Chapter 11

'A regular pea-souper, by Jove,' said Lord Peter.

Parker grunted, and struggled irritably into an overcoat.

'It affords me, if I may say so, the greatest satisfaction,' continued the noble lord, 'that in a collaboration like ours all the uninteresting and disagreeable routine work is done by you.'

Parker grunted again.

'Do you anticipate any difficulty about the warrant?' inquired Lord Peter.

Parker grunted a third time.

'I suppose you've seen to it that all this business is kept quiet?'

'Of course.'

'You've muzzled the workhouse people?'

'Of course.'

'And the police?'

'Yes.'

'Because, if you haven't there'll probably be nobody to arrest.'

'My dear Wimsey, do you think I'm a fool?'

'I had no such hope.'

Parker grunted finally and departed.

Lord Peter settled down to a perusal of his Dante. It afforded him no solace. Lord Peter was hampered in his career as a private detective by a public-school education. Despite Parker's admonitions, he was not always able to discount it. His mind had been warped in its young growth by 'Raffles' and 'Sherlock Holmes,' or the sentiments for which they stand. He belonged to a family which had never shot a fox.

'I am an amateur,' said Lord Peter.

Nevertheless, while communing with Dante, he made up his mind.

In the afternoon he found himself in Harley Street. Sir Julian Freke might be consulted about one's nerves from two till four on Tuesdays and Fridays. Lord Peter rang the bell.

'Have you an appointment, sir?' inquired the man who opened the door.

'No,' said Lord Peter, 'but will you give Sir Julian my card? I think it possible he may see me without one.'

He sat down in the beautiful room in which Sir Julian's patients awaited his healing counsel. It was full of people. Two or three fashionably dressed women were discussing shops and servants together, and teasing a toy griffon. A big, worried-looking man by himself in a corner looked at his watch twenty times a minute. Lord Peter knew him by sight. It was Wintrington, a millionaire, who had tried to kill himself a few months ago. He controlled the finances of five countries, but he could not control his nerves. The finances of five countries were in Sir Julian Freke's capable hands. By the fireplace sat a soldierly-looking young man, of about Lord Peter's own age. His face was prematurely lined and worn; he sat bolt upright, his restless eyes darting in the direction of every slightest sound. On the sofa was an elderly woman of modest appearance, with a young girl. The girl seemed listless and wretched; the woman's look showed deep affection, and anxiety tempered with a timid hope. Close beside Lord Peter was another younger woman, with a little girl, and Lord Peter noticed in both of them the broad cheekbones and beautiful grey, slanting eyes of the Slav. The child, moving restlessly about, trod on Lord Peter's patent-leather toe, and the mother admonished her in French before turning to apologize to Lord Peter.

'Mais je vous en prie, madame,' said the young man, 'it is nothing.'

'She is nervous, pauvre petite,' said the young woman.

'Then—if your theory is sound—Freke made a mistake.'

'Yes. A very slight one. He was guarding, with unnecessary caution, against starting a train of thought in the mind of anybody—say, the workhouse doctor. Up till then he'd been reckoning on the fact that people don't think a second time about anything (a body, say) that's once been accounted for.'

'What made him lose his head?'

'A chain of unforeseen accidents. Levy's having been recognised—my mother's son having foolishly advertised in the *Times* his connection with the Battersea end of the mystery—Detective Parker (whose photograph has been a little prominent in the illustrated press lately) seen sitting next door to the Duchess of Denver at the inquest. His aim in life was to prevent the two ends of the problem from linking up. And there were two of the links, literally side by side. Many criminals are wrecked by over-caution.'

Parker was silent.

'In my bedroom next door.'

'Then that's where he did put him.'

'But suppose the man went in to turn down the bed?'

'Beds are turned down by the housekeeper, earlier than ten o'clock.'

'Yes.... But Cummings heard Freke about the house all night.'

'He heard him go in and out two or three times. He'd expect him to do that, anyway.'

'Do you mean to say Freke got all that job finished before three in the morning?'

'Why not?'

'Quick work.'

'Well, call it quick work. Besides, why three? Cummings never saw him again till he called him for eight o'clock breakfast.'

'But he was having a bath at three.'

'I don't say he didn't get back from Park Lane before three. But I don't suppose Cummings went and looked through the bathroom keyhole to see if he was in the bath.'

Parker considered again.

'How about Crimplesham's pince-nez?' he asked.

'That is a bit mysterious,' said Lord Peter.

'And why Thipps's bathroom?'

'Why, indeed? Pure accident, perhaps—or pure devilry.'

'Do you think all this elaborate scheme could have been put together in a night, Wimsey?'

'Far from it. It was conceived as soon as that man who bore a superficial resemblance to Levy came into the workhouse. He had several days.'

'I see.'

'Freke gave himself away at the inquest. He and Grimbold disagreed about the length of the man's illness. If a small man (comparatively speaking) like Grimbold presumes to disagree with a man like Freke, it's because he is sure of his ground.'

'You are seeking advice for her?'

'Yes. He is wonderful, the doctor. Figure to yourself, monsieur, she cannot forget, poor child, the things she has seen.' She leaned nearer, so that the child might not hear. 'We have escaped—from starving Russia—six months ago. I dare not tell you—she has such quick ears, and then, the cries, the tremblings, the convulsions—they all begin again. We were skeletons when we arrived—mon Dieu!—but that is better now. See, she is thin, but she is not starved. She would be fatter but for the nerves that keep her from eating. We who are older, we forget—enfin, on apprend à ne pas y penser—but these children! When one is young, monsieur, tout ça impressionne trop.'

Lord Peter, escaping from the thraldom of British good form, expressed himself in that language in which sympathy is not condemned to mutism.

'But she is much better, much better,' said the mother, proudly; 'the great doctor, he does marvels.'

'C'est un homme précieux,' said Lord Peter.

'Ah, monsieur, c'est un saint qui opère des miracles! Nous prions pour lui, Natasha et moi, tous les jours. N'est-ce pas, chérie? And consider, monsieur, that he does it all, ce grand homme, cet homme illustre, for nothing at all. When we come here, we have not even the clothes upon our backs—we are ruined, famished. Et avec ça que nous sommes de bonne famille—mais hélas! monsieur, en Russie, comme vous savez, ça ne vous vaut que des insultes—des atrocités. Enfin! the great Sir Julian sees us, he says—"Madame, your little girl is very interesting to me. Say no more. I cure her for nothing—pour ses beaux yeux," a-t-il ajouté en riant. Ah, monsieur, c'est un saint, un véritable saint! and Natasha is much, much better.'

'Madame, je vous en félicite.'

'And you, monsieur? You are young, well, strong—you also suffer? It is still the war, perhaps?'

'A little remains of shell-shock,' said Lord Peter.

'Ah, yes. So many good, brave, young men— '

'Sir Julian can spare you a few minutes, my lord, if you will come in now,' said the servant.

Lord Peter bowed to his neighbour, and walked across the waiting-room. As the door of the consulting-room closed behind him, he remembered having once gone, disguised, into the staff-room of a German officer. He experienced the same feeling—the feeling of being caught in a trap, and a mingling of bravado and shame.

He had seen Sir Julian Freke several times from a distance, but never close. Now, while carefully and quite truthfully detailing the circumstances of his recent nervous attack, he considered the man before him. A man taller than himself, with immense breadth of shoulder, and wonderful hands. A face beautiful, impassioned and inhuman; fanatical, compelling eyes, bright blue amid the ruddy bush of hair and beard. They were not the cool and kindly eyes of the family doctor, they were the brooding eyes of the inspired scientist, and they searched one through.

'Well,' thought Lord Peter, 'I shan't have to be explicit, anyhow.'

'Yes,' said Sir Julian, 'yes. You had been working too hard. Puzzling your mind. Yes. More than that, perhaps—troubling your mind, shall we say?'

'I found myself faced with a very alarming contingency.'

'Yes. Unexpectedly, perhaps.'

'Very unexpected indeed.'

'Yes. Following on a period of mental and physical strain.'

'Well—perhaps. Nothing out of the way.'

'Yes. The unexpected contingency was—personal to yourself?'

'It demanded an immediate decision as to my own actions—yes, in that sense it was certainly personal.'

'Excellent. It won't do. Therefore Freke was lying. Why should he lie about it, unless he had some object in hiding the truth?'

'Well, but why mention it at all?'

'Because Levy, contrary to all expectation, had been seen at the corner of the road. That was a nasty accident for Freke. He thought it best to be beforehand with an explanation—of sorts. He reckoned, of course, on nobody's ever connecting Levy with Battersea Park.'

'Well, then, we come back to the first question: Why did Levy go there?'

'I don't know, but he was got there somehow. Why did Freke buy all those Peruvian Oil shares?'

'I don't know,' said Parker in his turn.

'Anyway,' went on Wimsey, 'Freke expected him, and made arrangements to let him in himself, so that Cummings shouldn't see who the caller was.'

'But the caller left again at ten.'

'Oh, Charles! I did not expect this of you. This is the purest Suggery! Who saw him go? Somebody said "Good-night" and walked away down the street. And you believe it was Levy because Freke didn't go out of his way to explain that it wasn't.'

'D'you mean that Freke walked cheerfully out of the house to Park Lane, and left Levy behind—dead or alive—for Cummings to find?'

'We have Cummings's word that he did nothing of the sort. A few minutes after the steps walked away from the house, Freke rang the library bell and told Cummings to shut up for the night.'

'Then— '

'Well—there's a side door to the house, I suppose—in fact, you know there is—Cummings said so—through the hospital.'

'Yes—well, where was Levy?'

'Levy went up into the library and never came down. You've been in Freke's library. Where would you have put him?'

out. His heroes are Edmond de la Pommerais, who persuaded his mistress into becoming an accessory to her own murder, and George Joseph Smith of Brides-in-a-bath fame, who could make passionate love to his wife in the night and carry out his plot to murder her in the morning. After all, he thinks conscience is a sort of vermiform appendix. Chop it out and you'll feel all the better. Freke isn't troubled by the usual conscientious deterrent. Witness his own hand in his books. Now again. The man who went to Levy's house in his place knew the house: Freke knew the house; he was a red-haired man, smaller than Levy, but not much smaller, since he could wear his clothes without appearing ludicrous: you have seen Freke—you know his height—about five-foot-eleven, I suppose, and his auburn mane; he probably wore surgical gloves: Freke is a surgeon; he was a methodical and daring man: surgeons are obliged to be both daring and methodical. Now take the other side. The man who got hold of the Battersea corpse had to have access to dead bodies. Freke obviously had access to dead bodies. He had to be cool and quick and callous about handling a dead body. Surgeons are all that. He had to be a strong man to carry the body across the roofs and dump it in at Thipps's window. Freke is a powerful man and a member of the Alpine Club. He probably wore surgical gloves and he let the body down from the roof with a surgical bandage. This points to a surgeon again. He undoubtedly lived in the neighbourhood. Freke lives next door. The girl you interviewed heard a bump on the roof of the end house. That is the house next to Freke's. Every time we look at Freke, he leads somewhere, whereas Milligan and Thipps and Crimplesham and all the other people we've honoured with our suspicion simply led nowhere.'

'Yes; but it's not quite so simple as you make out. What was Levy doing in that surreptitious way at Freke's on Monday night?'

'Well, you have Freke's explanation.'

'Rot, Wimsey. You said yourself it wouldn't do.'

'Quite so. You would have to assume some responsibility, no doubt.'

'A very grave responsibility.'

'Affecting others besides yourself?'

'Affecting one other person vitally, and a very great number indirectly.'

'Yes. The time was night. You were sitting in the dark?'

'Not at first. I think I put the light out afterwards.'

'Quite so—that action would naturally suggest itself to you. Were you warm?'

'I think the fire had died down. My man tells me that my teeth were chattering when I went in to him.'

'Yes. You live in Piccadilly?'

'Yes.'

'Heavy traffic sometimes goes past during the night, I expect.'

'Oh, frequently.'

'Just so. Now this decision you refer to—you had taken that decision.'

'Yes.'

'Your mind was made up?'

'Oh, yes.'

'You had decided to take the action, whatever it was.'

'Yes.'

'Yes. It involved perhaps a period of inaction.'

'Of comparative inaction—yes.'

'Of suspense, shall we say?'

'Yes—of suspense, certainly.'

'Possibly of some danger?'

'I don't know that that was in my mind at the time.'

'No—it was a case in which you could not possibly consider yourself.'

'If you like to put it that way.'

'Quite so. Yes. You had these attacks frequently in 1918?'

'Yes—I was very ill for some months.'

'Quite. Since then they have recurred less frequently?'

'Much less frequently.'

'Yes—when did the last occur?'

'About nine months ago.'

'Under what circumstances?'

'I was being worried by certain family matters. It was a question of deciding about some investments, and I was largely responsible.'

'Yes. You were interested last year, I think, in some police case?'

'Yes—in the recovery of Lord Attenbury's emerald necklace.'

'That involved some severe mental exercise?'

'I suppose so. But I enjoyed it very much.'

'Yes. Was the exertion of solving the problem attended by any bad results physically?'

'None.'

'No. You were interested, but not distressed.'

'Exactly.'

'Yes. You have been engaged in other investigations of the kind?'

'Yes. Little ones.'

'With bad results for your health?'

'Not a bit of it. On the contrary. I took up these cases as a sort of distraction. I had a bad knock just after the war, which didn't make matters any better for me, don't you know.'

'Ah! you are not married?'

'No.'

'No. Will you allow me to make an examination? Just come a little nearer to the light. I want to see your eyes. Whose advice have you had till now?'

'Sir James Hodges'.'

'Ah! yes—he was a sad loss to the medical profession. A really great man—a true scientist. Yes. Thank you. Now I should like to try you with this little invention.'

'What's it do?'

or so. Perhaps not. Not just primitive, brute jealousy. That means a word and a blow. But the thing that rankles is hurt vanity. That sticks. Humiliation. And we've all got a sore spot we don't like to have touched. I've got it. You've got it. Some blighter said hell knew no fury like a woman scorned. Stickin' it on to women, poor devils. Sex is every man's loco spot—you needn't fidget, you know it's true—he'll take a disappointment, but not a humiliation. I knew a man once who'd been turned down—not too charitably—by a girl he was engaged to. He spoke quite decently about her. I asked what had become of her. "Oh," he said, "she married the other fellow." And then burst out—couldn't help himself. "Lord, yes!" he cried. "To think of it—jilted for a Scotchman!" I don't know why he didn't like Scots, but that was what got him on the raw. Look at Freke. I've read his books. His attacks on his antagonists are savage. And he's a scientist. Yet he can't bear opposition, even in his work, which is where any first-class man is most sane and open-minded. Do you think he's a man to take a beating from any man on a side-issue? On a man's most sensitive side-issue? People are opinionated about side-issues, you know. I see red if anybody questions my judgment about a book. And Levy—who was nobody twenty years ago—romps in and carries off Freke's girl from under his nose. It isn't the girl Freke would bother about—it's having his aristocratic nose put out of joint by a little Jewish nobody.'

'There's another thing. Freke's got another side-issue. He likes crime. In that criminology book of his he gloats over a hardened murderer. I've read it, and I've seen the admiration simply glaring out between the lines whenever he writes about a callous and successful criminal. He reserves his contempt for the victims or the penitents or the men who lose their heads and get found

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summing up in Reg. v. Palmer, Shorthand Report, p. 308 C. C. C., May, 1856, Sess. Pa. 5. (Italics mine. D. L. S.)

'Well— '

'Well, look here, I don't pretend to be able to fill in all the blanks myself. But here we have two mysterious occurrences in one night, and a complete chain connecting the one with another through one particular person. It's beastly, but it's not unthinkable.'

'Yes, I know all that. But there are one or two quite definite stumbling-blocks.'

"Yes, I know. But, see here. On the one hand, Levy disappeared after being last seen looking for Prince of Wales Road at nine o'clock. At eight next morning a dead man, not unlike him in general outline, is discovered in a bath in Queen Caroline Mansions. Levy, by Freke's own admission, was going to see Freke. By information received from Chelsea workhouse a dead man, answering to the description of the Battersea corpse in its natural state, was delivered that same day to Freke. We have Levy with a past, and no future, as it were; an unknown vagrant with a future (in the cemetery) and no past, and Freke stands between their future and their past."

'That looks all right— '

'Yes. Now, further: Freke has a motive for getting rid of Levy —an old jealousy.'

'Very old—and not much of a motive.'

'People have been known to do that sort of thing.[1] You're thinking that people don't keep up old jealousies for twenty years

[1]Lord Peter was not without authority for his opinion: 'With respect to the alleged motive, it is of great importance to see whether there was a motive for committing such a crime, or whether there was not, or whether there is an improbability of its having been committed so strong as not to be overpowered by positive evidence. But *if there be any motive which can be assigned, I am bound to tell you that the inadequacy of that motive is of little importance.* We know, from the experience of criminal courts, that atrocious crimes of this sort have been committed from very slight motives; *not merely from malice and revenge*, but to gain a small pecuniary advantage, and to drive off for a time pressing difficulties.'—L. C. J. Campbell,

'Well—it tells me about your nervous reactions. Will you sit here?'

The examination that followed was purely medical. When it was concluded, Sir Julian said:

'Now, Lord Peter, I'll tell you about yourself in quite untechnical language— '

'Thanks,' said Peter, 'that's kind of you. I'm an awful fool about long words.'

'Yes. Are you fond of private theatricals, Lord Peter?'

'Not particularly,' said Peter, genuinely surprised. 'Awful bore as a rule. Why?'

'I thought you might be,' said the specialist, drily. 'Well, now. You know quite well that the strain you put on your nerves during the war has left its mark on you. It has left what I may call old wounds in your brain. Sensations received by your nerve-endings sent messages to your brain, and produced minute physical changes there—changes we are only beginning to be able to detect, even with our most delicate instruments. These changes in their turn set up sensations; or I should say, more accurately, that sensations are the names we give to these changes of tissue when we perceive them: we call them horror, fear, sense of responsibility and so on.'

'Yes, I follow you.'

'Very well. Now, if you stimulate those damaged places in your brain again, you run the risk of opening up the old wounds. I mean, that if you get nerve-sensations of any kind producing the reactions which we call horror, fear, and sense of responsibility, they may go on to make disturbance right along the old channel, and produce in their turn physical changes which you will call by the names you were accustomed to associate with them—dread of German mines, responsibility for the lives of your men, strained attention and the inability to distinguish small sounds through the overpowering noise of guns.'

'I see.'

'This effect would be increased by extraneous circumstances producing other familiar physical sensations—night, cold or the rattling of heavy traffic, for instance.'

'Yes.'

'Yes. The old wounds are nearly healed, but not quite. The ordinary exercise of your mental faculties has no bad effect. It is only when you excite the injured part of your brain.'

'Yes, I see.'

'Yes. You must avoid these occasions. You must learn to be irresponsible, Lord Peter.'

'My friends say I'm only too irresponsible already.'

'Very likely. A sensitive nervous temperament often appears so, owing to its mental nimbleness.'

'Oh!'

'Yes. This particular responsibility you were speaking of still rests upon you?'

'Yes, it does.'

'You have not yet completed the course of action on which you have decided?'

'Not yet.'

'You feel bound to carry it through?'

'Oh, yes—I can't back out of it now.'

'No. You are expecting further strain?'

'A certain amount.'

'Do you expect it to last much longer?'

'Very little longer now.'

'Ah! Your nerves are not all they should be.'

'No?'

'No. Nothing to be alarmed about, but you must exercise care while undergoing this strain, and afterwards you should take a complete rest. How about a voyage in the Mediterranean or the South Seas or somewhere?'

'Sir—sir!—dear me! why, it's Mr Parker! How fortunate! If you would be so kind—summoned from the club—a sick friend—can't find a taxi—everybody going home from the theatre—if I might share your cab—you are returning to Bloomsbury? I want Russell Square—if I might presume—a matter of life and death.'

He spoke in hurried gasps, as though he had been running violently and far. Parker promptly stepped out of the taxi.

'Delighted to be of service to you, Sir Julian,' he said; 'take my taxi. I am going down to Craven Street myself, but I'm in no hurry. Pray make use of the cab.'

'It's extremely kind of you,' said the surgeon. 'I am ashamed— '

'That's all right,' said Parker, cheerily. 'I can wait.' He assisted Freke into the taxi. 'What number? 24 Russell Square, driver, and look sharp.'

The taxi drove off. Parker remounted the stairs and rang Lord Peter's bell.

'Thanks, old man,' he said. 'I'll stop the night, after all.'

'Come in,' said Wimsey.

'Did you see that?' asked Parker.

'I saw something. What happened exactly?'

Parker told his story. 'Frankly,' he said, 'I've been thinking you a bit mad, but now I'm not quite so sure of it.'

Peter laughed.

'Blessed are they that have not seen and yet have believed. Bunter, Mr Parker will stay the night.'

'Look here, Wimsey, let's have another look at this business. Where's that letter?'

Lord Peter produced Bunter's essay in dialogue. Parker studied it for a short time in silence.

'You know, Wimsey, I'm as full of objections to this idea as an egg is of meat.'

'So'm I, old son. That's why I want to dig up our Chelsea pauper. But trot out your objections.'