

Chapter 19

Lord Peter Plays Dummy

‘Do you want to come with me to the Armstrong woman?’

‘May as well,’ said Wimsey, ‘you never know.’



Nurse Armstrong belonged to an expensive nursing home in Great Wimpole Street. She had not been interviewed before, having only returned the previous evening from escorting an invalid lady to Italy. She was a large, good-looking, imperturbable woman, rather like the Venus of Milo, and she answered Parker’s questions in a cheerful, matter-of-fact tone, as though they had been about bandages or temperatures.

‘Oh, yes, Constable; I remember the poor old gentleman being brought in, perfectly.’

Parker had a natural dislike to being called constable. However, a detective must not let little things like that irritate him.

‘Was Miss Dorland present at the interview between your patient and her brother?’

‘Only for a few moments. She said good afternoon to the old gentleman and led him up to the bed, and then, when she saw them comfortable together, she went out.’

‘How do you mean, comfortable together?’

‘Well, the patient called the old gentleman by his name, and he answered, and then he took her hand and said, “I’m sorry, Felicity; forgive me,” or something of that sort, and she said, “There’s nothing to forgive; don’t distress yourself, Arthur,”—crying, he was, the poor old man. So he sat down on the chair by the bed, and Miss Dorland went out.’

‘Nothing was said about the will?’

'Not while Miss Dorland was in the room, if that's what you mean.'

'Suppose anybody had listened at the door afterwards—could they have heard what was said?'

'Oh, no! The patient was very weak and spoke very low. I couldn't hear myself half she said.'

'Where were you?'

'Well, I went away, because I thought they'd like to be alone. But I was in my own room with the door open between, and I was looking in most of the time. She was so ill, you see, and the old gentleman looked so frail, I didn't like to go out of earshot. In our work, you see, we often have to see and hear a lot that we don't say anything about.'

'Of course, Nurse—I am sure you did quite right. Now when Miss Dorland brought the brandy up—the General was feeling very ill?'

'Yes—he had a nasty turn. I put him in the big chair and bent him over till the spasm went off. He asked for his own medicine, and I gave it to him—no, it wasn't drops—it was amyl nitrate; you inhale it. Then I rang the bell and sent the girl for the brandy.'

'Amyl nitrate—you're sure that's all he had?'

'Positive; there wasn't anything else. Lady Dormer had been having strychnine injections to keep her heart going, of course, and we'd tried oxygen; but we shouldn't give him those, you know.'

She smiled, competently, condescendingly.

'Now, you say Lady Dormer had been having this, that and the other. Were there any medicines lying about that General Fentiman might have accidentally taken up and swallowed?'

'Oh, dear no.'

'No drops or tablets or anything of that kind?'

'Certainly not; the medicines were kept in my room.'

'Nothing on the bedside table or the mantelpiece?'

'There was a cup of diluted Listerine by the bed, for washing out the patient's mouth from time to time, that was all.'

'And there's no digitalin in Listerine—no, of course not. Well now, who brought up the brandy-and-water?'

'A penny for your thoughts, then,' said Parker, trying desperately to keep the conversation on a jocular footing.

'Not even thirty pieces of silver,' replied Wimsey, mournfully. Parker stacked the canvasses away without another word.

ruining themselves. Suggestive, I fancy. The—stop a minute! Let's look at that again.'

Parker had brought forward the head of the swallow, squinting man which he had mentioned to Wimsey before.

'Put that up on the easel. That's very interesting. The others, you see, are all an effort to imitate other people's art, but this—this is an effort to imitate nature. Why?—it's very bad, but it's meant for somebody. And it's been worked on a lot. Now what was it made her do that?'

'Well, it wasn't for his beauty, I should think.'

'No?—but there must have been a reason. Dante, you may remember, once painted an angel. Do you know the limerick about the old man of Khartoum?'

'What did he do?'

'He kept two black sheep in his room. They remind me (he said) of two friends who are dead. But I cannot remember of whom.'

'If that reminds you of anybody you know, I don't care much for your friends. I never saw an uglier mug.'

'He's not beautiful. But I think the sinister squint is chiefly due to bad drawing. It's very difficult to get eyes looking the same way, when you can't draw. Cover up one eye, Charles—not yours, the portrait's.'

Parker did so.

Wimsey looked again, and shook his head.

'It escapes me for the moment,' he said. 'Probably it's nobody I know after all. But, whoever it is, surely this room tells you something.'

'It suggests to me,' said Parker, 'that the girl's been taking more interest in crimes and chemistry stuff than is altogether healthy in the circumstances.'

Wimsey looked at him for a moment.

'I wish I could think as you do.'

'What *do* you think?' demanded Parker, impatiently.

'No,' said Wimsey. 'I told you about that George business this morning, because glass bottles are facts, and one mustn't conceal facts. But I'm not obliged to tell you what I think.'

'You don't think, then, that Ann Dorland did the murder?'

'I don't know about that, Charles. I came here hoping that this room would tell me the same thing that it told you. But it hasn't. It's told me different. It's told me what I thought all along.'

'The housemaid went to Mrs Mitcham for it. I should have had some upstairs, as a matter of fact, but the patient couldn't keep it down. Some of them can't, you know.'

'Did the girl bring it straight up to you?'

'No—she stopped to call Miss Dorland on the way. Of course, she ought to have brought the brandy at once and gone to Miss Dorland afterwards—but it's anything to save trouble with these girls, as I daresay you know.'

'Did Miss Dorland bring it straight up—?' began Parker. Nurse Armstrong broke in upon him.

'If you're thinking, did she put the digitalin into the brandy, you can dismiss that from your mind, constable. If he'd had as big a dose as that in solution at half-past four, he'd have been taken ill ever so much earlier than he was.'

'You seem to be well up in the case, Nurse.'

'Oh, I am. Naturally I was interested, Lady Dormer being my patient and all.'

'Of course. But all the same, *did* Miss Dorland bring the brandy straight along to you?'

'I think so. I heard Nellie go along the passage on the half landing, and looked out to call to her, but by the time I'd got the door open, I saw Miss Dorland coming out of the studio with the brandy in her hand.'

'And where was Nellie then?'

'Just got back to the end of the passage and starting downstairs to the telephone.'

'At that rate, Miss Dorland couldn't have been more than ten seconds alone with the brandy,' said Peter, thoughtfully. 'And who gave it to General Fentiman?'

'I did. I took it out of Miss Dorland's hand at the door and gave it to him at once. He seemed better then, and only took a little of it.'

'Did you leave him again?'

'I did not. Miss Dorland went out on to the landing presently to see if the taxi was coming.'

'She was never alone with him?'

'Not for a moment.'

'Did you like Miss Dorland, Nurse? Is she a nice girl, I mean?' Wimsey had not spoken for so long that Parker quite started.

'She was always very pleasant to me,' said Nurse Armstrong. 'I shouldn't call her an attractive girl, not to my mind.'

'Did she ever mention Lady Dormer's testamentary arrangements in your hearing?' asked Parker, picking up what he conceived to be Wimsey's train of thought.

'Well—not exactly. But I remember her once talking about her painting, and saying she did it for a hobby, as her aunt would see she always had enough to live on.'

'That's true enough,' said Parker. 'At the worst, she would get fifteen thousand pounds, which carefully invested, might mean six or seven hundred a year. She didn't say she expected to be very rich?'

'No.'

'Nor anything about the General?'

'Not a word.'

'Was she happy?' asked Wimsey.

'She was upset, naturally, with her aunt being so ill.'

'I don't mean that. You are the sort of person who observes a lot—nurses are awfully quick about that kind of thing, I've noticed. Did she strike you as a person who—who felt right with life, as you might say?'

'She was one of the quiet ones. But—yes—I should say she was satisfied with things all right.'

'Did she sleep well?'

'Oh, she was a very sound sleeper. It was a job to wake her if anything was wanted in the night.'

'Did she cry much?'

'She cried over the old lady's death; she had very nice feelings.'

'Some natural tears she shed, and all that. She didn't lie about and have awful howling fits or anything like that?'

'Good gracious, no!'

'How did she walk?'

'Walk?'

'Yes, walk. Was she what you'd call droopy?'

'Oh, no—quick and brisk.'

'What was her voice like?'

'Oh!—a few text-books—first steps in chemistry. What's that tumbled down at the back of the book-case? Louis Berman, eh? *The Personal Equation*. And here's *Why We Behave Like Human Beings*. And Julian Huxley's essays. A determined effort at self-education here, what?'

'Girls seem to go in for that sort of thing nowadays.'

'Yes—hardly nice, is it? Hullo!'

'What?'

'Over here by the couch. This represents the latest of our lobster-shells, I fancy. Austin Freeman, Austin Freeman, Austin Freeman—bless me! she must have ordered him in wholesale. *Through the Wall*—that's a good 'ec story; Charles—all about the third degree—Isabel Ostrander—three Edgar Wallaces—the girl's been indulging in an orgy of crime!'

'I shouldn't wonder,' said Parker, with emphasis. 'That fellow Freeman is full of plots about poisonings and wills and survivorship, isn't he?'

'Yes'—Wimsey balanced *A Silent Witness* gently in his hand, and laid it down again. 'This one, for instance, is all about a bloke who murdered somebody and kept him in cold storage till he was ready to dispose of him. It would suit Robert Fentiman.'

Parker grinned.

'A bit elaborate for the ordinary criminal. But I daresay people do get ideas out of these books. Like to look at the pictures? They're pretty awful.'

'Don't try to break it gently. Show us the worst at once.... Oh, lord!'

'Well, it gives *me* a pain,' said Parker. 'But I thought perhaps that was my lack of artistic education.'

'It was your natural good taste. What vile colour, and viler drawing.'

'But nobody cares about drawing nowadays, do they?'

'Ah! but there's a difference between the man who can draw and won't draw, and the man who can't draw at all. Go on. Let's see the rest.'

Parker produced them, one after the other. Wimsey glanced quickly at each. He had picked up the brush and palette and was fingering them as he talked.

'These,' he said, 'are the paintings of a completely untalented person, who is, moreover, trying to copy the mannerisms of a very advanced school. By the way, you have noticed, of course, that she has been painting within the last few days, but chucked it in sudden disgust. She has left the paints on the palette, and the brushes are still stuck in the turps, turning their ends up and generally

'You can't. She's gone off somewhere. My man hasn't reported yet.'

'Oh! Well, never mind her. What I really want to see is her studio.'

'Yes? Well, there's no reason why you shouldn't.'

'Will they let me in?'

'Probably not. I'll meet you there and take you in with me. I was going out any way. I've got to interview the nurse. We've just got hold of her.'

'Thanks awfully. Sure you can spare the time?'

'Yes. I'd like your opinion.'

'I'm glad somebody wants it. I'm beginning to feel like a pelican in the wilderness.'

'Rot! I'll be round in ten minutes.'

'Of course,' explained Parker, as he ushered Wimsey into the studio, 'we've taken away all the chemicals and things. There's not much to look at, really.'

'Well, you can deal best with all that. It's the books and paintings I want to look at. Hi'm! Books, you know, Charles, are like lobster shells, we surround ourselves with 'em, then we grow out of 'em and leave 'em behind, as evidence of our earlier stages of development.'

'That's a fact,' said Parker. 'I've got rows of school-boy stuff at home—never touch it now, of course. And W. J. Locke—read everything he wrote once upon a time. And Le Queux, and Conan Doyle, and all that stuff.'

'And now you read theology. And what else?'

'Well, I read Hardy a good bit. And when I'm not too tired, I have a go at Henry James.'

'The refined self-examinations of the infinitely-sophisticated. 'M-m. Well now. Let's start with the shelves by the fireplace. Dorothy Richardson—Virginia Woolf—E. B. C. Jones—May Sinclair—Katherine Mansfield—the modern female writers are well represented, aren't they? Galsworthy. Yes. No J. D. Beresford—no Wells—no Bennett. Dear me, quite a row of D. H. Lawrence. I wonder if she reads him very often.'

He pulled down *Women in Love* at random, and slapped the pages open and shut.

'Not kept very well dusted, are they? But they have been read. Compton Mackenzie—Storm Jameson—yes—I see.'

'The medical stuff is over here.'

'Well, now, that was one of the nice things about her. Rather deep for a woman, but with what I might call a tune in it. Melodious,' said Nurse Armstrong, with a faint giggle, 'that's what they call it in novels.'

Parker opened his mouth and shut it again.

'How long did you stay on at the house after Lady Dormer died?' pursued Wimsey.

'I waited on till after the funeral, just in case Miss Dorland should need anybody.'

'Before you left, did you hear anything of this trouble about the lawyers and the wills?'

'They were talking about it downstairs. Miss Dorland said nothing to me herself.'

'Did she seem worried?'

'Not to notice.'

'Had she any friends with her at the time?'

'Not staying in the house. She went out to see some friends one evening, I think—the evening before I left. She didn't say who they were.'

'I see. Thank you, Nurse.'

Parker had no more questions to put, and they took their leave.

'Well,' said Parker, 'how anybody could admire that girl's voice—'

'You noticed that! My theory is coming out right, Charles. I wish it wasn't. I'd *rather* be wrong. I should like to have you look pitifully at me and say, "I told you so." I can't speak more strongly than that.'

'Hang your theories!' said Parker. 'It looks to me as if we shall have to wash out the idea that General Fentiman got his dose in Portman Square. By the way, didn't you say you'd met the Dorland girl at the Rushworth's?'

'No. I said I went hoping to meet her, but she wasn't there.'

'Oh, I see. Well, that'll do for the moment. How about a spot of lunch?'

At which point they turned the corner and ran slap into Salcombe Hardy, emerging from Harley Street. Wimsey clutched Parker's arm suddenly. 'I've remembered,' he said.

'What?'

'Who that portrait reminds me of. Tell you later.'

Sally, it appeared, was also thinking of grub. He was, in fact, due to meet Waffles Newton at the Falstaff. It ended in their all going to the Falstaff.

'And how's it all going?' demanded Sally, ordering boiled beef and carrots. He looked limpidly at Parker who shook his head.

'Discreet man, your friend,' said Sally to Peter. 'I suppose the police are engaged in following up a clew—or have we reached the point when they are completely baffled? Or do we say that an arrest is imminent, eh?'

'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 blurted 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.

'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.'

'No—no thanks, old man. I'll go home and get a bath and shave.'

'Oh, right-oh!'

There was a pause.

'Well, I'd better be going,' said Wimsey.

'Oh, yes,' said Parker again. 'Right-oh!'

'Et—cheerio!' said Wimsey at the door.

'Cheerio!' said Parker.

The bedroom door shut. The flat door shut. The front door shut.

Parker pulled the telephone towards him and called up Scotland Yard.

The atmosphere of his own office was bracing to Parker when he got down there. For one thing, he was taken aside by a friend and congratulated in conspiratorial whispers.

'Your promotion's gone through,' said the friend. 'Dead certainty. The Chief's no end pleased. Between you and me, of course. But you've got your Chief-Inspectorship all right. Damn good.'

Then, at ten o'clock, the news came through that the missing Walmisley-Hubbard had turned up. It had been abandoned in a remote Hertfordshire lane. It was in perfectly good order, the gear-lever in neutral and the tank full of petrol. Evidently, Fentiman had left it and wandered away somewhere, but he could not be far off. Parker made the necessary arrangements for combing out the neighbourhood. The bustle and occupation soothed his mind. Guilty or insane or both, George Fentiman had to be found; it was just a job to be done.

The man who had been sent to interview Mrs Munnis (armed this time with a warrant) returned with the fragments of the bottle and tablets. Parker duly passed these along to the police analyst. One of the detectives who was shadowing Miss Dorland rang up to announce that a young woman had come to see her, and that the two had then come out carrying a suit-case and driven away in a taxi. Maddison, the other detective, was following them. Parker said, 'All right; stay where you are for the present,' and considered this new development. The telephone rang again. He thought it would be Maddison, but it was Wimsey—a determinedly brisk and cheerful Wimsey this time.

'I say, Charles. I want something.'

'What?'

'I want to go and see Miss Dorland.'

do when they're interviewed by the police—think of their hideous pasts, I suppose, and wonder what's coming next. Or else it's just stage-fright. He stuck to the same tale he told you—said he was quite sure the old General hadn't taken any pills or anything in the taxi—didn't attempt to pretend he knew anything about Lady Dormer's will. There was nothing to detain him for. He said he had to get to his job in Great Portland Street. So they let him go. Dykes sent a man to follow him up, and he went along to Hubbard-Walmisley's all right. Dykes said, might he just have a look round the place before he went, and Mrs Fentiman said certainly. He didn't expect to find anything, really. Just happened to step into the back-yard, and saw a bit of broken glass. He then had a look round, and there was the cap of the tablet-bottle in the dust-bin. Well, then, of course, he started to get interested, and was just having a hunt through for the rest of it, when old mother Munn appeared and said the dust-bin was her property. So they had to clear out. But Dykes oughtn't to have let Fentiman go till they'd finished going over the place. He phoned through to Hubbard-Walmisley's at once, and heard that Fentiman had arrived and immediately gone out with the car, to visit a prospective customer in Herts. The fellow who was supposed to be trailing Fentiman got carburetor trouble just beyond St Albans, and by the time he was fixed, he'd lost Fentiman.'

'Did Fentiman go to the customer's house?'

'Not he. Disappeared completely. We shall find the car, of course—it's only a matter of time.'

'Yes,' said Wimsey. His voice sounded tired and constrained.

'This alters the look of things a bit,' said Parker, 'doesn't it?'

'Yes.'

'What have you done to your face, old man?'

Wimsey glanced at the looking-glass, and saw that an angry red flush had come up on the cheekbone.

'Had a bit of a dust-up with Robert,' he said.

'Oh!'

Parker was aware of a thin veil of hostility, drawn between himself and the friend he valued. He knew that for the first time, Wimsey was seeing him as the police. Wimsey was ashamed and his shame made Parker ashamed too.

'You'd better have some breakfast,' said Parker. His voice sounded awkward to himself.

'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?'

'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—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.’

to meddle in, provided you can pose as the pious little friend of justice. You make me sick!’

‘I tried to keep out of this—’

‘You tried!—don’t be a blasted hypocrite! You get out of it now, and stay out—do you hear?’

‘Yes, but listen a moment—’

‘Get out!’ said Robert.

Wimsey stood up.

‘I know how you feel, Fentiman—’

‘Don’t stand there being righteous and forbearing, you sickening prig. For the last time—are you going to shut up, or are you going to trot round to your policeman friend and earn the thanks of a grateful country for splitting on George? Get on! Which is it to be?’

‘You won’t do George any good—’

‘Never mind that. Are you going to hold your tongue?’

‘Be reasonable, Fentiman.’

‘Reasonable be damned. Are you going to the police? No shuffling. Yes or no?’

‘Yes.’

‘You dirty little squirt,’ said Robert, striking out passionately. Wimsey’s return blow caught him neatly on the chin and landed him in the wastepaper basket.

‘And now, look here,’ said Wimsey, standing over him, hat and stick in hand. ‘It’s no odds to me what you do or say. You think your brother murdered your grandfather. I don’t know whether he did or not. But the worst thing you can do for him is to try and destroy evidence. And the worst thing you can possibly do for his wife is to make her a party to anything of the sort. And next time you try to smash anybody’s face in, remember to cover up your chin. That’s all. I can let myself out. Good-bye.’

He went round to 12 Great Ormond Street and roused Parker out of bed. Parker listened thoughtfully to what he had to say.

‘I wish we’d stopped Fentiman before he bolted,’ he said.

‘Yes; why didn’t you?’

‘Well, Dykes seems to have muffed it rather. I wasn’t there myself. But everything seemed all right. Fentiman looked a bit nervy, but many people