Chapter 13

Manon

'That one word, my dear Watson, should have told me the whole story, had I been the ideal reasoner which you are so fond of depicting.'

Memoirs Of Sherlock Holmes

'THANK God,' said Parker. 'Well, that settles it.'

'It does—and yet again, it doesn't,' retorted Lord Peter. He leaned back against the fat silk cushion in the sofa corner meditatively.

'Of course, it's disagreeable having to give this woman away,' said Parker sensibly and pleasantly, 'but these things have to be done.'

'I know. It's all simply awfully nice and all that. And Jerry, who's got the poor woman into this mess, has to be considered first. I know. And if we don't restrain Grimethorpe quite successfully, and he cuts her throat for her, it'll be simply rippin' for Jerry to think of all his life.... Jerry! I say, you know, what frightful idiots we were not to see the truth right off! I mean—of course, my sister-in-law is an awfully good woman, and all that, but Mrs Grimethorpe—whew! I told you about the time she mistook me for Jerry. One crowded, split second of glorious all-overishness. I ought to have known then. Our voices are alike, of course, and she couldn't see in that dark kitchen. I don't believe there's an ounce of any feeling left in the woman except sheer terror—but, ye gods! what eyes and skin! Well, never mind. Some undeserving fellows have all the luck. Have you got any really good stories? No? Well, I'll tell you some—enlarge your mind and all that. Do you know the rhyme about the young man at the War Office?'

Mr Parker endured five stories with commendable patience, and then suddenly broke down.

'Hurray!' said Wimsey. 'Splendid man! I love to see you melt into a refined snigger from time to time. I'll spare you the really outrageous one about the young housewife and the traveller in bicycle-pumps. You know, Charles, I really should like to know who did Cathcart in. Legally, it's enough to prove Jerry innocent, but, Mrs Grimethorpe or no Mrs Grimethorpe, it doesn't do us credit in a professional capacity. "The father weakens, but the governor is firm"; that is, as a brother I am satisfied—I may say light-hearted—but as a sleuth I am cast down, humiliated, thrown back upon myself, a lodge in a garden of cucumbers. Besides, of all defences an alibi is the most awkward to establish, unless a number of independent and disinterested witnesses combine to make it thoroughly air-tight. If Jerry sticks to his denial, the most they can be sure of is that either he or Mrs Grimethorpe is being chivalrous.'

'But you've got the letter.'

'Yes. But how are we going to prove that it came that evening? The envelope is destroyed. Fleming remembers nothing about it. Jerry might have received it days earlier. Or it might be a complete fake. Who is to say that I didn't put it in the window myself and pretend to find it. After all, I'm hardly what you would call disinterested.'

'Bunter saw you find it.'

'He didn't, Charles. At that precise moment he was out of the room fetching shaving-water.'

'Oh, was he?'

'Moreover, only Mrs Grimethorpe can swear to what is really the important point—the moment of Jerry's arrival and departure. Unless he was at Grider's Hole before 12:30 at least, it's immaterial whether he was there or not.'

'Well,' said Parker, 'can't we keep Mrs Grimethorpe up our sleeve, so to speak— '

'Sounds a bit abandoned,' said Lord Peter, 'but we will keep her with pleasure if you like.'

'—and meanwhile,' pursued Mr Parker, unheeding, 'do our best to find the actual criminal?'

'Oh, yes,' said Lord Peter, 'and that reminds me. I made a discovery at the Lodge—at least, I think so. Did you notice that somebody had been forcing one of the study windows?'

'No, really?'

'No. If you call upon me, I am a lost woman. But you will find another way?'

'I will try, but I can promise nothing. I will do everything that is possible to protect you. If you care at all for my brother— '

'I don't know. I am so horribly afraid. He was kind and good to me. He was—so different. But I am afraid—I'm afraid.'

Wimsey turned. Her terrified eyes had seen the shadow cross the threshold. Grimethorpe was at the door, glowering in upon them.

'Ah, Mr Grimethorpe,' exclaimed Wimsey cheerfully, 'there you are. Awfully pleased to see you and thank you, don'tcherknow, for puttin' me up. I was just saying so to Mrs Grimethorpe, an' asking her to say good-bye to you for me. Must be off now, I'm afraid. Bunter and I are ever so grateful to you both for all your kindness. Oh, and I say, could you find me the stout fellows who hauled us out of that Pot of yours last night—if it is yours. Nasty, damp thing to keep outside the front door, what? I'd like to thank 'em.'

'Dom good thing for unwelcome guests,' said the man ferociously. 'An' tha'd better be off afore Ah throws thee out.'

'I'm just off,' said Peter. 'Good-bye again, Mrs Grimethorpe, and a thousand thanks.'

He collected Bunter, rewarded his rescuers suitably, took an affectionate farewell of the enraged farmer, and departed, sore in body and desperately confused in mind.

'Yes, that fits in all right. Three quarters of an hour to go and three quarters to come back. He stuck this into the window, I suppose, to keep it from rattling?'

'There was a high wind—I was nervous. I thought every sound was my husband coming back.'

'Where was your husband?'

'At Stapley.'

'Had he suspected this?'

'Yes, for some time.'

'Since my brother was here in August?'

'Yes. But he could get no proof. If he had had proof he would have killed me. You have seen him. He is a devil.'

'M'm.'

Wimsey was silent. The woman glanced fearfully at his face and seemed to read some hope there, for she clutched him by the arm.

'If you call me to give evidence,' she said, 'he will know. He *will* kill me. For God's sake, have pity. That letter is my death-warrant. Oh, for the mother that bore you, have mercy upon me. My life is a hell, and when I die I shall go to hell for my sin. Find some other way—you can—you must.'

Wimsey gently released himself.

'Don't do that, Mrs Grimethorpe. We might be seen. I am deeply sorry for you, and, if I can get my brother out of this without bringing you in, I promise you I will. But you see the difficulty. Why don't you leave this man? He is openly brutal to you.'

She laughed.

'Do you think he'd leave me alive while the law was slowly releasing me? Knowing him, do you think so?'

Wimsey really did not think so.

'I will promise you this, Mrs Grimethorpe. I will do all I can to avoid having to use your evidence. But if there should be no other way, I will see that you have police protection from the moment that the subpoena is served on you.'

'And for the rest of my life?'

'When you are once in London we will see about freeing you from this man.'

'Yes; I found distinct marks. Of course, it was a long time after the murder, but there were scratches on the catch all right—the sort of thing a penknife would leave.'

'What fools we were not to make an examination at the time!'

'Come to think of it, why should you have? Anyhow, I asked Fleming about it, and he said he did remember, now he came to think of it, that on the Thursday morning he'd found the window open, and couldn't account for it. And here's another thing. I've had a letter from my friend Tim Watchett. Here it is:'

My Lord—

About our conversation. I have found a Man who was with the Party in question at the 'Pig and Whistle' on the night of the 13th *ult.* and he tells me that the Party borrowed his bicycle, and same was found afterwards in the ditch where Party was picked up with the Handlebars bent and wheels buckled.

Trusting to the Continuance of your esteemed favour.

TIMOTHY WATCHETT.

'What do you think of that?'

'Good enough to go on,' said Parker. 'At least, we are no longer hampered with horrible doubts.'

'No. And, though she's my sister, I must say that of all the blithering she-asses Mary is the blitheringest. Taking up with that awful bounder to start with— '

'She was jolly fine about it,' said Mr Parker, getting rather red in the face. 'It's just because she's your sister that you can't appreciate what a fine thing she did. How should a big, chivalrous nature like hers see through a man like that? She's so sincere and thorough herself, she judges everyone by the same standard. She wouldn't believe anybody could be so thin and wobbly-minded as Goyles till it was proved to her. And even then she couldn't bring herself

to think ill of him till he'd given himself away out of his own mouth. It was wonderful, the way she fought for him. Think what it must have meant to such a splendid, straight-forward woman to— '

'All right, all right,' cried Peter, who had been staring at his friend, transfixed with astonishment. 'Don't get worked up. I believe you. Spare me. I'm only a brother. All brothers are fools. All lovers are lunatics—Shakespeare says so. Do you want Mary, old man? You surprise me, but I believe brothers always are surprised. Bless you, dear children!'

'Damn it all, Wimsey,' said Parker, very angry, 'you've no right to talk like that. I only said how greatly I admired your sister—everyone must admire such pluck and staunchness. You needn't be insulting. I know she's Lady Mary Wimsey and damnably rich, and I'm only a common police official with nothing a year and a pension to look forward to, but there's no need to sneer about it.'

'I'm not sneering,' retorted Peter indignantly. 'I can't imagine why anybody should want to marry my sister, but you're a friend of mine and a damn good sort, and you've my good word for what it's worth. Besides—dash it all, man!—to put it on the lowest grounds, do look what it might have been! A Socialist Conchy of neither bowels nor breeding, or a card-sharping dark horse with a mysterious past! Mother and Jerry must have got to the point when they'd welcome a decent, God-fearing plumber, let alone a policeman. Only thing I'm afraid of is that Mary, havin' such beastly bad taste in blokes, won't know how to appreciate a really decent fellow like you, old son.'

Mr Parker begged his friend's pardon for his unworthy suspicions, and they sat a little time in silence. Parker sipped his port, and saw unimaginable visions warmly glowing in its rosy depths. Wimsey pulled out his pocket-book, and began idly turning over its contents, throwing old letters into the fire, unfolding and refolding memoranda, and reviewing a miscellaneous series of other people's visiting-cards. He came at length to the slip of blotting-paper from the study at Riddlesdale, to whose fragmentary markings he had since given scarcely a thought.

Presently Mr Parker, finishing his port and recalling his mind with an effort, remembered that he had been meaning to tell Peter something before the name of Lady Mary had driven all other thoughts out of his head. He turned to his host, open-mouthed for speech, but his remark never got beyond a preliminary

If you do so you surely need not trouble about this alibi. Your brother's movements are his own business.'

'I could wish,' said Wimsey, 'you had not taken up this attitude. Believe me, I would have done all I could to spare you. I have been working hard to find, as you say, the real murderer, but with no success. The trial will probably take place at the end of the month.'

Her lips twitched a little at that, but she said nothing.

'I had hoped that with your help we might agree on some explanation—less than the truth, perhaps, but sufficient to clear my brother. As it is, I fear I shall have to produce the proof I hold, and let matters take their course.'

That, at last, struck under her guard. A dull flush crept up her cheeks; one hand tightened upon the handle of the churn, where she had rested it.

'What do you mean by proof?'

'I can prove that on the night of the 13th my brother slept in the room I occupied last night,' said Wimsey, with calculated brutality.

She winced. 'It is a lie. You cannot prove it. He will deny it. I shall deny it.'

'He was not there?'

'No.'

'Then how did this come to be wedged in the sash of the bedroom window?'

At sight of the letter she broke down, crumpling up in a heap against the table. The set lines of her face distorted themselves into a mere caricature of terror.

'No, no, no! It is a lie! God help me!'

'Hush!' said Wimsey peremptorily. 'Someone will hear you.' He dragged her to her feet. 'Tell the truth, and we will see if we can find a way out. It is true—he was here that night?'

'You know it.'

'When did he come?'

'At a quarter past twelve.'

'Who let him in?'

'He had the keys.'

'When did he leave you?'

'A little after two.'

'He has, in the most decided manner, refused to state where he was between eleven and three on that night. His refusal has brought him into great danger of his life.'

She looked at him steadily.

'He feels bound in honour not to disclose his whereabouts, though I know that, if he chose to speak, he could bring a witness to clear him.'

'He seems to be a very honourable man.' The cold voice wavered a trifle, then steadied again.

'Yes. Undoubtedly, from his point of view, he is doing the right thing. You will understand, however, that, as his brother, I am naturally anxious to have the matter put in its proper light.'

'I don't understand why you are telling me all this. I suppose, if the thing is disgraceful, he doesn't want it known.'

'Obviously. But to us—to his wife and young son, and to his sister and myself—his life and safety are matters of the first importance.'

'Of more importance than his honour?'

'The secret is a disgraceful one in a sense, and will give pain to his family. But it would be an infinitely greater disgrace that he should be executed for murder. The stigma in that case would involve all those who bear his name. The shame of the truth will, I fear, in this very unjust society of ours, rest more upon the witness to his alibi than upon himself.'

'Can you in that case expect the witness to come forward?'

'To prevent the condemnation of an innocent man? Yes, I think I may venture to expect even that.'

'I repeat—why are you telling me all this?'

'Because, Mrs Grimethorpe, you know, even better than I, how innocent my brother is of this murder. Believe me, I am deeply distressed at having to say these things to you.'

'I know nothing about your brother.'

'Forgive me, that is not true.'

'I know nothing. And surely, if the Duke will not speak, you should respect his reasons.'

'I am not bound in any way.'

'I am afraid I cannot help you. You are wasting time. If you cannot produce your missing witness, why do you not set about finding the real murderer?

click like that of a clock about to strike, for, even as he turned, Lord Peter brought his fist down on the little table with a bang that made the decanters ring, and cried out in the loud voice of complete and sudden enlightenment:

'*Manon Lescaut*!'

'Eh?' said Mr Parker.

'Boil my brains!' said Lord Peter. 'Boil 'em and mash 'em and serve 'em up with butter as a dish of turnips, for it's damn well all they're fit for! Look at me!' (Mr Parker scarcely needed this exhortation.) 'Here we've been worryin' over Jerry, an' worryin' over Mary, an' huntin' for Goyleses an' Grimethorpes and God knows who—and all the time I'd got this little bit of paper tucked away in my pocket. The blot upon the paper's rim a blotted paper was to him, and it was nothing more. But *Manon*, *Manon*! Charles, if I'd had the grey matter of a woodlouse that book ought to have told me the whole story. And think what we'd have been saved!'

'I wish you wouldn't be so excited,' said Parker. 'I'm sure it's perfectly splendid for you to see your way so clearly, but I never read *Manon Lescaut*, and you haven't shown me the blotting-paper, and I haven't the foggiest idea what you've discovered.'

Lord Peter passed the relic over without comment.

'I observe,' said Parker, 'that the paper is rather crumpled and dirty, and smells powerfully of tobacco and Russian leather, and deduce that you have been keeping it in your pocket-book.'

'No!' said Wimsey incredulously. 'And when you actually saw me take it out! Holmes, how do you do it?'

'At one corner,' pursued Parker, 'I see two blots, one rather larger than the other. I think someone must have shaken a pen there. Is there anything sinister about the blot?'

'I haven't noticed anything.'

'Some way below the blots the Duke has signed his name two or three times—or, rather, his title. The inference is that his letters were not to intimates.'

'The inference is justifiable, I fancy.'

'Colonel Marchbanks has a neat signature.'

'He can hardly mean mischief,' said Peter. 'He signs his name like an honest man! Proceed.'

'There's a sprawly message about five something of fine something. Do you see anything occult there?'

'The number five may have a cabalistic meaning, but I admit I don't know what it is. There are five senses, five fingers, five great Chinese precepts, five books of Moses, to say nothing of the mysterious entities hymned in the Dilly Song—"Five are the flamboys under the pole." I must admit that I have always panted to know what the five flamboys were. But, not knowing, I get no help from it in this case.'

'Well, that's all, except a fragment consisting of "oe" on one line, and "is fou— " below it.'

'What do you make of that?'

'"Is found," I suppose.'

'Do you?'

'That seems the simplest interpretation. Or possibly "his foul"—there seems to have been a sudden rush of ink to the pen just there. Do you think it is "his foul"? Was the Duke writing about Cathcart's foul play? Is that what you mean?'

'No, I don't make that of it. Besides, I don't think it's Jerry's writing.'

'Whose is it?'

'I don't know, but I can guess.'

'And it leads somewhere?'

'It tells the whole story.'

'Oh, cough it up, Wimsey. Even Dr Watson would lose patience.'

'Tut, tut! Try the line above.'

'Well, there's only "oe."'

'Yes, well?'

'Well, I don't know. Poet, poem, manœuvre, Loeb edition, Citroën—it might be anything.'

'Dunno about that. There aren't lashings of English words with "oe" in them—and it's written so close it almost looks like a diphthong at that.'

'Perhaps it isn't an English word.'

'Exactly; perhaps it isn't.'

'Oh! Oh, I see. French?'

'Ah, you're gettin' warm.'

'Sœur—œuvre—œuf—bœuf— '

The woman looked doubtfully at him, wiped her hands on her apron, and, going into the scullery, shouted, 'Mrs Grimethorpe!' A voice replied from somewhere outside.

'Gentleman wants see tha.'

'Where is Mrs Grimethorpe?' broke in Peter hurriedly.

'I' t'dairy, recken.'

'I'll go to her there,' said Wimsey, stepping briskly out. He passed through a stone-paved scullery, and across a yard, in time to see Mrs Grimethorpe emerging from a dark doorway opposite.

Framed there, the cold sunlight just lighting upon her still, dead-white face and heavy, dark hair, she was more wonderful than ever. There was no trace of Yorkshire descent in the long, dark eyes and curled mouth. The curve of nose and cheekbones vouched for an origin immensely remote; coming out of the darkness, she might have just risen from her far tomb in the Pyramids, dropping the dry and perfumed grave-bands from her fingers.

Lord Peter pulled himself together.

'Foreign,' he said to himself matter-of-factly. 'Touch of Jew perhaps, or Spanish, is it? Remarkable type. Don't blame Jerry. Couldn't live with Helen myself. Now for it.'

He advanced quickly.

'Good morning,' she said, 'are you better?'

'Perfectly all right, thank you—thanks to your kindness, which I do not know how to repay.'

'You will repay any kindness best by going at once,' she answered in her remote voice. 'My husband does not care for strangers, and 'twas unfortunate the way you met before.'

'I will go directly. But I must first beg for the favour of a word with you.' He peered past her into the dimness of the dairy. 'In here, perhaps?'

'What do you want with me?'

She stepped back, however, and allowed him to follow her in.

'Mrs Grimethorpe, I am placed in a most painful position. You know that my brother, the Duke of Denver, is in prison, awaiting his trial for a murder which took place on the night of October 13th?'

Her face did not change. 'I have heard so.'

His Majesty of the date proposed for the trial; arranging for fitting up the Royal Gallery at Westminster; humbly requesting the attendance of a sufficient police force to keep clear the approaches leading to the House; petitioning His Majesty graciously to appoint a Lord High Steward; ordering, in sheeplike accordance with precedent, that all lords be summoned to attend in their robes; that every lord, in giving judgment, disclose his opinion upon his honour, laying his right hand upon his heart; that the Sergeant-at-Arms be within the House to make proclamations in the King's name for keeping silence—and so on, and on, unendingly. And there, jammed in the window-sash, was the dirty little bit of paper which, discovered earlier, would have made the whole monstrous ceremonial unnecessary.

Wimsey's adventure in the bog had unsettled his nerves. He sat down on the bed and laughed, with the tears streaming down his face.

Mr Bunter was speechless. Speechlessly he produced a razor—and to the end of his days Wimsey never knew how or from whom he had so adequately procured it—and began to strop it thoughtfully upon the palm of his hand.

Presently Wimsey pulled himself together and staggered to the window for a little cooling draught of moor air. As he did so, a loud hullabaloo smote his ear, and he perceived, in the courtyard below, Farmer Grimethorpe striding among his dogs; when they howled he struck at them with a whip, and they howled again. Suddenly he glanced up at the window, with an expression of such livid hatred that Wimsey stepped hurriedly back as though struck.

While Bunter shaved him he was silent.

The interview before Lord Peter was a delicate one; the situation, however one looked at it, unpleasant. He was under a considerable debt of gratitude to his hostess; on the other hand, Denver's position was such that minor considerations really had to go to the wall. His lordship had, nevertheless, never felt quite such a cad as he did while descending the staircase at Grider's Hole.

In the big farm kitchen he found a stout country-woman, stirring a pot of stew. He asked for Mr Grimethorpe, and was told that he had gone out.

'Can I speak to Mrs Grimethorpe, please?'

'No, no. You were nearer the first time.'

'Sœur—Cœur!'

'Cœur. Hold on a moment. Look at the scratch in front of that.'

'Wait a bit—er—cer— '

'How about *percer*?'

'I believe you're right. "Percer le cœur."'

'Yes. Or "perceras le cœur."'

'That's better. It seems to need another letter or two.'

'And now your "is found" line.'

'*Fou!*'

'Who?'

'I didn't say "who"; I said "*fou*".'

'I know you did. I said who?'

'Who?'

'Who's *fou*?'

'Oh, is. By Jove, "suis"! "Je suis fou."'

'*À la bonne heure!* And I suggest that the next words are "*de douleur*", or something like it.'

'They might be.'

'Cautious beast! I say they are.'

'Well, and suppose they are?'

'It tells us everything.'

'Nothing!'

'Everything, I say. Think. This was written on the day Cathcart died. Now who in the house would be likely to write these words, "*perceras le cœur…je suis fou de douleur*"? Take everybody. I know it isn't Jerry's fist, and he wouldn't use those expressions. Colonel or Mrs Marchbanks? Not Pygmalion likely! Freddy? Couldn't write passionate letters in French to save his life.'

'No, of course not. It would have to be either Cathcart or—Lady Mary.'

'Rot! It couldn't be Mary.'

'Why not?'

'Not unless she changed her sex, you know.'

'Of course not. It would have to be "je suis folle." Then Cathcart— '

'Of course. He lived in France all his life. Consider his bank-book. Consider— '

'Lord! Wimsey, we've been blind.'

'Yes.'

'And listen! I was going to tell you. The Sûreté write me that they've traced one of Cathcart's bank-notes.'

'Where to?'

'To a Mr François who owns a lot of house property near the Etoile.'

'And lets it out in *appartements*!'

'No doubt.'

'When's the next train? Bunter!'

'My lord!'

Mr Bunter hurried to the door at the call.

'The next boat-train for Paris?'

'Eight-twenty, my lord, from Waterloo.'

'We're going by it. How long?'

'Twenty minutes, my lord.'

'Pack my toothbrush and call a taxi.'

'Certainly, my lord.'

'But, Wimsey, what light does it throw on Cathcart's murder? Did this woman— '

'I've no time,' said Wimsey hurriedly. 'But I'll be back in a day or two. Meanwhile— '

He hunted hastily in the bookshelf.

'Read this.'

He flung the book at his friend and plunged into his bedroom.

At eleven o'clock, as a gap of dirty water disfigured with oil and bits of paper widened between the *Normannia* and the quay; while hardened passengers fortified their sea-stomachs with cold ham and pickles, and the more nervous studied the Boddy jackets in their cabins; while the harbour lights winked and swam right and left, and Lord Peter scraped acquaintance with a second-rate cinema actor in the bar, Charles Parker sat, with a puzzled frown, before the fire at 110 Piccadilly, making his first acquaintance with the delicate masterpiece of the Abbé Prévost.

upside-down, as a cure for anæmia of the brain. Jerry! Jerry! But, naturally, of course, you rotten ass, isn't it obvious? Silly old blighter. Why couldn't he tell Murbles or me?'

Mr Bunter advanced, the picture of respectful inquiry.

'Look at it—look at it!' said Wimsey, with a hysterical squeak of laughter. 'O Lord! O Lord! Stuck into the window-frame for anybody to find. *Just* like Jerry. Signs his name to the business in letters a foot long, leaves it conspicuously about, and then goes away and is chivalrously silent.'

Mr Bunter put the jug down upon the washstand in case of accident, and took the paper.

It was the missing letter from Tommy Freeborn.

No doubt about it. There it was—the evidence which established the truth of Denver's evidence. More—which established his alibi for the night of the 13th.

Not Cathcart—Denver.

Denver suggesting that the shooting party should return in October to Riddlesdale, where they had opened the grouse season in August. Denver sneaking hurriedly out at 11:30 to walk two miles across the fields on a night when Farmer Grimethorpe had gone to buy machinery. Denver carelessly plugging a rattling sash on a stormy night with an important letter bearing his title on it for all to see. Denver padding back at three in the morning like a homing tom-cat, to fall over his guest's dead body by the conservatory. Denver, with his kind, stupid, English-gentleman ideas about honour, going obstinately off to prison, rather than tell his solicitor where he had been. Denver misleading them all into the wildest and most ingenious solutions of a mystery which now stood out clear as seven sunbeams. Denver, whose voice the woman had thought she recognized on the memorable day when she flung herself into the arms of his brother. Denver calmly setting in motion the enormous, creaking machinery of a trial by his noble peers in order to safeguard a woman's reputation.

This very day, probably, a Select Committee of lords was sitting 'to inspect the Journals of this House upon former trials of peers in criminal cases, in order to bring the Duke of Denver to a speedy trial, and to report to the House what they should think proper thereupon.' There they were: moving that an address be presented to His Majesty by the lords with white staves, to acquaint