'Four horses! Come, Plunkett, you must have been seeing double. There's nobody about here would be driving four horses, unless it was Mr Mortimer from Abbotts Bolton, and he wouldn't be taking his horseflesh out at midnight.'

'Four horses they was, sir. I see them plain. And it weren't Mr Mortimer, neither, for he drives a drag, and this were a big, heavy coach, with no lights on it, but shinin' all of itself, with a colour like moonshine.'

'Oh, nonsense, man! You couldn't see the moon last night. It was pitch-dark.'

'No, sir, but the coach shone all moony-like, all the same.'

'And no lights? I wonder what the police would say to that.'

'No mortal police could stop that coach,' said Plunkett contemptuously, 'nor no mortal man could abide the sight on it. I tell you, sir, that ain't the worst of it. The horses— '

'Was it going slowly?'

'No, sir. It were going at a gallop, only the hoofs didn't touch the ground. There weren't no sound, and I see the black road and the white hoofs half a foot off of it. And the horses had no heads.'

'No heads?'

'No, sir.'

Mr Frobisher-Pym laughed.

'Come, come, Plunkett, you don't expect us to swallow that. No heads? How could even a ghost drive horses with no heads? How about the reins, eh?'

'You may laugh, sir, but we know that with God all things are possible. Four white horses they was. I see them clearly, but there was neither head nor neck beyond the collar, sir. I see the reins, shining like silver, and they ran up to the rings of the hames, and they didn't go no further. If I was to drop down dead this minute, sir, that's what I see.'

'Was there a driver to this wonderful turn-out?'

'Yes, sir, there was a driver.'

'Headless too, I suppose?'

'Yes, sir, headless too. At least, I couldn't see nothing of him beyond his coat, which had them old-fashioned capes at the shoulders.'





'Well, I must say, Plunkett, you're very circumstantial. How far off was this —er—apparition when you saw it?'

'I was passing by the War Memorial, sir, when I see it come up the lane. It wouldn't be above twenty or thirty yards from where I stood. It went by at a gallop, and turned off to the left round the churchyard wall.'

'Well, well, it sounds odd, certainly, but it was a dark night, and at that distance your eyes may have deceived you. Now, if you'll take my advice you'll think no more about it.'

'Ah, sir, it's all very well saying that, but everybody knows the man who sees the death-coach of the Burdocks is doomed to die within the week. There's no use rebelling against it, sir; it is so. And if you'll be so good as to oblige me over that matter of a will, I'd die happier for knowing as Sarah and the children was sure of their bit of money.'

Mr Frobisher-Pym obliged over the will, though much against the grain, exhorting and scolding as he wrote. Wimsey added his own signature as one of the witnesses, and contributed his own bit of comfort.

'I shouldn't worry too much about the coach, if I were you,' he said. 'Depend upon it, if it's the Burdock coach it'll just have come for the soul of the old squire. It couldn't be expected to go to New York for him, don't you see? It's just gettin' ready for the funeral to-morrow.'

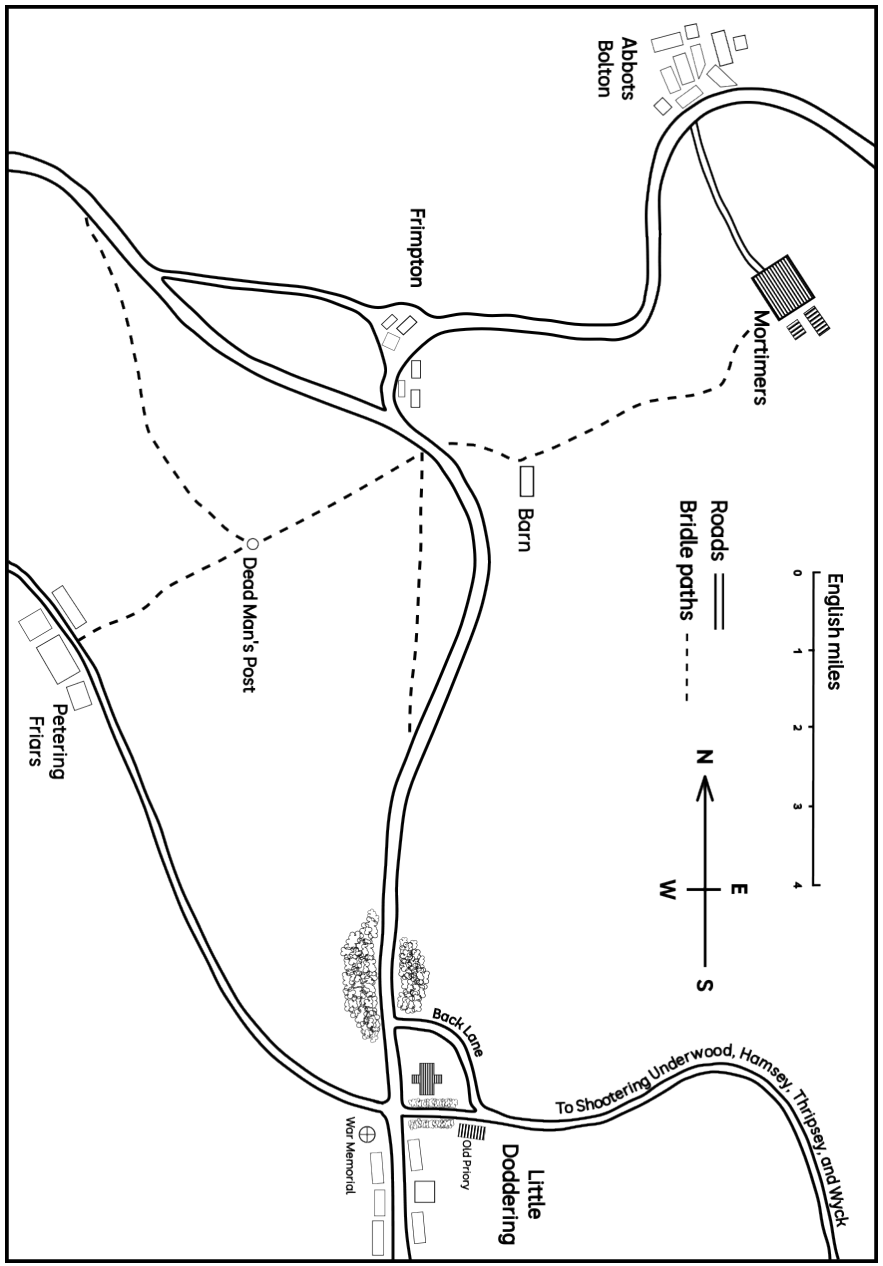
'That's likely enough,' agreed Plunkett. 'Often and often it's been seen in these parts when one of the Burdocks was taken. But it's terrible unlucky to see it.'

The thought of the funeral seemed, however, to cheer him a little. The visitors again begged him not to think about it, and took their departure.

'Isn't it wonderful,' said Mr Frobisher-Pym, 'what imagination will do with these people? And they're obstinate. You could argue with them till you were black in the face.'

'Yes. I say, let's go down to the church and have a look at the place. I'd like to know how much he could really have seen from where he was standing.'

The parish church of Little Doddering stands, like so many country churches, at some distance from the houses. The main road from Herriotting, Abbotts Bolton, and Frimpton runs past the west gate of the churchyard—a wide God's acre, crowded with ancient stones. On the south side is a narrow and gloomy lane, heavily overhung with old elm-trees, dividing the church from




'Oh, well,' said Mr Frobisher-Pym, finding this opening irresistible, 'we know there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy. Quite so. But that doesn't apply nowadays,' he added contradictorily. 'There are no ghosts in the twentieth century. Just you think the matter out quietly, and you'll find you've made a mistake. There's probably some quite simple explanation. Dear me! I remember Mrs Frobisher-Pym waking up one night and having a terrible fright, because she thought somebody'd been and hanged himself on our bedroom door. Such a silly idea, because I was safe in bed beside her—snoring, *she* said, ha, ha!—and, if anybody was feeling like hanging himself, he wouldn't come into our bedroom to do it. Well, she clutched my arm in a great state of mind, and when I went to see what had alarmed her, what do you think it was? My trousers, which I'd hung up by the braces, with the socks still in the legs! My word! and didn't I get a wigging for not having put my things away tidy!'

Mr Frobisher-Pym laughed, and Mrs Plunkett said dutifully, 'There now!' Her husband shook his head.

'That may be, sir, but I see the death-coach last night with my own eyes. Just striking midnight it was, by the church clock, and I see it come up the lane by the old priory wall.'

'And what were you doing out of bed at midnight, eh?'

'Well, sir, I'd been round to my sister's, that's got her boy home on leaf off of his ship.'

'And you'd been drinking his health, I dare say, Plunkett.' Mr Frobisher-Pym wagged an admonitory forefinger.

'No, sir, I don't deny I'd had a glass or two of ale, but not to fuddle me. My wife can tell you I was sober enough when I got home.'

'That's right, sir. Plunkett hadn't taken too much last night, that I'll swear to.'

'Well, what was it you saw, Plunkett?'

'I see the death-coach, same as I'm telling you, sir. It come up the lane, all ghostly white, sir, and never making no more sound than the dead—which it were, sir.'

'A wagon or something going through to Lymptree or Herriotting.'

'No, sir—tweren't a wagon. I counted the horses—four white horses, and they went by with never a sound of hoof or bridle. And that weren't— '

'Well, now, Plunkett, what's the trouble?' enquired Mr Frobisher-Pym, with the hearty bedside manner adopted by country gentlefolk visiting their dependants. 'Sorry not to see you out and about. Touch of the old complaint, eh?'

'No, sir; no, sir. Thank you, sir. I'm well enough in myself. But I've had a warning, and I'm not long for this world.'

'Not long for this world? Oh, nonsense, Plunkett. You mustn't talk like that. A touch of indigestion, that's what you've got, I expect. Gives one the blues, I know. I'm sure I often feel like nothing on earth when I've got one of my bilious attacks. Try a dose of castor-oil, or a good old-fashioned blue pill and black draught. Nothing like it. Then you won't talk about warnings and dying.'

'No medicine won't do no good to *my* complaint, sir. Nobody as see what I've seed ever got the better of it. But as you and the gentleman are here, sir, I'm wondering if you'll do me a favour.'

'Of course, Plunkett, anything you like. What is it?'

'Why, just to draw up my will, sir. Old Parson, he used to do it. But I don't fancy this new young man, with his candles and bits of things. It don't seem as if he'd make it good and legal, sir, and I wouldn't like it if there was any dispute after I was gone. So as there ain't much time left me, I'd be grateful if you'd put it down clear for me in pen and ink that I wants my little bit all to go to Sarah here, and after her to Alf and Elsie, divided up equal.'

'Of course I'll do that for you, Plunkett, any time you like. But it's all nonsense to be talking about wills. Bless my soul, I shouldn't be surprised if you were to see us all underground.'

'No, sir. I've been a hale and hearty man, I'm not denying. But I've been called, sir, and I've got to go. It must come to all of us, I know that. But it's a fearful thing to see the death-coach come for one, and know that the dead are in it, that cannot rest in the grave.'

'Come now, Plunkett, you don't mean to tell me you believe in that old foolishness about the death-coach. I thought you were an educated man. What would Alf say if he heard you talking such nonsense?'

'Ah, sir, young people don't know everything, and there's many more things in God's creation than what you'll find in the printed books.'





the still more ancient ruins of Doddering Priory. On the main road, a little beyond the point where Old Priory Lane enters, stands the War Memorial, and from here the road runs straight on into Little Doddering. Round the remaining two sides of the churchyard winds another lane, known to the village simply as the Back Lane. This branches out from the Herriotting road about a hundred yards north of the church, connects with the far end of Priory Lane, and thence proceeds deviously to Shootering Underwood, Hamsey, Thripsey, and Wyck.

'Whatever it was Plunkett thinks he saw,' said Mr Frobisher-Pym, 'it must have come from Shootering. The Back Lane only leads round by some fields and a cottage or two, and it stands to reason anybody coming from Frimpton would have taken the main road, going and coming. The lane is in a very bad state with all this rain. I'm afraid even your detective ability, my dear Wimsey, would not avail to find wheel-marks on this modern tarmac.'

'Hardly,' said Wimsey, 'especially in the case of a ghostly chariot which gets along without touching the ground. But your reasoning seems perfectly sound, sir.'

'It was probably a couple of belated wagons going to market,' pursued Mr Frobisher-Pym, 'and the rest of it is superstition and, I am afraid, the local beer. Plunkett couldn't have seen all those details about drivers and hames and so on at this distance. And, if it was making no noise, how did he come to notice it at all, since he'd got past the turn and was walking in the other direction? Depend upon it, he heard the wheels and imagined the rest.'

'Probably,' said Wimsey.

'Of course,' went on his host, 'if the wagons really were going about without lights, it ought to be looked into. It is a very dangerous thing, with all these motor vehicles about, and I've had to speak severely about it before now. I fined a man only the other day for the very same thing. Do you care to see the church while we're here?'

Knowing that in country places it is always considered proper to see the church, Lord Peter expressed his eagerness to do so.

'It's always open nowadays,' said the magistrate, leading the way to the west entrance. 'The vicar has an idea that churches should be always open for private prayer. He comes from a town living, of course. Round about here the people are always out on the land, and you can't expect them to come into

church in their working clothes and muddy boots. They wouldn't think it respectful, and they've other things to do. Besides, I said to him, consider the opportunity it gives for undesirable conduct. But he's a young man, and he'll have to learn by experience.'

He pushed the door open. A curious, stuffy waft of stale incense, damp, and stoves rushed out at them as they entered—a kind of concentrated extract of Church of England. The two altars, bright with flowers and gilding, and showing as garish splashes among the heavy shadows and oppressive architecture of the little Norman building, sounded the same note of contradiction; it was the warm and human that seemed exotic and unfamiliar; the cold and unwelcoming that seemed native to the place and people.

'This Lady-chapel, as Hancock calls it, in the south aisle, is new, of course,' said Mr Frobisher-Pym. 'It aroused a good deal of opposition, but the Bishop is lenient with the High Church party—too lenient, some people think—but, after all, what does it matter? I'm sure I can say my prayers just as well with two communion-tables as with one. And, I will say for Hancock, he is very good with the young men and the girls. In these days of motor-cycles, it's something to get them interested in religion at all. Those trestles in the chapel are for old Burdock's coffin, I suppose. Ah! Here is the vicar.'

A thin man in a cassock emerged from a door beside the high altar and came down towards them, carrying a tall, oaken candlestick in his hand. He greeted them with a slightly professional smile of welcome. Wimsey diagnosed him promptly as earnest, nervous, and not highly intellectual.

'The candlesticks have only just come,' he observed after the usual introductions had been made. 'I was afraid they would not be here in time. However, all is now well.'

He set the candlestick beside the coffin-trestles, and proceeded to decorate its brass spike with a long candle of unbleached wax, which he took from a parcel in a neighbouring pew.

Mr Frobisher-Pym said nothing. Wimsey felt it incumbent on him to express his interest, and did so.

'It is very gratifying,' said Mr Hancock, thus encouraged, 'to see the people beginning to take a real interest in their church. I have really had very little difficulty in finding watchers for to-night. We are having eight watchers, two by two, from 10 o'clock this evening—till which time I shall be myself on duty





The damp is apt to come up through these brick floors. I'm thinking of having the whole place re-set with concrete, but it takes money, of course. I can't imagine,' he went on, as he led the way past the greenhouse towards a trim cottage set in its own square of kitchen-garden, 'what can have happened to have upset Plunkett. I hope it's nothing serious. He's getting elderly, of course, but he ought to be above believing in warnings. You wouldn't believe the extraordinary ideas these people get hold of. Fact is, I expect he's been round at the "Weary Traveller," and caught sight of somebody's washing hung out on the way home.'

'Not washing,' corrected Wimsey mechanically. He had a deductive turn of mind which exposed the folly of the suggestion even while irritably admitting that the matter was of no importance. 'It poured with rain last night, and, besides, it's Thursday. But Tuesday and Wednesday were fine, so the drying would have all been done then. No washing.'

'Well, well—something else then—a post, or old Mrs Giddens's white donkey. Plunkett does occasionally take a drop too much, I'm sorry to say, but he's a very good kennel-man, so one overlooks it. They're superstitious round about these parts, and they can tell some queer tales if once you get into their confidence. You'd be surprised how far off the main track we are as regards civilisation. Why, not here, but at Abbotts Bolton, fifteen miles off, it's as much as one's life's worth to shoot a hare. Witches, you know, and that sort of thing.'

'I shouldn't be a bit surprised. They'll still tell you about werewolves in some parts of Germany.'

'Yes, I dare say. Well, here we are.' Mr Frobisher-Pym rapped loudly with his walking-stick on the door of the cottage and turned the handle without waiting for permission.

'You there, Mrs Plunkett? May we come in? Ah! good morning. Hope we're not disturbing you, but Merridew told me Plunkett was not so well. This is Lord Peter Wimsey—a very old friend of mine; that is to say, I'm a very old friend of *his*; ha, ha!'

'Good morning, sir; good morning, your lordship. I'm sure Plunkett will be very pleased to see you. Please step in. Plunkett, here's Mr Pym to see you.'

The elderly man who sat crouching over the fire turned a mournful face towards them, and half rose, touching his forehead.

He broke off a dangling branch of ivy as he spoke. The plant shuddered revengefully, tipping a small shower of water down Wimsey's neck.

The cocker spaniel and her family occupied a comfortable and airy stall in the stable buildings. A youngish man in breeches and leggings emerged to greet the visitors, and produced the little bundles of puppy-hood for their inspection. Wimsey sat down on an upturned bucket and examined them gravely one by one. The bitch, after cautiously reviewing his boots and grumbling a little, decided that he was trustworthy and slobbered genially over his knees.

'Let me see,' said Mr Frobisher-Pym, 'how old are they?'

'Thirteen days, sir.'

'Is she feeding them all right?'

'Fine, sir. She's having some of the malt food. Seems to suit her very well, sir.'

'Ah, yes. Plunkett was a little doubtful about it, but I heard it spoken very well of. Plunkett doesn't care for experiments, and, in a general way, I agree with him. Where is Plunkett, by the way?'

'He's not very well this morning, sir.'

'Sorry to hear that, Merridew. The rheumatics again?'

'No, sir. From what Mrs Plunkett tells me, he's had a bit of a shock.'

'A shock? What sort of a shock? Nothing wrong with Alf or Elsie, I hope?'

'No, sir. The fact is—I understand he's seen something, sir.'

'What do you mean, seen something?'

'Well, sir—something in the nature of a warning, from what he says.'

'A warning? Good heavens, Merridew, he mustn't get those sort of ideas in his head. I'm surprised at Plunkett; I always thought he was a very level-headed man. What sort of warning did he say it was?'

'I couldn't say, sir.'

'Surely he mentioned what he thought he'd seen.'

Merridew's face took on a slightly obstinate look.

'I can't say, I'm sure, sir.'

'This will never do. I must go and see Plunkett. Is he at the cottage?'

'Yes, sir.'

'We'll go down there at once. You don't mind, do you, Wimsey? I can't allow Plunkett to make himself ill. If he's had a shock he'd better see a doctor. Well, carry on, Merridew, and be sure you keep her warm and comfortable.





—till six in the morning, when I come in to say Mass. The men will carry on till 2 o'clock, then my wife and daughter will relieve them, and Mr Hubbard and young Rawlinson have kindly consented to take the hours from four till six.'

'What Rawlinson is that?' demanded Mr Frobisher-Pym.

'Mr Graham's clerk from Herriotting. It is true he is not a member of the parish, but he was born here, and was good enough to wish to take his turn in watching. He is coming over on his motor-cycle. After all, Mr Graham has had charge of Burdock's family affairs for very many years, and no doubt they wished to show their respect in some way.'

'Well, I only hope he'll be awake enough to do his work in the morning, after gadding about all night,' said Mr Frobisher-Pym gruffly. 'As for Hubbard, that's his own look-out, though I must say it seems an odd occupation for a publican. Still, if he's pleased, and you're pleased, there's no more to be said about it.'

'You've got a very beautiful old church here, Mr Hancock,' said Wimsey, seeing that controversy seemed imminent.

'Very beautiful indeed,' said the vicar. 'Have you noticed that apse? It is rare for a village church to possess such a perfect Norman apse. Perhaps you would like to come and look at it.' He genuflected as they passed a hanging lamp which burned before a niche. 'You see, we are permitted Reservation. The Bishop— ' He prattled cheerfully as they wandered up the chancel, digressing from time to time to draw attention to the handsome miserere seats ('Of course, this was the original Priory Church'), and a beautifully carved piscina and aumbry ('It is rare to find them so well preserved'). Wimsey assisted him to carry down the remaining candlesticks from the vestry, and, when these had been put in position, joined Mr Frobisher-Pym at the door.

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'I think you said you were dining with the Lumsdens to-night,' said the magistrate, as they sat smoking after lunch. 'How are you going? Will you have the car?'

'I'd rather you'd lend me one of the saddle-horses,' said Wimsey. 'I get few opportunities of riding in town.'

'Certainly, my dear boy, certainly. Only I'm afraid you'll have rather a wet ride. Take Polly Flinders; it will do her good to get some exercise. You are quite sure you would prefer it? Have you got your kit with you?'

'Yes—I brought an old pair of bags down with me, and, with this raincoat, I shan't come to any harm. They won't expect me to dress. How far is it to Frimpton, by the way?'

'Nine miles by the main road, and tarmac all the way, I'm afraid, but there's a good wide piece of grass each side. And, of course, you can cut off a mile or so by going across the common. What time will you want to start?'

'Oh, about seven o'clock, I should think. And, I say, sir—will Mrs Frobisher-Pym think it very rude if I'm rather late back? Old Lumsden and I went through the war together, and if we get yarning over old times we may go on into the small hours. I don't want to feel I'm treating your house like a hotel, but— '

'Of course not, of course not! That's absolutely all right. My wife won't mind in the very least. We want you to enjoy your visit and do exactly what you like. I'll give you the key, and I'll remember not to put the chain up. Perhaps you wouldn't mind doing that yourself when you come in?'

'Rather not. And how about the mare?'

'I'll tell Merridew to look out for you; he sleeps over the stables. I only wish it were going to be a better night for you. I'm afraid the glass is going back. Yes. Dear, dear! It's a bad look-out for to-morrow. By the way, you'll probably pass the funeral procession at the church. It should be along by about then, if the train is punctual.'

The train, presumably, was punctual, for as Lord Peter cantered up to the west gate of the church he saw a hearse of great funereal pomp drawn up before it, surrounded by a little crowd of people. Two mourning coaches were in attendance; the driver of the second seemed to be having some difficulty with the horses, and Wimsey rightly inferred that this was the pair which had been borrowed from Mr Mortimer. Restraining Polly Flinders as best he might, he sidled into a respectful position on the edge of the crowd, and watched the coffin taken from the hearse and carried through the gate, where it was met by Mr Hancock, in full pontificals, attended by a thurifer and two torch-bearers. The effect was a little marred by the rain, which had extinguished the candles, but the village seemed to look upon it as an excellent show nevertheless. A





'Yes. He's something in the City—a director of a company—connected with silk stockings, I believe. Nobody has seen very much of him. He came down as soon as he heard of his father's death. He's staying with the Hancocks. The big house has been shut up since old Burdock went to the States four years ago. I suppose Haviland thought it wasn't worth while opening it up till they knew what Martin was going to do about it. That's why the body is being taken to the church.'

'Much less trouble, certainly,' said Wimsey.

'Oh, yes—though, mind you, I think Haviland ought to take a more neighbourly view of it. Considering the position the Burdocks have always held in the place, the people had a right to expect a proper reception after the funeral. It's usual. But these business people think less of tradition than we do down here. And, naturally, since the Hancocks are putting Haviland up, he can't raise much objection to the candles and the prayers and things.'

'Perhaps not,' said Mrs Frobisher-Pym, 'but it would have been more suitable if Haviland had come to us, rather than to the Hancocks, whom he doesn't even know.'

'My dear, you forget the very unpleasant dispute I had with Haviland Burdock about shooting over my land. After the correspondence that passed between us, last time he was down here, I could scarcely offer him hospitality. His father took a perfectly proper view of it, I will say that for him, but Haviland was exceedingly discourteous to me, and things were said which I could not possibly overlook. However, we mustn't bore you, Lord Peter, with our local small-talk. If you've finished your breakfast, what do you say to a walk round the place? It's a pity it's raining so hard—and you don't see the garden at its best this time of the year, of course—but I've got some cocker span'els you might like to have a look at.'

Lord Peter expressed eager anxiety to see the spaniels, and in a few minutes' time found himself squelching down the gravel path which led to the kennels.

'Nothing like a healthy country life,' said Mr Frobisher-Pym. 'I always think London is so depressing in the winter. Nothing to do with one's self. All right to run up for a day or two and see a theatre now and again, but how you people stick it week in and week out beats me. I must speak to Plunkett about this archway,' he added. 'It's getting out of trim.'

Martin Burdock came home and had a quarrel with his father you could have heard for miles. He said that the whole thing was a lie, and that he meant to marry the girl, anyway. I cannot understand how anybody could marry into a blackmailing family like that.'

'My dear,' said Mr Frobisher-Pym gently, 'I don't think you're being quite fair to Martin, or his wife's parents, either. From what Martin told me, they were quite decent people, only not his class, of course, and they came in a well-meaning way to find out what Martin's "intentions" were. You would want to do the same yourself, if it were a daughter of ours. Old Burdock, naturally, thought they meant blackmail. He was the kind of man who thinks everything can be paid for; and he considered a son of his had a perfect right to seduce a young woman who worked for a living. I don't say Martin was altogether in the right— '

'Martin is a chip off the old block, I'm afraid,' retorted the lady. 'He married the girl, anyway, and why should he do that, unless he had to?'

'Well, they've never had any children, you know,' said Mr Frobisher-Pym.

'That's as may be. I've no doubt the girl was in league with her parents. And you know the Martin Burdocks have lived in Paris ever since.'

'That's true,' admitted her husband. 'It was an unfortunate affair altogether. They've had some difficulty in tracing Martin's address, too, but no doubt he'll be coming back shortly. He is engaged in producing some film play, they tell me, so possibly he can't get away in time for the funeral.'

'If he had any natural feeling, he would not let a film play stand in his way,' said Mrs Frobisher-Pym.

'My dear, there are such things as contracts, with very heavy monetary penalties for breaking them. And I don't suppose Martin could afford to lose a big sum of money. It's not likely that his father will have left him anything.'

'Martin is the younger son, then?' asked Wimsey, politely showing more interest than he felt in the rather well-worn plot of this village melodrama.

'No, he is the eldest of the lot. The house is entailed, of course, and so is the estate, such as it is. But there's no money in the land. Old Burdock made his fortune in rubber shares during the boom, and the money will go as he leaves it—wherever that may be, for they haven't found any will yet. He's probably left it all to Haviland.'

'The younger son?'





massive man, dressed with great correctness in a black frock coat and tall hat, and accompanied by a woman in handsome mourning and furs, was sympathetically commented on. This was Haviland Burdock of silk-stocking fame, the younger son of the deceased. A vast number of white wreaths were then handed out, and greeted with murmurs of admiration and approval. The choir struck up a hymn, rather raggedly, and the procession filed away into the church. Polly Flinders shook her head vigorously, and Wimsey, taking this as a signal to be gone, replaced his hat and ambled gently away towards Frimpton.

He followed the main road for about four miles, winding up through finely wooded country to the edge of Frimpton Common. Here the road made a wide sweep, skirting the common and curving gently down into Frimpton village. Wimsey hesitated for a moment, considering that it was growing dark and that both the way and the animal he rode were strange to him. There seemed, however, to be a well-defined bridle-path across the common, and eventually he decided to take it. Polly Flinders seemed to know it well enough, and cantered along without hesitation. A ride of about a mile and a half brought them without adventure into the main road again. Here a fork in the road presented itself confusingly; an electric torch, however, and a sign-post solved the problem; after which ten minutes' ride brought the traveller to his goal.

Major Lumsden was a large, cheerful man—none the less cheerful for having lost a leg in the War. He had a large, cheerful wife, a large, cheerful house, and a large, cheerful family. Wimsey soon found himself seated before a fire as large and cheerful as the rest of the establishment, exchanging gossip with his hosts over a whisky-and-soda. He described the Burdock funeral with irreverent gusto, and went on to tell the story of the phantom coach. Major Lumsden laughed.

'It's a quaint part of the country,' he said. 'The policeman is just as bad as the rest of them. Do you remember, dear, the time I had to go out and lay a ghost, down at Pogson's farm?'

'I do, indeed,' said his wife emphatically. 'The maids had a wonderful time. Trivett—that's our local constable—came rushing in here and fainted in the kitchen, and they all sat round howling and sustaining him with our best brandy, while Dan went down and investigated.'

'Did you find the ghost?'

'Well, not the ghost, exactly, but we found a pair of boots and half a pork-pie in the empty house, so we put it all down to a tramp. Still, I must say odd things do happen about here. There were those fires on the common last year. They were never explained.'

'Gipsies, Dan.'

'Maybe; but nobody ever saw them, and the fires would start in the most unexpected way, sometimes in the pouring rain; and, before you could get near one, it would be out, and only a sodden wet black mark left behind it. And there's another bit of the common that animals don't like—near what they call the Dead Man's Post. My dogs won't go near it. Funny brutes. I've never seen anything there, but even in broad daylight they don't seem to fancy it. The common's not got a good reputation. It used to be a great place for highwaymen.'

'Is the Burdock coach anything to do with highwaymen?'

'No. I fancy it was some rakehelly dead-and-gone Burdock. Belonged to the Hell-fire Club or something. The usual sort of story. All the people round here believe in it, of course. It's rather a good thing. Keeps the servants indoors at night. Well, let's go and have some grub, shall we?'

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'Do you remember,' said Major Lumsden, 'that damned old mill, and the three elms by the pig-sty?'

'Good Lord, yes! You very obligingly blew them out of the landscape for us, I remember. They made us a damned sight too conspicuous.'

'We rather missed them when they were gone.'

'Thank heaven you didn't miss them when they were there. I'll tell you what you did miss, though.'

'What's that?'

'The old sow.'

'By Jove, yes. Do you remember old Piper fetching her in?'

'I'll say I do. That reminds me. You knew Bunthorne....'

'I'll say good night,' said Mrs Lumsden, 'and leave you people to it.'

'Do you remember,' said Lord Peter Wimsey, 'that awkward moment when Popham went off his rocker?'

'No. I'd been sent back with a batch of prisoners. I heard about it though. I never knew what became of him.'





'He took up the ridiculous position,' said Mr Frobisher-Pym, 'that the more sinful the old man had been the more he needed praying for. I said, "I think it would need more praying than you or I could do to help old Burdock out of the place he's in now." Ha, ha! So he said, "I agree with you, Mr Frobisher-Pym; that is why I am having eight watchers to pray all through the night for him." I admit he had me there.'

'Eight people?' exclaimed Mrs Frobisher-Pym.

'Not all at once, I understand; in relays, two at a time. "Well," I said, "I think you ought to consider that you will be giving a handle to the Nonconformists." Of course, he couldn't deny that.'

Wimsey helped himself to marmalade. Nonconformists, it seemed, were always searching for handles. Though what kind—whether door-handles, tea-pot handles, pump-handles, or starting-handles—was never explained, nor what the handles were to be used for when found. However, having been brought up in the odour of the Establishment, he was familiar with this odd dissenting peculiarity, and merely said:

'Pity to be extreme in a small parish like this. Disturbs the ideas of the simple fathers of the hamlet and the village blacksmith, with his daughter singin' in the choir and the Old Hundredth and all the rest of it. Don't Burdock's family have anything to say to it? There are some sons, aren't there?'

'Only the two, now. Aldine was the one that was killed, of course, and Martin is somewhere abroad. He went off after that row with his father, and I don't think he has been back in England since.'

'What was the row about?'

'Oh, that was a disgraceful business. Martin got a girl into trouble—a film actress or a typist or somebody of that sort—and insisted on marrying her.'

'Oh?'

'Yes, so dreadful of him,' said the lady, taking up the tale, 'when he was practically engaged to the Delaprime girl—the one with glasses, you know. It made a terrible scandal. Some horribly vulgar people came down and pushed their way into the house and insisted on seeing old Mr Burdock. I will say for him he stood up to them—he wasn't the sort of person you could intimidate. He told them the girl had only herself to blame, and they could sue Martin if they liked—*he* wouldn't be blackmailed on his son's account. The butler was listening at the door, naturally, and told the whole village about it. And then