He could not describe the stranger's dress more particularly than that he wore a soft hat and an overcoat, and, he thought, leggings. He was pretty near sure it was the night of the murder, because afterwards he had turned it over in his mind and made out that it might have been one of yon folk at the Lodge—possibly the Duke. He had only arrived at this result by a slow process of thought, and had not 'come forward,' not knowing whom or where to come to.

With this the inquirers had to be content, and, presenting Groot with half a crown, they emerged upon the moor at something after five o'clock.

'Bunter,' said Lord Peter through the dusk, 'I am abso-bally-lutely positive that the answer to all this business is at Grider's Hole.'

'Very possibly, my lord.'

Lord Peter extended his finger in a south-easterly direction. 'That is Grider's Hole,' he said. 'Let's go.'

'Very good, my lord.'

So, like two Cockney innocents, Lord Peter and Bunter set forth at a brisk pace down the narrow moor-track towards Grider's Hole, with never a glance behind them for the great white menace rolling silently down through the November dusk from the wide loneliness of Whemmeling Fell.

'Bunter!'

'Here, my lord!'

The voice was close at his ear.

'Thank God! I thought you'd disappeared for good. I say, we ought to have known.'

'Yes, my lord.'

It had come on them from behind, in a single stride, thick, cold, choking—blotting each from the other, though they were only a yard or two apart.

Wimsey shouted. His voice was breaking and fading.

'Bunter, old thing,' said Lord Peter, 'I'm simply beastly sorry to have let you in for this.'

'Don't mention it, my lord,' said Bunter, with his mouth in the slime. A thought struck him.

'What became of your stick, my lord?'

'I dropped it. It should be somewhere near, if it hasn't sunk in.'

Bunter cautiously released his left hand and felt about.

'Hi! Hi! Help!'

Bunter's hand closed over the stick, which, by a happy accident, had fallen across a stable tuft of grass. He pulled it over to him, and laid it across his arms, so that he could just rest his chin upon it. The relief to his neck was momentarily so enormous that his courage was renewed. He felt he could hang on for ever.

'Help!'

Minutes passed like hours.

'See that?'

A faint, flickering gleam somewhere away to the right. With desperate energy both shouted together.

'Help! Help! Oy! Oy! Help!'

An answering yell. The light swayed—came nearer—a spreading blur in the fog.

'We *must* keep it up,' panted Wimsey. They yelled again.

'Where be?'

'Here!'

'Hello! A pause. Then:

'Here be stick,' said a voice, suddenly near.

'Follow the string!' yelled Bunter. They heard two voices, apparently arguing. Then the string was twitched.

'Here! Here! Two of us! Make haste!'

More consultation.

'Hang on, canst a?'

'Yes, if you're quick.'

'Fetchin' hurdle. Two on 'ee, sayst a?'

'Yes.'

'Deep in?'

'One of us.'

'Aw reet. Jem's comin?'

A spluttering noise marked the arrival of Jem with a hurdle. Then came an endless wait. Then another hurdle, the string twitching, and the blur of the lantern bobbing violently about. Then a third hurdle was flung down, and the light came suddenly out of the mist. A hand caught Bunter by the ankle.

'Where's other?'

'Here—nearly up to his neck. Have you a rope?'

'Aye, sure. Jem! T'rope!'

The rope came snaking out of the fog. Bunter grasped it, and passed it round his master's body.

'Now—coom tha back and heave.'

Bunter crawled cautiously backwards upon the hurdle. All three set hands upon the rope. It was like trying to heave the earth out of her course.

'Traid I'm rooted to Australia,' panted Peter apologetically. Bunter sweated and sobbed.

'It's aw reet—he's coomin!'

With slow heavings the rope began to come towards them. Their muscles cracked.

Suddenly, with a great *phop!* the bog let go its hold. The three at the rope were hurled head over heels upon the hurdles. Something unrecognizable in slime lay flat, heaving helplessly. They dragged at him in a kind of frenzy, as though he might be snatched back from them again. The evil bog stench rose thickly round them. They

It was a good lunch. But that seemed to exhaust their luck for the day, for by three o'clock the men had not been identified, and the scent seemed cold.

Wilkes, the groom, however, had his own contribution to the inquiry. He had met a man from King's Fenton at lunch, and they had, naturally, got to talking over the mysterious murder at the Lodge, and the man had said that he knew an old man living in a hut on the Fell, who said that on the night of the murder he'd seen a man walking over Whemmeling Fell in the middle of the night. 'And it coom to me, all of a sooden, it mought be his grace,' said Wilkes brightly.

Further inquiries elicited that the old man's name was Groot, and that Wilkes could easily drop Lord Peter and Bunter at the beginning of the sheep-path which led up to his hut.

Now, had Lord Peter taken his brother's advice, and paid more attention to English country sports than to incunabula and criminals in London—or had Bunter been brought up on the moors, rather than in a Kentish village—or had Wilkes (who was a Yorkshire man bred and born, and ought to have known better) not been so outrageously puffed up with the sense of his own importance in suggesting a clue, and with impatience to have that clue followed up without delay—or had any one of the three exercised common sense—this preposterous suggestion would never have been made, much less carried out, on a November day in the North Riding. As it was, however, Lord Peter and Bunter left the trap at the foot of the moor-path at ten minutes to four, and, dismissing Wilkes, climbed steadily up to the wee hut on the edge of the Fell.

The old man was extremely deaf, and, after half an hour of interrogation, his story did not amount to much. On a night in October, which he thought might be the night of the murder, he had been sitting by his peat fire when—about midnight, as he guessed—a tall man had loomed up out of the darkness. He spoke like a Southerner, and said he had got lost on the moor. Old Groot had come to his door and

October 14th:

- 1:15 A.M. Picked up by Watson, carrier, about a mile out on road to Riddlesdale, very dirty and ill-tempered, and not quite sober.
- 1:45 A.M. Let into 'Rose and Crown' by James Johnson, pot-man.
- 9:00 A.M. Called by Elizabeth Dobbin.
- 9:30 A.M. In Bar of 'Rose and Crown'. Hears of man murdered at Riddlesdale. Behaves suspiciously.
- 10:15 A.M. Cashes check £129 17s. 8d. at Lloyds Bank.
- 10:30 A.M. Pays Gooch for drills.
- 11:50 A.M. Leaves 'Rose and Crown' for Grider's Hole.

Lord Peter looked at this for a few minutes, and put his finger on the great gap of six hours after 7:20.

'How far to Riddlesdale, Bunter?'

'About thirteen and three-quarter miles, my lord.'

'And the shot was heard at 10:55. It couldn't be done on foot. Did Watson explain why he didn't get back from his round till two in the morning?'

'Yes, my lord. He says he reckons to be back about eleven, but his horse cast a shoe between King's Fenton and Riddlesdale. He had to walk him quietly into Riddlesdale—about 3½ miles—getting there about ten, and knock up the blacksmith. He turned in to the "Lord in Glory" till closing time, and then went home with a friend and had a few more. At 12:40 he started off home, and picked Grimethorpe up a mile or so out, near the cross roads.'

'Sounds circumstantial. The blacksmith and the friend ought to be able to substantiate it. But we simply must find those men at the "Pig and Whistle".'

'Yes, my lord. I will try again after lunch.'

crossed the first hurdle—the second—the third—and rose staggeringly to their feet on firm ground.

'What a beastly place,' said Lord Peter faintly. 'Pologise, stupid of me to have forgotten—what'sy name?'

'Well, tha's loocky,' said one of their rescuers. 'We thowt we heerd someun a-shouting. There be few folks as cooms oot o' Peter's Pot dead or alive, I reckon.'

'Well, it was nearly potted Peter that time,' said his lordship, and fainted.

To Lord Peter the memory of his entry that night into the farmhouse at Grider's Hole always brought with it a sensation of nightmare. The coils of fog rolled in with them as the door opened, and through them the firelight leapt steamily. A hanging lamp made a blur. The Medusa-head of Mrs Grimethorpe, terribly white against her black hair, peered over him. A hairy paw caught her by the shoulder and wrenched her aside.

'Shameless! A mon—ony mon—that's a' tha thinks on. Bide till tha's wanted. What's this?'

Voices—voices—ever so many fierce faces peering down all round. 'Peter's Pot? An' what were 'ee a-wanting on t'moor this time night? No good. Nobody but a fool or a thief 'ud coom oop ere i' t'fog.'

One of the men, a farm laborer with wry shoulders and a thin, malicious face, suddenly burst into tuneless song:

I been a-courtin' Mary Jane
On Ilkla' Moor bar'at.

'Howd tooong!' yelled Grimethorpe, in a fury. 'Doost want Ah should break ivery bwoan i' thi body?' He turned on Bunter. 'Tak thesen off, Ah tell tha. Tha'rt here for no good.'

'But, William—' began his wife. He snapped round at her like a dog, and she shrank back.

‘Naay now, naay now,’ said a man, whom Wimsey dimly recognized as the fellow who had befriended him on his previous visit, ‘tha mun’ taak them in for t’ night, racken, or there’ll be trouble wi’ t’ folk down yonder at t’ Lodge, lat aloan what police ’ull saay. Ef t’ fellow ’in coom to do harm, ’ee’s doon it already—to ’unself. Woan’t do no more tonight—look at ’un. Bring ’un to fire, mon,’ he added to Bunter, and then, turning to the farmer again, ‘Tes tha’ll be in Queer Street ef’e wor to goo an’ die on us wi’ noomony or rhoomackicks.’

This reasoning seemed partly to convince Grimethorpe. He made way, grumbling, and the two chilled and exhausted men were brought near the fire. Somebody brought two large, steaming tumblers of spirits. Wimsey’s brain seemed to clear, then swim again drowsily, drunkenly.

Presently he became aware that he was being carried upstairs and put to bed. A big, old-fashioned room, with a fire on the hearth and a huge, grim four-poster. Bunter was helping him out of soaked clothes, rubbing him. Another man appeared from time to time to help him. From below came the bellowing sound of Grimethorpe’s voice, blasphemously uplifted. Then the harsh, brassy singing of the wry-shouldered man:

Then woorms will coom an’ ate thee oop
On Ilkla’ Moor bar t’at....
Then doocks will coom an’ ate oop woorms
On Ilkla’ Moor....

Lord Peter rolled into bed.
‘Bunter—where—you all right? Never said thank you—dunno what I’m doing—anywhere to sleep—what?’
He drifted away into oblivion. The old song came up mockingly, and wound its horrible fancies into his dreams:

and having ordered lunch, they proceeded to draw up the following schedule:

GRIMETHORPE’S MOVEMENTS.

Wednesday, October 13th to Thursday, October 14th.

October 13th:

12:30	P.M.	Arrives ‘Rose and Crown’.
1:00	P.M.	Lunches.
3:00	P.M.	Orders two drills from man called Gooch in Trimmer’s Lane.
4:30	P.M.	Drink with Gooch to clinch bargain.
5:00	P.M.	Calls at house of John Watson, carrier, about delivering some dog-food. Watson absent. Mrs Watson says W. expected back that night. G. says will call again.
5:30	P.M.	Calls on Mark Dolby, grocer, to complain about some tinned salmon.
5:45	P.M.	Calls on Mr Hewitt, optician, to pay bill for spectacles and dispute the amount.
6:00	P.M.	Drinks with Zedekiah Bone at ‘Bridge and Bottle’.
6:45	P.M.	Calls again on Mrs Watson. Watson not yet home.
7:00	P.M.	Seen by Constable Z15 drinking with several men at ‘Pig and Whistle’? Heard to use threatening language with regard to some person unknown.
7:20	P.M.	Seen to leave ‘Pig and Whistle’ with two men (not yet identified).

'I should think not,' said Peter; 'you can do a lot better than that. Well, I suppose I've lost my money, then. By the way, what time did Mr Grimethorpe come in to bed?'

'Close on two i' t' morning,' said the girl, tossing her head. 'He were locked oot, an' Jem had to go down and let 'un in.'

'That so?' said Peter. 'Well, I might try to get out on a technicality, eh, Mr Watchett? Two o'clock is Thursday, isn't it? I'll work that for all it's worth. Thanks frightfully. That's all I want to know.'

Bet grinned and giggled herself away, comparing the generosity of the strange gentleman with the stinginess of Mr Grimethorpe. Peter rose.

'I'm no end obliged, Mr Watchett,' he said. 'I'll just have a word with Jem. Don't say anything by the way.'

'Not me,' said Mr Watchett; 'I knows wot's wot. Good luck, my lord.'

Jem corroborated Bet. Grimethorpe had returned at about 1.50 A.M. on October 14th, drunk, and plastered with mud. He had muttered something about having run up against a man called Watson.

The ostler was next interrogated. He did not think that anybody could get a horse and trap out of the stable at night without his knowing it. He knew Watson. He was a carrier by trade, and lived in Windon Street. Lord Peter rewarded his informant suitably, and set out for Windon Street.

But the recital of his quest would be tedious. At a quarter past noon he joined Bunter at the Merbah memorial.

'Any luck?'

'I have secured certain information, my lord, which I have duly noted. Total expenditure on beer for self and witnesses 7s. 2d., my lord.'

Lord Peter paid the 7s. 2d. without a word, and they adjourned to the 'Rose and Crown'. Being accommodated in a private parlour,

Then we shall coom an' are oop doocks
On Ilkla' Moor bar t'at....
An' that is how—an' that is how—is how....

When Wimsey next opened his eyes a pale November sun was struggling in at the window. It seemed that the fog had fulfilled its mission and departed. For some time he lay, vaguely unaware of how he came to be where he was; then the outlines of recollection straightened themselves, the drifting outposts of dreams were called back, the burden of his preoccupation settled down as usual. He became aware of an extreme bodily lassitude, and of the dragging pain of wrenched shoulder muscles. Examining himself perfunctorily, he found a bruised and tender zone beneath the armpits and round his chest and back, where the rescuing rope had hauled at him. It was painful to move, so he lay back and closed his eyes once more.

Presently the door opened to admit Bunter, neatly clothed and bearing a tray from which rose a most excellent odour of ham and eggs.

'Hullo, Bunter!'

'Good morning, my lord! I trust your lordship has rested.'

'Feel as fit as a fiddle, thanks—come to think of it, why fiddle?—except for a general feeling of havin' been violently massaged by some fellow with cast-iron fingers and knobby joints. How about you?'

'The arms are a tifle fatigued, thank you, my lord; otherwise, I am happy to say, I feel no trace of the misadventure. Allow me, my lord.'

He set the tray tenderly upon Lord Peter's ready knees.

'They must be jolly well dragged out of their sockets,' said his lordship, 'holdin' me up all that ghastly long time. I'm so beastly deep in debt to you already, Bunter, it's not a bit of use tryin' to repay it. You know I won't forget, anyhow, don't you? All right, I won't be embarrassin' or anything—thanks awfully, anyhow. That's that.'

What? Did they give you anywhere decent to sleep? I didn't seem to be able to sit up an' take notice last night.'

'I slept excellently, I thank your lordship.' Mr Bunter indicated a kind of truckle-bed in a corner of the room. 'They would have given me another room, my lord, but in the circumstances, I preferred to remain with your lordship, trusting you would excuse the liberty. I told them that I feared the effects of prolonged immersion upon your lordship's health. I was uneasy, besides, about the intention of Grimethorpe. I feared he might not feel altogether hospitably disposed, and that he might be led into some hasty action if we were not together.'

'I shouldn't wonder. Most murderous-lookin' fellow I ever set eyes on. I'll have to talk to him this morning—or to Mrs Grimethorpe. I'd take my oath she could tell us something, what?'

'I should say there was very little doubt of it, my lord.'

'Trouble is,' pursued Wimsey, with his mouth full of egg, 'I don't know how to get at her. That jolly husband of hers seems to cherish the most unpleasant suspicions of anything that comes this way in trousers. If he found out we'd been talkin' to her, what you may call privately, he might, as you say, be hurried by his feelin's into doin' something regrettable.'

'Just so, my lord.'

'Still, the fellow must go an' look after his bally old farm some time, and then, p'raps, we'll be able to tackle her. Queer sort of woman—damn fine one, what? Wonder what she made of Cathcart?' he added musingly.

Mr Bunter volunteered no opinion on this delicate point.

'Well, Bunter, I think I'll get up. I don't suppose we're altogether welcome here. I didn't fancy the look in our host's eye last night.'

'No, my lord. He made a deal of opposition about having your lordship conveyed to this room.'

'Why, whose room is it?'

'Certainly not,' said Lord Peter. 'What about?'

'Ah!' said Mr Watchett, 'there it is, wot abahnt?'

'Tell me,' said Lord Peter, 'do you recollect Grimethorpe comin' into Stapley on October 13th—a Wednesday, it was?'

'That would be the day of the—ah! to be sure! Yes, I do recollect it, for I remember thinking it was odd him comin' here except on a market-day. Said he 'ad ter look at some machinery—drills and such, that's raight. 'E was 'ere raight enough.'

'Do you remember what time he came in?'

'Well, naow, I've a fancy 'e was 'ere ter lunch. The waitress'd know. 'Ere, Bet!' he called through the side door, 'd'yer 'appen to recollect whether Mr Grimethorpe lunched 'ere October the 13th—Wednesday it were, the d'y the pore gent was murdered over at Riddlesdale?'

'Grimethorpe o' Grider's Hole?' said the girl, a well-grown young Yorkshire woman. 'Yes! 'E took loonch, and coom back to sleep. Ah! m not mistook, for ah waited on 'un, an' took up 'is watter i' t' morning, and 'e only gied me tuppence.'

'Monstrous!' said Lord Peter. 'Look here, Miss Elizabeth, you're sure it was the thirteenth? Because I've got a bet on it with a friend, and I don't want to lose the money if I can help it. You're positive it was Wednesday night he slept here? I could have sworn it was Thursday.'

'Naay, sir, t'wor Wednesday for I remember hearing the men talking o' t' murder i' t' bar, an' telling Mester Grimethorpe next daay.'

'Sounds conclusive. What did Mr Grimethorpe say about it?'

'There now,' cried the young woman, 'tis queer you should ask that; everyone noticed how strange he acted. He turned all white like a sheet, and looked at both his hands, one after the other, and then he pushes 'es hair off's forehead—dazed-like. We reckoned he hadn't got over the drink. He's more often drunk than not. Ah wouldn't be his wife for five hundred pounds.'