

Chapter 10

Lord Peter Forces a Card

‘**H**ULLO!’
‘Is that you, Wimsey? Hulllo! I say, is that Lord Peter Wimsey. Hulllo! I must speak to Lord Peter Wimsey. Hulllo!’
‘All right. I’ve said hulllo. Who’re you? And what’s the excitement?’

‘It’s me. Major Fentiman. I say—*is* that Wimsey?’

‘Yes. Wimsey speaking. What’s up?’

‘I can’t hear you.’

‘Of course you can’t if you keep on shouting. This is Wimsey. Good morning. Stand three inches from the mouth-piece and speak in an ordinary voice. Do not say hulllo! To recall the operator, depress the receiver *gently* two or three times.’

‘Oh, shut up! don’t be an ass. I’ve seen Oliver.’

‘Have you, where?’

‘Getting into a train at Charing Cross.’

‘Did you speak to him?’

‘No—it’s maddening. I was just getting my ticket when I saw him passing the barrier. I tore down after him. Some people got in my way, curse them. There was a Circle train standing at the platform. He bolted in and they clanged the doors. I rushed on, waving and shouting, but the train went out. I cursed like anything.’

‘I bet you did. How very sickening.’

‘Yes, wasn’t it? I took the next train—’

‘What for?’

‘Oh, I don’t know. I thought I might spot him on a platform somewhere.’

‘What a hope! You didn’t think to ask where he’d booked for?’

‘No. Besides, he probably got the ticket from an automatic.’

‘Probably. Well, it can’t be helped, that’s all. He’ll probably turn up again. You’re sure it was he?’

‘Oh, dear, yes. I couldn’t be mistaken. I’d know him anywhere. I thought I’d just let you know.’

‘Thanks awfully. It encourages me extremely. Charing Cross seems to be a haunt of his. He’s phoned from there on the evening of the tenth, you know.’

‘So he did.’

‘I’ll tell you what we’d better do, Fentiman. The thing is getting rather serious. I propose that you should go and keep an eye on Charing Cross station. I’ll get hold of a detective—’

‘A police detective?’

‘Not necessarily. A private one would do. You and he can go along and keep watch on the station for, say a week. You must describe Oliver to the detective as best you can, and you can watch turn and turn about.’

‘Hang it all, Wimsey—it’ll take a lot of time. I’ve gone back to my rooms at Richmond. And besides, I’ve got my own duties to do.’

‘Yes, well, while you’re on duty the detective must keep watch.’

‘It’s a dreadful grind, Wimsey.’ Fentiman’s voice sounded dissatisfied.

‘It’s half a million of money. Of course, if you’re not keen—’

‘I *am* keen. But I don’t believe anything will come of it.’

‘Probably not; but it’s worth trying. And in the meantime, I’ll have another watch kept at Gati’s.’

‘At Gati’s?’

‘Yes. They know him there. I’ll send a man down—’

‘But he never comes there now.’

‘Oh, but he may come again. There’s no reason why he shouldn’t. We know now that he’s in town, and not gone out of the country or anything. I’ll tell the management that he’s wanted for an urgent business matter, so as not to make unpleasantness.’

‘They won’t like it.’

‘Then they’ll have to lump it.’

‘He’s gone, anyway.’

‘I wish I’d had a better squint at him. Because I’ve got a sort of idea that I’ve seen those lovely features before, and not so long ago, either. Was this the face that launched a thousand ships? No, I don’t think it was that.’

‘All I can say is,’ said George, ‘that if I see him again, I’ll put such a face on him that his mother won’t know him.’

‘Don’t do that. You might destroy a clue. I—wait a minute—I’ve got an idea. I believe it must be the same man who’s been haunting the Bellona and asking questions. Oh, hades! and we’ve let him go. And I’d put him down in my mind as Oliver’s minion. If ever you see him again, Fentiman, freeze on to him like grim death. I want to talk to him.’

'He's so thick-skinned; the regular unimaginative Briton. I believe Robert would cheerfully go through another five years of war and think it all a very good rag. Robert was proverbial, you know, for never turning a hair. I remember Robert, at that ghastly hole at Carency, where the whole ground was rotten with corpses—ugh!—potting those swollen great rats for a penny a time, and laughing at them. Rats. Alive and putrid with what they'd been feeding on. Oh, yes. Robert was thought a damn good soldier.'

'Very fortunate for him,' said Wimsey.

'Yes. He's the same sort as grandfather. They liked each other. Still, grandfather was very decent about me. A beast, as the school-boy said, but a just beast. And Sheila was a great favourite of his.'

'Nobody could help liking her,' said Wimsey, politely.

Lunch ended on a more cheerful note than it had begun. As they came out into the street, however, George Fentiman glanced round uneasily. A small man in a buttoned-up overcoat and with a soft hat pulled down over his eyes, was gazing into the window of a shop near at hand.

George strode up to him.

'Look here, you!' he said. 'What the devil do you mean by following me about? You clear off, d'you hear?'

'I think you are mistaken, sir,' said the man, quietly enough. 'I have never seen you before.'

'Haven't you, by jove? Well, *I've* seen *you* hanging about, and if you do it any more, I'll give you something to remember me by. D'you hear?'

'Hullo!' said Wimsey, who had stopped to speak to the commissionaire, 'what's up?—Here, you, wait a moment!'

But at sight of Wimsey, the man had slipped like an eel among the roaring Strand traffic, and was lost to view.

George Fentiman turned to his companion triumphantly.

'Did you see that? That lousy little beggar! Made off like a shot when I threatened him. That's the fellow who's been dogging me about for three days.'

'I'm sorry,' said Wimsey, 'but it was not your prowess, Fentiman. It was my awful aspect that drove him away. What is it about me? Have I a front like Jove to threaten and command? Or am I wearing a repulsive tie?'

'Well, all right. But, look here—*I'll* do Gatti's.'

'That won't do. We want you to identify him at Charing Cross. The waiter or somebody can do the identifying at Gatti's. You say they know him.'

'Yes, of course they do. But—'

'But what?—By the way, which waiter is it you spoke to. I had a talk with the head man there yesterday, and he didn't seem to know anything about it.'

'No—it wasn't the head waiter. One of the others. The plump, dark one.'

'All right. I'll find the right one. Now, will you see to the Charing Cross end?'

'Of course—if you really think it's any good.'

'Yes, I do. Right you are. I'll get hold of the 'tec and send him along to you, and you can arrange with him.'

'Very well.'

'Cheerio!'

Lord Peter rang off and sat for a few moments, grinning to himself. Then he turned to Bunter.

'I don't often prophesy, Bunter, but I'm going to do it now. Your fortune told by hand or cards. Beware of the dark stranger. That sort of thing.'

'Indeed, my lord?'

'Cross the gypsy's palm with silver. I see Mr Oliver. I see him taking a journey in which he will cross water. I see trouble. I see the ace of spades—upside-down, Bunter.'

'And what then, my lord?'

'Nothing. I look into the future and I see a blank. The gypsy has spoken.'

'I will bear it in mind, my lord.'

'Do. If my prediction is not fulfilled, I will give you a new camera. And now I'm going round to see that fellow who calls himself Sleuths Incorporated, and get him to put a good man on to keep watch at Charing Cross. And after that, I'm going down to Chelsea and I don't quite know when I shall be back. You'd better take the afternoon off. Put me out some sandwiches or something, and don't wait up if I'm late.'

Wimsey disposed quickly of his business with Sleuths Incorporated, and then made his way to a pleasant little studio overlooking the river at Chelsea. The door, which bore a neat label 'Miss Marjorie Phelps,' was opened by a pleasant-looking young woman with curly hair and a blue overall heavily smudged with clay.

'Lord Peter! How nice of you. Do come in.'

'Shan't I be in the way?'

'Not a scrap. You don't mind if I go on working.'

'Rather not.'

'You could put the kettle on and find some food if you liked to be really helpful. I just want to finish up this figure.'

'That's fine. I took the liberty of bringing a pot of Hybla honey with me.'

'What sweet ideas you have! I really think you are one of the nicest people I know. You don't talk rubbish about art, and you don't want your hand held, and your mind always turns on eating and drinking.'

'Don't speak too soon. I don't want my hand held, but I did come here with an object.'

'Very sensible of you. Most people come without any.'

'And stay interminably.'

'They do.'

Miss Phelps cocked her head on one side and looked critically at the little dancing lady she was modelling. She had made a line of her own in pottery figurines, which sold well and were worth the money.

'That's rather attractive,' said Wimsey.

'Rather pretty-pretty. But it's a special order, and one can't afford to be particular. I've done a Christmas present for you, by the way. You'd better have a look at it, and if you think it offensive we'll smash it together. It's in that cupboard.'

Wimsey opened the cupboard and extracted a little figure about nine inches high. It represented a young man in a flowing dressing-gown, absorbed in the study of a huge volume held on his knee. The portrait was life-like. He chuckled.

'It's damned good, Marjorie. A very fine bit of modelling. I'd love to have it. You aren't multiplying it too often, I hope? I mean, it won't be on sale at Selfridges?'

course I didn't mean half I said. She knows that, but the old man took it all seriously.'

'Half a moment,' broke in Wimsey, 'did he say all this to you in the taxi that day?'

'Yes, he did. A long lecture, all about the purity and courage of a good woman, driving round and round Regent's Park. I had to promise to turn over a new leaf and all that. Like being back at one's prep. school.'

'But didn't he mention anything about the money Lady Dormer was leaving to him?'

'Not a word. I don't suppose he knew about it.'

'I think he did. He'd just come from seeing her, you know, and I've a very good idea she explained matters to him then.'

'Did she? Well, that rather explains it. I thought he was being very pompous and stiff about it. He said what a responsibility money was, you know, and how he would like to feel that anything he left to me was being properly used and all that. And he rubbed it in about my not having been able to make good for myself—that was what got my goat—and about Sheila. Said I ought to appreciate a good woman's love more, my boy, and cherish her and so on. As if I needed him to tell me that. But of course, if he knew he was in the running for this half-million, it makes rather a difference. By jove, yes! I expect he would feel a bit anxious at the idea of leaving it all to a fellow he looked on as a waster.'

'I wonder he didn't mention it.'

'You didn't know grandfather. I bet he was thinking over in his mind whether it wouldn't be better to give my share to Sheila, and he was sounding me, to see what sort of disposition I'd got. The old fox! Well, I did my best to put myself in a good light, of course, because just at the moment I didn't want to lose my chance of his two thousand. But I don't think he found me satisfactory. I say,' went on George, with rather a sheepish laugh, 'perhaps it's just as well he popped off when he did. He might have cut me off with a shilling, eh?'

'Your brother would have seen you through in any case.'

'I suppose he would. Robert's quite a decent sort, really, though he does get on one's nerves so.'

'Does he?'

‘But what does he want?’

‘How should I know? What have you been doing?’

‘Nothing, of course. I tell you, Wimsey, I believe there’s some sort of conspiracy going on to get me into trouble, or do away with me, or something. I can’t stand it. It’s simply damnable. Suppose this fellow starts hanging round the Walmisley-Hubbard place. Look nice, won’t it, for their salesman to have a ’tec on his heels all the time? Just as I hoped things were coming right—’

‘Bosh!’ said Wimsey. ‘Don’t let yourself get rattled. It’s probably all imagination, or just a coincidence.’

‘It isn’t. I wouldn’t mind betting he’s outside in the street now.’

‘Well, then, we’ll settle his hash when we get outside. Give him in charge for annoying you. Look here, forget him for a bit. Tell me about the old General. How did he seem, that last time you saw him?’

‘Oh, he seemed fit enough. Crusty, as usual.’

‘Crusty, was he? What about?’

‘Private matters,’ said George, sullenly.

Wimsey cursed himself for having started his questions tactlessly. The only thing now was to retrieve the situation as far as possible.

‘I’m not at all sure,’ he said, ‘that relations shouldn’t all be painlessly put away after threescore and ten. Or at any rate segregated. Or have their tongues sterilized, so that they can’t be poisonously interfein.’

‘I wish they were,’ growled George. ‘The old man—damn it all, I know he was in the Crimea, but he’s no idea what a real war’s like. He thinks things can go on just as they did half a century ago. I daresay he never did behave as I do. Anyway, I know he never had to go to his wife for his pocket-money, let alone having the inside gassed out of him. Coming preaching to me—and I couldn’t say anything, because he was so confoundedly old, you know.’

‘Very trying,’ murmured Wimsey, sympathetically.

‘It’s all so damned unfair,’ said George. ‘Do you know,’ he burst out, the sense of grievance suddenly overpowering his wounded vanity, ‘the old devil actually threatened to cut me out of the miserable little bit of money he had to leave me if I didn’t “reform my domestic behaviour”. That’s the way he talked. Just as if I was carrying on with another woman or something. I know I did have an awful row with Sheila one day, but of

‘I’ll spare you that. I thought of giving one to your mother.’

‘That’ll please her no end. Thanks ever so. I shall look forward to Christmas, for once. Shall I make some toast?’

‘Rather!’

Wimsey squatted happily down before the gasfire, while the model-ler went on with her work. Tea and figurine were ready almost at the same moment, and Miss Phelps, flinging off her overall, threw herself luxuriously into a battered arm-chair by the hearth.

‘And what can I do for you?’

‘You can tell me all you know about Miss Ann Dorland.’

‘Ann Dorland? Great heavens! You haven’t fallen for Ann Dorland, have you? I’ve heard she’s coming into a lot of money.’

‘You have a perfectly disgusting mind, Miss Phelps. Have some more toast. Excuse me licking my fingers. I have not fallen for the lady. If I had, I’d manage my affairs without assistance. I haven’t even seen her. What’s she like?’

‘To look at?’

‘Among other things.’

‘Well, she’s rather plain. She has dark, straight hair, cut in a bang across the forehead and bobbed—like a Flemish page. Her forehead is broad and she has a square sort of face and a straight nose—quite good. Also, her eyes are good—gray, with nice heavy eyebrows, not fashionable a bit. But she has a bad skin and rather sticky-out teeth. And she’s dumpy.’

‘She’s a painter, isn’t she?’

‘M’m—well! she paints.’

‘I see. A well-off amateur with a studio.’

‘Yes. I will say that old Lady Dormer was very decent to her. Ann Dorland, you know, is some sort of far-away distant cousin on the female side of the Fentiman family, and when Lady Dormer first got to hear of her she was an orphan and incredibly poverty-stricken. The old lady liked to have a bit of young life about the house, so she took charge of her, and the wonderful thing is that she didn’t try to monopolize her. She let her have a big place for a studio and bring in any friends she liked and go about as she chose—in reason, of course.’

‘Lady Dormer suffered a good deal from oppressive relations in her own youth,’ said Wimsey.

'I know, but most old people seem to forget that. I'm sure Lady Dormer had time enough. She must have been rather unusual. Mind you, I didn't know her very well, and I don't really know a great deal about Ann Dorland. I've been there, of course. She gave parties—rather incompetently. And she comes round to some of our studios from time to time. But she isn't really one of us.'

'Probably one has to be really poor and hard-working to be that.'

'No. You, for instance, fit in quite well on the rare occasions when we have the pleasure. And it doesn't matter not being able to paint. Look at Bobby Hobart and his ghastly daubs—he's a perfect dear and everybody loves him. I think Ann Dorland must have a complex of some kind. Complexes explain so much, like the blessed word hippopotamus.'

Wimsey helped himself lavishly to honey and looked receptive.

'I think really,' went on Miss Phelps, 'that Ann ought to have been something in the City. She has brains, you know. She'd run anything awfully well. But she isn't creative. And then, of course, so many of our little lot seem to be running love-affairs. And a continual atmosphere of hectic passion is very trying if you haven't got any of your own.'

'Has Miss Dorland a mind above hectic passion?'

'Well, no. I daresay she would quite have liked—but nothing ever came of it. Why are you interested in having Ann Dorland analysed?'

'I'll tell you some day. It isn't just vulgar curiosity.'

'No, you're very decent as a rule, or I wouldn't be telling you all this. I think, really, Ann has a sort of fixed idea that she couldn't ever possibly attract any one, and so she's either sentimental and tiresome, or rude and snubbing, and our crowd does hate sentimentality and simply can't bear to be snubbed. Ann's rather pathetic, really. As a matter of fact, I think she's gone off art a bit. Last time I heard about her, she had been telling some one she was going in for social service, or sick-nursing, or something of that kind. I think it's very sensible. She'd probably get along much better with the people who do that sort of thing. They're so much more solid and polite.'

'I see. Look here, suppose I ever wanted to run across Miss Dorland accidentally on purpose—where should I be likely to find her?'

'You *do* seem thrilled about her! I think I should try the Rushworths. They go in rather for science and improving the submerged tenth and

At Gatti's he left George in a corner while he went to have a chat with the head waiter, emerging from the interview with a puzzled expression which aroused even George's curiosity, full as he was of his own concerns. 'What's up? Isn't there anything you can bear to eat?'

'It's all right. I was just wondering whether to have *moules marinières* or not.'

'Good idea.'

Wimsey's face cleared, and for some time they absorbed mussels from the shell with speechless, though not altogether silent, satisfaction.

'By the way,' said Wimsey, suddenly, 'you never told me that you had seen your grandfather the afternoon before he died.'

George flushed. He was struggling with a particularly elastic mussel, firmly rooted to the shell, and could not answer for a moment.

'How on earth?—confound it all, Wimsey, are *you* behind this infernal watch that's being kept on me?'

'Watch?'

'Yes, I said watch. I call it a damn rotten thing to do. I never thought for a moment you had anything to do with it.'

'I haven't. Who's keeping a watch on you?'

'There's a fellow following me about. A spy. I'm always seeing him. I don't know whether he's a detective or what. He looks like a criminal. He came down in the bus with me from Finsbury Park this morning. He was after me all day yesterday. He's probably about now. I won't have it. If I catch sight of him again I shall knock his dirty little head off. Why should I be followed and spied on? I haven't done anything. And now *you* begin.'

'I swear I've nothing to do with anybody following you about. Honestly, I haven't. I wouldn't employ a man, anyway, who'd let a bloke see that he was being followed. No. When I start huntin' you, I shall be as silent and stealthy as a gas-leak. What's this incompetent bloodhound like to look at?'

'Looks like a tout. Small, thin, with his hat pulled down over his eyes and an old rain-coat with the collar turned up. And a very blue chin.'

'Sounds like a stage detective. He's a silly ass anyway.'

'He gets on my nerves.'

'Oh, all right. Next time you see him, punch his head.'

Wimsey submitted to a mild quick one and then wandered back to look at a new type of clutch. He spun out this interesting interview till one of the Walmisley-Hubbard 'shop 'buses' came in with Fentiman at the wheel.

'Hallo!' said Wimsey, 'trying her out?'

'Yes. I've got the hang of her all right.'

'Think you could sell her?' asked the old pal.

'Oh, yes. Soon learn to show her off. She's a jolly decent 'bus.'

'That's good. Well, I expect you're about ready for a quick one. How about it, Wimsey?'

They had a quick one together. After this, the dear old pal remembered that he must buzz off because he'd promised to hunt up a customer.

'You'll turn up to-morrow, then?' he said to George. 'There's an old bird down at Malden wants to have a trial trip. I can't go, so you can have a shot at him. All right?'

'Perfectly.'

'Righty-ho! I'll have the 'bus ready for you at eleven. Cheer-most-frightfully-ho! So long.'

'Little sunbeam about the house, isn't he?' said Wimsey.

'Rather. Have another?'

'I was thinking, how about lunch? Come along with me if you have nothing better to do.'

George accepted and put forward the names of one or two restaurants.

'No,' said Wimsey, 'I've got a fancy to go to Gatti's to-day, if you don't mind.'

'Not at all, that will do splendidly. I've seen Murbles, by the bye, and he's prepared to deal with the MacStewart man. He thinks he can hold him off till it's all settled up—if it ever *is* settled.'

'That's good,' said Wimsey, rather absently.

'And I'm damned glad about this chance of a job,' went on George. 'If it turns out any good, it'll make things a lot easier—in more than one way.'

Wimsey said heartily that he was sure it would, and then relapsed into a silence unusual with him, which lasted all the way to the Strand.

things like that. Of course, I suppose Ann's in mourning now, but I don't think that would necessarily keep her away from the Rushworth's. Their gatherings aren't precisely frivolous.'

'Thanks very much. You're a mine of valuable information. And, for a woman, you don't ask many questions.'

'Thank you for those few kind words, Lord Peter.'

'I am now free to devote my invaluable attention to *your* concerns. What is the news? And who is in love with whom?'

'Oh, life is a perfect desert. Nobody is in love with me, and the Schlitzers have had a worse row than usual and separated.'

'No!'

'Yes. Only, owing to financial considerations, they've got to go on sharing the same studio—you know, that big room over the mews. It must be very awkward having to eat and sleep and work in the same room with somebody you're being separated from. They don't even speak, and it's very awkward when you call on one of them and the other has to pretend not to be able to see or hear you.'

'I shouldn't think one could keep it up under those circumstances.'

'It's difficult. I'd have had Olga here, only she is so dreadfully bad-tempered. Besides, neither of them will give up the studio to the other.'

'I see. But isn't there any third party in the case?'

'Yes—Utric Fiennes, the sculptor, you know. But he can't have her at his place because his wife's there, and he's really dependent on his wife, because his sculpting doesn't pay. And besides, he's at work on that colossal group for the Exhibition and he can't move it; it weighs about twenty tons. And if he went off and took Olga away, his wife would lock him out of the place. It's very inconvenient being a sculptor. It's like playing the double-bass; one's so handicapped by one's baggage.'

'True. Whereas, when you run away with me, we'll be able to put all the pottery shepherds and shepherdesses in a handbag.'

'Of course. What fun it will be. Where shall we run to?'

'How about starting to-night and getting as far as Oddenino's and going on to a show—if you're not doing anything?'

'You are a loveable man, and I shall call you Peter. Shall we see "Betwixt and Between"?''

'The thing they had such a job to get past the censor? Yes, if you like. Is it particularly obscene?'

'No, epicene, I fancy.'

'Oh, I see. Well, I'm quite agreeable. Only I warn you that I shall make a point of asking you the meaning of all the risky bits in a very audible voice.'

'That's your idea of amusement, is it?'

'Yes. It does make them so wild. People say "Hush!" and giggle, and if I'm lucky I end up with a gorgeous row in the bar.'

'Then I won't risk it. No. I'll tell you what I'd really love. We'll go and see "George Barnwell" at the Elephant and have a fish-and-chips supper afterwards.'

This was agreed upon, and was voted in retrospect a most profitable evening. It finished up with grilled kippers at a friend's studio in the early hours. Lord Peter returned home to find a note upon the hall-table.

My lord,

The person from Sleuths Incorporated rang up to-day that he was inclined to acquiesce in your lordship's opinion, but that he was keeping his eye upon the party and would report further to-morrow. The sandwiches are on the dining-room table, if your lordship should require refreshment.

Yours obediently,

M. BUNTER.

'Cross the gypsy's palm with silver,' said his lordship, happily, and rolled into bed.

'I'm never serious. That's what my friends dislike about me. Honestly, I'll try and make as little row as I can. But if Oliver is sending his minions to corrupt your staff and play old harr with my investigations, it's going to make it damned awkward. I wish you'd let me know if the fellow turns up again. I'd like to cast my eye over him.'

'All right, I will. And do clear out now, there's a good fellow.'

'I go,' said Wimsey, 'my tail well tucked down between my legs and a flea in each ear. Oh! by the way—'

'Well?' (in an exasperated tone).

'When did you last see George Fentiman?'

'Not for donkey's years. Not since it happened.'

'I thought not. Oh, and by the way—'

'Yes?'

'Robert Fentiman was actually staying in the Club at the time, wasn't he?'

'Which time?'

'The time it happened, you ass.'

'Yes, he was. But he's living at the old man's place now.'

'I know, thanks. But I wondered whether—Where does he live when he isn't in town?'

'Out at Richmond, I think. In rooms, or something.'

'Oh, does he? Thanks very much. Yes, I really will go. In fact, I've practically gone.'

He went. He never stopped going till he came to Finsbury Park. George was out, and so, of course, was Mrs Fentiman, but the charwoman said she had heard the Captain mention he was going down to Great Portland Street. Wimsey went in pursuit. A couple of hours spent lounging round show-rooms and talking to car-demonstrators, nearly all of whom were, in one manner or another, his dear old pals, resulted in the discovery that George Fentiman was being taken on by the Walmisley-Hubbard outfit for a few weeks to show what he could do.

'Oh, he'll do you all right,' said Wimsey, 'he's a damn fine driver. Oh, lord, yes! *He's* all right.'

'He looks a bit nerry,' said the particular dear old pal attached to the Walmisley-Hubbard show. 'Wants bucking up, what? That reminds me. What about a quick one?'