A gust of rain and wind blew in through the hall door as they struggled out into the night. It was past one in the morning and pitch-dark. Major Lumsden again pressed Wimsey to stay.

'No, thanks, really. The old lady's feelings might be hurt. It's not so bad, really—wet, but not cold. Come up, Polly, stand over, old lady.'

He put the saddle on and girthed it, while Lumsden held the lantern. The mare, fed and rested, came delicately dancing out of the warm loose-box, head well stretched forward, and nostrils snuffing at the rain.

'Well, so long, old lad. Come and look us up again. It's been great.'

'Rather! By Jove, yes. Best respects to madame. Is the gate open?'

'Yes.'

'Well, cheerio!'

'Cheerio!'

Polly Flinders, with her nose turned homewards, settled down to make short work of the nine miles of high-road. Once outside the gates, the night seemed lighter, though the rain poured heavily. Somewhere buried behind the thronging clouds there was a moon, which now and again showed as a pale stain on the sky, a paler reflection on the black road. Wimsey, with a mind full of memories and a skin full of whisky, hummed to himself as he rode.

As he passed the fork, he hesitated for a moment. Should he take the path over the common or stick to the road? On consideration, he decided to give the common a miss—not because of its sinister reputation, but because of ruts and rabbit-holes. He shook the reins, bestowed a word of encouragement on his mount, and continued by the road, having the common on his right hand, and, on the left, fields bounded by high hedges, which gave some shelter from the driving rain.

He had topped the rise, and passed the spot where the bridle-path again joined the high-road, when a slight start and stumble drew his attention unpleasantly to Polly Flinders.

'Hold up, mare,' he said disapprovingly.

Polly shook her head, moved forward, tried to pick up her easy pace again. 'Hullo!' said Wimsey, alarmed. He pulled her to a standstill.

'Lame in the near fore,' he said, dismounting. 'If you've been and gone and strained anything, my girl, four miles from home, father *will* be pleased.' It occurred to him for the first time how curiously lonely the

road was. He had not seen a single car. They might have been in the wilds of Africa.

He ran an exploratory hand down the near foreleg. The mare stood quietly enough, without shrinking or wincing. Wimsey was puzzled.

'If these had been the good old days,' he said, 'I'd have thought she'd picked up a stone. But what— '

He lifted the mare's foot, and explored it carefully with fingers and pocket-torch. His diagnosis had been right, after all. A steel nut, evidently dropped from a passing car, had wedged itself firmly between the shoe and the frog. He grunted and felt for his knife. Happily, it was one of that excellent old-fashioned kind which includes, besides blades and corkscrews, an ingenious apparatus for removing foreign bodies from horses' feet.

The mare nuzzled him gently as he stooped over his task. It was a little awkward getting to work; he had to wedge the torch under his arm, so as to leave one hand free for the tool and the other to hold the hoof. He was swearing gently at these difficulties when, happening to glance down the road ahead, he fancied he caught the gleam of something moving. It was not easy to see, for at this point the tall trees stood up on both sides of the road, which dipped abruptly from the edge of the common. It was not a car; the light was too faint. A wagon, probably, with a dim lantern. Yet it seemed to move fast. He puzzled for a moment, then bent to work again.

The nut resisted his efforts, and the mare, touched in a tender spot, pulled away, trying to get her foot down. He soothed her with his voice and patted her neck. The torch slipped from his arm. He cursed it impatiently, set down the hoof, and picked up the torch from the edge of the grass, into which it had rolled. As he straightened himself again, he looked along the road and saw.

Up from under the dripping dark of the trees it came, shining with a thin, moony radiance. There was no clatter of hoofs, no rumble of wheels, no ringing of bit or bridle. He saw the white, sleek, shining shoulders with the collar that lay on each, like a faint fiery ring, enclosing nothing. He saw the gleaming reins, their cut ends slipping back and forward unsupported through the ring of the hames. The feet, that never touched earth, ran swiftly—four times four noiseless hoofs, bearing the pale bodies by like smoke. The driver leaned forward, brandishing his whip. He was faceless

and headless, but his whole attitude bespoke desperate haste. The coach was barely visible through the driving rain, but Wimsey saw the dimly spinning wheels and a faint whiteness, still and stiff, at the window. It went past at a gallop—headless driver and headless horses and silent coach. Its passing left a stir, a sound that was less a sound than a vibration—and the wind roared suddenly after it, with a great sheet of water blown up out of the south.

'Good God!' said Wimsey. And then: 'How many whiskies did we have?'

He turned and looked back along the road, straining his eyes. Then suddenly he remembered the mare, and, without troubling further about the torch, picked up her foot and went to work by touch. The nut gave no more trouble, but dropped out into his hand almost immediately. Polly Flinders sighed gratefully and blew into his ear.

Wimsey led her forward a few steps. She put her feet down firmly and strongly. The nut, removed without delay, had left no tenderness. Wimsey mounted, let her go—then pulled her head round suddenly.

'I'm going to see,' he said resolutely. 'Come up, mare! We won't let any headless horses get the better of *us*. Perfectly indecent, goin' about without heads. Get on, old lady. Over the common with you. We'll catch 'em at the cross-roads.'

Without the slightest consideration for his host or his host's property, he put the mare to the bridle-path again, and urged her into a gallop.

At first he thought he could make out a pale, fluttering whiteness, moving away ahead of him on the road. Presently, as high-road and bridle-path diverged, he lost it altogether. But he knew there was no side-road. Bar any accident to his mount, he was bound to catch it before it came to the fork. Polly Flinders, answering easily to the touch of his heel, skimmed over the rough track with the indifference born of familiarity. In less than ten minutes her feet rang out again on the tarmac. He pulled her up, faced round in the direction of Little Doddering, and stared down the road. He could see nothing yet. Either he was well ahead of the coach, or it had already passed at unbelievable speed, or else—

He waited. Nothing. The violent rain had ceased, and the moon was struggling out again. The road appeared completely deserted. He glanced over his shoulder. A small beam of light near the ground moved, turned,

'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.'

'I got him sent home. He's married now and living in Lincolnshire.'

'Is he? Well, he couldn't help himself, I suppose. He was only a kid. What's happened to Philpotts?'

'Oh, Philpotts....'

'Where's your glass, old man?'

'Oh, rot, old man. The night is still young....'

'Really? Well, but look here, why not stay the night? My wife will be delighted. I can fix you up in no time.'

'No, thanks most awfully. I must be rolling off home. I said I'd be back; and I'm booked to put the chain on the door.'

'As you like, of course, but it's still raining. Not a good night for a ride on an open horse.'

'I'll bring a saloon next time. We shan't hurt. Rain's good for the complexion—makes the roses grow. Don't wake your man up. I can saddle her myself.'

'My dear man, it's no trouble.'

'No, really, old man.'

'Well, I'll come along and lend you a hand.'

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?'

'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.'

flashed green, and red, and white again, and came towards him. Presently he made out that it was a policeman wheeling a bicycle.

'A bad night, sir,' said the man civilly, but with a faint note of enquiry in his voice.

'Rotten,' said Wimsey.

'Just had to mend a puncture, to make it all the pleasanter,' added the policeman.

Wimsey expressed sympathy. 'Have you been here long?' he added.

'Best part o' twenty minutes.'

'Did you see anything pass along this way from Little Doddering?'

'Ain't been nothing along while I've been here. What sort of thing did you mean, sir?'

'I thought I saw— ' Wimsey hesitated. He did not care about the idea of making a fool of himself. 'A carriage with four horses,' he said hesitatingly. 'It passed me on this road not a quarter of an hour ago—down at the other end of the common. I—I came back to see. It seemed unusual— ' He became aware that his story sounded very lame.

The policeman spoke rather sharply and rapidly.

'There ain't been nothing past here.'

'You're sure?'

'Yes, sir; and, if you don't mind me sayin' so, you'd best be getting home. It's a lonesome bit o' road.'

'Yes, isn't it?' said Wimsey. 'Well, good night, sergeant.'

He turned the mare's head back along the Little Doddering road, going very quietly. He saw nothing, heard nothing, and passed nothing. The night was brighter now, and, as he rode back, he verified the entire absence of side-roads. Whatever the thing was which he had seen, it had vanished somewhere along the edge of the common; it had not gone by the main road, nor by any other.

Wimsey came down rather late for breakfast in the morning, to find his hosts in a state of some excitement.

'The most extraordinary thing has happened,' said Mrs Frobisher-Pym.

'Outrageous!' added her husband. 'I warned Hancock—he can't say I didn't warn him. Still, however much one may disapprove of his goings-

on, there is no excuse whatever for such abominable conduct. Once let me get hold of the beggars, whoever they are— '

'What's up?' said Wimsey, helping himself to broiled kidneys at the sideboard.

'A most scandalous thing,' said Mrs Frobisher-Pym. 'The vicar came up to Tom at once—I hope we didn't disturb you, by the way, with all the excitement. It appears that when Mr Hancock got to the church this morning at 6 o'clock to take the early service— '

'No, no, my dear, you've got it wrong. Let *me* tell it. When Joe Grinch—that's the sexton, you know, and he has to get there first to ring the bell—when he arrived, he found the south door wide open and nobody in the chapel, where they should have been, beside the coffin. He was very much perplexed, of course, but he supposed that Hubbard and young Rawlinson had got sick of it and gone off home. So he went on to the vestry to get the vestments and things ready, and to his amazement he heard women's voices, calling out to him from inside. He was so astonished, didn't know where he was, but he went on and unlocked the door— '

'With his own key?' put in Wimsey.

'The key was in the door. As a rule it's kept hanging up on a nail under a curtain near the organ, but it was in the lock—where it ought not to have been. And inside the vestry he found Mrs Hancock and her daughter, nearly dead with fright and annoyance.'

'Great Scott!'

'Yes, indeed. They had a most extraordinary story to tell. They'd taken over at 2 o'clock from the other pair of watchers, and had knelt down by the coffin in the Lady-chapel, according to plan, to say the proper sort of prayers, whatever they are. They'd been there, to the best of their calculation, about ten minutes, when they heard a noise up by the High Altar, as though somebody was creeping stealthily about. Miss Hancock is a very plucky girl, and she got up and walked up the aisle in the dark, with Mrs Hancock following on behind because, as she said, she didn't want to be left alone. When they'd got as far as the rood-screen, Miss Hancock called out aloud, 'Who's there?' At that they heard a sort of rustling sound, and a noise like something being knocked over. Miss Hancock most courageously snatched up one of the churchwarden's staffs, which

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 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

candlesticks from the vestry, and, when these had been put in position, joined Mr Frobisher-Pym at the door.

'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.'

was clipped on to the choir-stalls, and ran forward, thinking, she says, that somebody was trying to steal the ornaments off the altar. There's a very fine fifteenth-century cross— '

'Never mind the cross, Tom. That hasn't been taken, at any rate.'

'No, it hasn't, but she thought it might be. Anyhow, just as she got up to the sanctuary steps, with Mrs Hancock coming close after her and begging her to be careful, somebody seemed to rush out of the choir-stalls, and caught her by the arms and frog's-marched her—that's her expression—into the vestry. And before she could get breath even to shriek, Mrs Hancock was pushed in beside her, and the door locked on them.'

'By Jove! You do have exciting times in your village.'

'Well,' said Mr Frobisher-Pym, 'of course they were dreadfully frightened, because they didn't know but what these wretches would come back and murder them, and, in any case, they thought the church was being robbed. But the vestry windows are very narrow and barred, and they couldn't do anything except wait. They tried to listen, but they couldn't hear much. Their only hope was that the four-o'clock watchers might come early and catch the thieves at work. But they waited and they waited, and they heard four strike, and five, and nobody came.'

'What had happened to what's-his-name and Rawlinson then?'

'They couldn't make out, and nor could Grinch. However, they had a good look round the church, and nothing seemed to be taken or disturbed in any way. Just then the vicar came along, and they told him all about it. He was very much shocked, naturally, and his first thought—when he found the ornaments were safe and the poor-box all right—was that some Kensitite people had been stealing the wafers from the what d'you call it.'

'The tabernacle,' suggested Wimsey.

'Yes, that's his name for it. That worried him very much, and he unlocked it and had a look, but the wafers were all there all right, and, as there's only one key, and that was on his own watch-chain, it wasn't a case of anyone substituting unconsecrated wafers for consecrated ones, or any practical joke of that kind. So he sent Mrs and Miss Hancock home, and had a look round the church outside, and the first thing he saw, lying in the bushes near the south door, was young Rawlinson's motor-cycle.'

'Oho!'

'So his next idea was to hunt for Rawlinson and Hubbard. However, he didn't have to look far. He'd got round the church as far as the furnace-house on the north side, when he heard a terrific hullabaloo going on, and people shouting and thumping on the door. So he called Grinch, and they looked in through the little window, and there, if you please, were Hubbard and young Rawlinson, bawling and going on and using the most shocking language. It seems they were set on in exactly the same way, only before they got inside the church. Rawlinson had been passing the evening with Hubbard, I understand, and they had a bit of a sleep downstairs in the back bar, to avoid disturbing the house early—or so they say, though I dare say if the truth was known they were having drinks; and if that's Hancock's idea of a suitable preparation for going to church and saying prayers, all I can say is, it isn't mine. Anyway, they started off just before four, Hubbard going down on the carrier of Rawlinson's bicycle. They had to get off at the south gate, which was pushed to, and while Rawlinson was wheeling the machine up the path two or three men—they couldn't see exactly—jumped out from the trees. There was a bit of a scuffle, but what with the bicycle, and its being so unexpected, they couldn't put up a very good fight, and the men dropped blankets over their heads, or something. I don't know all the details. At any rate, they were bundled into the furnace-house and left there. They may be there still, for all I know, if they haven't found the key. There should be a spare key, but I don't know what's become of it. They sent up for it this morning, but I haven't seen it about for a long time.'

'It wasn't left in the lock this time, then?'

'No, it wasn't. They've had to send for the locksmith. I'm going down now to see what's to be done about it. Like to come, if you're ready?'

Wimsey said he would. Anything in the nature of a problem always fascinated him.

'You were back pretty late, by the way,' said Mr Frobisher-Pym jovially, as they left the house. 'Yarning over old times, I suppose.'

'We were, indeed,' said Wimsey.

'Hope the old girl carried you all right. Lonely bit of road, isn't it? I don't suppose you saw anybody worse than yourself, as the saying goes?'

'Only a policeman,' said Wimsey untruthfully. He had not yet quite decided about the phantom coach. No doubt Plunkett would be relieved

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—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

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.'

to know that he was not the only person to whom the 'warning' had come. But, then, had it really been the phantom coach, or merely a delusion, begotten by whisky upon reminiscence? Wimsey, in the cold light of day, was none too certain.

On arriving at the church, the magistrate and his guest found quite a little crowd collected, conspicuous among whom were the vicar, in cassock and biretta, gesticulating freely, and the local policeman, his tunic buttoned awry and his dignity much impaired by the small fry of the village, who clustered round his legs. He had just finished taking down the statements of the two men who had been released from the stoke-hole. The younger of these, a fresh-faced, impudent-looking fellow of twenty-five or so, was in the act of starting up his motor-cycle. He greeted Mr Frobisher-Pym pleasantly. 'Afraid they've made us look a bit small, sir. You'll excuse me, won't you? I'll have to be getting back to Herriotting. Mr Graham won't be any too pleased if I'm late for the office. I think some of the bright lads have been having a joke with us.' He grinned as he pushed the throttle-lever over and departed in a smother of unnecessary smoke that made Mr Frobisher-Pym sneeze. His fellow-victim, a large, fat man, who looked the sporting publican that he was, grinned shamefacedly at the magistrate.

'Well, Hubbard,' said the latter, 'I hope you've enjoyed your experience. I must say I'm surprised at a man of your size letting himself be shut up in a coal-hole like a naughty urchin.'

'Yes, sir, I was surprised myself at the time,' retorted the publican, good-humouredly enough. 'When that there blanket came down on my head, I was the most surprised man in this here country. I gave 'em a hack or two on the shins, though, to remember me by,' he added, with a reminiscent chuckle.

'How many of them were there?' asked Wimsey.

'Three or four, I should say, sir. But not 'avin' seen 'em, I can only tell from 'earin' 'em talk. There was two laid 'old of me, I'm pretty sure, and young Rawlinson thinks there was only one 'ad 'old of 'im, but 'e was a wonderful strong 'un.'

'We must leave no stone unturned to find out who these people were,' said the vicar excitedly. 'Ah, Mr Frobisher-Pym, come and see what they

have done in the church. It is as I thought—an anti-Catholic protest. We must be most thankful that they have done no more than they have.'

He led the way in. Someone had lit two or three hanging lamps in the gloomy little chancel. By their light Wimsey was able to see that the neck of the eagle lectern was decorated with an enormous red-white-and-blue bow, and bore a large placard—obviously pinched from the local newspaper offices—'Vatican Bans Immodest Dress.' In each of the choir-stalls a teddy-bear sat, lumpishly amiable, apparently absorbed in reading the choir-books upside-down, while on the ledge before them copies of the *Pink 'Un* were obstrusively displayed. In the pulpit, a waggish hand had set up a pantomime ass's head, elegantly arrayed in a nightgown, and crowned with a handsome nimbus, cut from gold paper.

'Disgraceful, isn't it?' said the vicar.

'Well, Hancock,' replied Mr Frobisher-Pym, 'I must say I think you have brought it upon yourself—though I quite agree, of course, that this sort of thing cannot possibly be allowed, and the offenders must be discovered and severely punished. But you must see that many of your practices appear to these people to be papistical nonsense at best, and while that is no excuse....'

His reprimanding voice barked on.

'... what I really can only look upon as this sacrilegious business with old Burdock—a man whose life....'

The policeman had by this time shoved away the attendant villagers and was standing beside Lord Peter at the entrance of the rood-screen.

'Was that you was out on the road this morning, sir? Ah! I thought I reckernised your voice. Did you get home all right, sir? Didn't meet nothing?'

There seemed to be a shade more than idle questioning in the tone of his voice. Wimsey turned quickly.

'No, I met nothing—more. Who is it drives a coach with four white horses about this village of a night, sergeant?'

'Not sergeant, sir—I ain't due for promotion yet awhile. Well, sir, as to white horses, I don't altogether like to say. Mr Mortimer over at Abbotts Bolton has some nice greys, and he's the biggest horse-breeder about these parts—but, well, there, sir, he wouldn't be driving out in all that rain, sir, would he?'

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 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?'