Chapter 23

Post-Mortem

'And George is all right again now?'

'Thank heaven, yes—getting on splendidly. The doctor says he worked himself into it, just out of worry lest he should be suspected. It never occurred to me—but then George is very quick at putting two and two together.'

'Of course he knew he was one of the last people to see his grandfather.'

'Yes, and seeing the name on the bottle—and the police coming— '

'That did it. And you're sure he's all right?'

'Oh, rather. The minute he knew that it was all cleared up, he seemed to come out from under a blanket. He sent you all sorts of messages, by the way.'

'Well, as soon as he's fit you must come and dine with me…'

'…A simple case, of course, as soon as you had disentangled the Robert part of it.'

'A damned unsatisfactory case, Charles. Not the kind I like. No real proof.'

'Nothing in it for us, of course. Just as well it never came to trial, though. With juries you never know.'

'No; they might have let Penberthy off; or convicted them both.'

'Exactly. If you ask me, I think Ann Dorland is a very lucky young woman.'

'Oh, God!—you *would* say that…'

'…Yes, of course, I'm sorry for Naomi Rushworth. But she needn't be so spiteful. She goes about hinting that of course dear Walter was got over by that Dorland girl and sacrificed himself to save her.'

'Well, that's natural, I suppose. You thought Miss Dorland had done it yourself at one time, you know, Marjorie.'

'I didn't know then about her being engaged to Penberthy. And I think he deserved all he got…Well, I know he's dead, but it was a rotten way to treat a girl, and Ann's far too good for that kind of thing. People have a perfect right to want love-affairs. You men always think…'

'Not me, Marjorie. I don't think.'

'Oh, you! You're almost human. I'd almost take you on myself if you asked me. You don't feel inclined that way, I suppose?'

'My dear—if a great liking and friendship were enough, I would—like a shot. But that wouldn't satisfy you, would it?'

'It wouldn't satisfy *you*, Peter. I'm sorry. Forget it.'

'I won't forget it. It's the biggest compliment I've ever had paid me. Great Scott! I only wish…'

'There! that's all right, you needn't make a speech. And you won't go away tactfully forever, will you?'

'Not if you don't want me to.'

'And you won't be embarrassed?'

'No, I won't be embarrassed. Portrait of a young man poking the fire to bits to indicate complete freedom from embarrassment. Let's go and feed somewhere, shall we?…'

'…Well, and how did you get on with the heiress and the lawyers and all that lot?'

'Oh! there was a long argument. Miss Dorland insisted on dividing the money, and I said no, I couldn't think of it. She said it was only hers as the result of a crime, and Pritchard and Murbles said she wasn't responsible for other people's crimes. And I said it would look like my profiting by my own attempt at fraud, and she said, not at all, and we went on and on, don't you know. That's a damned decent girl, Wimsey.'

'Yes, I know. The moment I found she preferred burgundy to champagne I had the highest opinion of her.'

'No, really—there's something very fine and straightforward about her.'

'Oh, yes—not a bad girl at all; though I shouldn't have said she was quite your sort.'

'Why not?'

'Motor-bike, probably,' said Anstruther. 'As I was saying, it's not as though— '

'Something's happened,' broke in the red-faced man, setting down his glass.

There were voices, and the running to and fro of feet. The door was flung open. Startled faces turned towards it. Wetheridge burst in, pale and angry.

'I say, you fellows,' he cried, 'here's another unpleasantness. Penberthy's shot himself in the library. People ought to have more consideration for the members. Where's Culyer?'

Wimsey pushed his way out into the entrance-hall. There, as he had expected, he found the plainclothes detective who had been told off to shadow Penberthy.

'Send for Inspector Parker,' he said. 'I have a paper to give him. Your job's over; it's the end of the case.'

'Dr Penberthy,' said the old man, 'now that that paper is in Lord Peter Wimsey's hands, you understand that he can only take the course of communicating with the police. But as that would cause a great deal of unpleasantness to yourself and to other people, you may wish to take another way out of the situation. As a doctor, you will perhaps prefer to make your own arrangements. If not— '

He drew out from his jacket-pocket the thing which he had fetched.

'If not, I happen to have brought this with me from my private locker. I am placing it here, in the table-drawer, preparatory to taking it down into the country to-morrow. It is loaded.'

'Thank you,' said Penberthy.

The Colonel closed the drawer slowly, stepped back a couple of paces and bowed gravely. Wimsey put his hand on Penberthy's shoulder for a moment, then took the Colonel's arm. Their shadows moved, lengthened, shortened, doubled and crossed as they passed the seven lights in the seven bays of the library. The door shut after them.

'How about a drink, Colonel?' said Wimsey.

They went into the bar, which was just preparing to close for the night. Several other men were there, talking over their plans for Christmas.

'I'm getting away south,' said Tin-Tummy Challoner. 'I'm fed up with this climate and this country.'

'I wish you'd look us up, Wimsey,' said another man. 'We could give you some very decent shooting. We're having a sort of house-party; my wife, you know—must have all these young people round—awful crowd of women. But I'm getting one or two men who can play bridge and handle a gun, and it would be a positive charity to see me through. Deadly season, Christmas. Can't think why they invented it.'

'It's all right if you've got kids,' interrupted a large, red-faced man with a bald head. 'The little beggars enjoy it. You ought to start a family, Anstruther.'

'All very well,' said Anstruther, 'you're cut out by nature to dress up as Father Christmas. I tell you, what with one thing and another, entertaining and going about, and the servants we have to keep in a place like ours, it's a job to keep things going. If you know of a good thing, I wish you'd put me on to it. It's not as though— '

'Hullo!' said Challoner, 'what was that?'

'Well—arty and all that. And her looks aren't her strong point.'

'You needn't be offensive, Wimsey. Surely I may be allowed to appreciate a woman of intelligence and character. I may not be highbrow, but I have *some* ideas beyond the front row of the chorus. And what that girl went through with that blighter Penberthy makes my blood boil.'

'Oh, you've heard all about that?'

'I have. She told me, and I respected her for it. I thought it most courageous of her. It's about time somebody brought a little brightness into that poor girl's life. You don't realize how desperately lonely she has been. She had to take up that art business to give her an interest, poor child, but she's really cut out for an ordinary, sensible, feminine life. You may not understand that, with your ideas, but she has really a very sweet nature.'

'Sorry, Fentiman.'

'She made me ashamed, the way she took the whole thing. When I think of the trouble I got her into, owing to my damned dishonest tinkering about with—you know— '

'My dear man, you were perfectly providential. If you hadn't tinkered about, as you say, she'd be married to Penberthy by now.'

'That's true—and that makes it so amazing of her to forgive me. She *loved* that blighter, Wimsey. You don't know. It's absolutely pathetic.'

'Well, you'll have to do your best to make her forget it.'

'I look on that as a duty, Wimsey.'

'Just so. Doing anything to-night? Care to come and look at a show?'

'Sorry—I'm booked. Taking Miss Dorland to the new thing at the Palladium, in fact. Thought it'd do her good—buck her up and so on.'

'Oh?—good work!—Here's luck to it…'

'…and the cooking is getting perfectly disgraceful. I spoke to Culyer about it only yesterday. But he won't do anything. I don't know what's the good of the committee. This club isn't half what it used to be. In fact, Wimsey, I'm thinking of resigning.'

'Oh, don't do that, Wetheridge. It wouldn't be the same place without you.'

'Look at all the disturbance there has been lately. Police and reporters—and then Penberthy blowing his brains out in the library. And the coal's all slate. Only yesterday something exploded like a shell—I assure you,

exactly like a shell—in the card-room; and as nearly as possible got me in the eye. I said to Culyer, "This must *not* occur again." You may laugh, but I knew a man who was blinded by a thing popping out suddenly like that. These things never happened before the War, and—great heavens! William! Look at this wine! Smell it! *Taste* it! Corked? Yes, I should think it *was* corked! My God! I don't know what's come to this Club.'

The End

'Not unless you make it clear that she had no part in the crime,' Wimsey reminded him.

'That's true. All right. I'll put it all on paper for you. Give me half an hour, will you?'

'Right you are,' said Wimsey.

He left the library and wandered into the smoking-room. Colonel Marchbanks was there, and greeted him with a friendly smile.

'Glad you're here, Colonel. Mind if I come and chat to you for a moment?'

'By all means, my dear boy. I'm in no hurry to get home. My wife's away. What can I do for you?'

Wimsey told him, in a lowered voice. The Colonel was distressed.

'Ah, well,' he said, 'you've done the best thing, to my mind. I look at these matters from a soldier's point of view, of course. Much better to make a clean job of it all. Dear, dear! Sometimes, Lord Peter, I think that the War has had a bad effect on some of our young men. But then, of course, all are not soldiers by training, and that makes a great difference. I certainly notice a less fine sense of honour in these days than we had when I was a boy. There were not so many excuses made then for people; there were things that were done and things that were not done. Nowadays men—and, I am sorry to say, women too—let themselves go in a way that is to me quite incomprehensible. I can understand a man's committing murder in hot blood—but poisoning—and then putting a good, ladylike girl into such an equivocal position—no! I fail to understand it. Still, as you say, the right course is being taken at last.'

'Yes,' said Wimsey.

'Excuse me for a moment,' said the Colonel, and went out.

When he returned, he went with Wimsey into the library. Penberthy had finished writing and was reading his statement through.

'Will that do?' he asked.

Wimsey read it, Colonel Marchbanks looking over the pages with him.

'That is quite all right,' he said. 'Colonel Marchbanks will witness it with me.'

This was done. Wimsey gathered the sheets together and put them in his breast-pocket. Then he turned silently to the Colonel, as though passing the word to him.

'Write a clear account of what actually happened,' said Wimsey. 'Make a clean job of it for these other people. Make it clear that Miss Dorland had nothing to do with it.'

'And then?'

'Then do as you like. In your place I know what I should do.'

Penberthy propped his chin on his hands and sat for some minutes staring at the works of Dickens in the leather-and-gold binding.

'Very well,' he said at last. 'You're quite right. I ought to have done it before. But—damn it!—if ever a man had rotten luck....

If only Robert Fentiman hadn't been a rogue. It's funny, isn't it? That's your wonderful poetic justice, isn't it? If Robert Fentiman had been an honest man, I should have got my half-million, and Ann Dorland would have got a perfectly good husband, and the world would have gained a fine clinic, incidentally. But as Robert was a rogue—here we are....

I didn't intend to be such a sweep to the Dorland girl. I'd have been decent to her if I'd married her. Mind you, she did sicken me a bit. Always wanting to be sentimental. It's true, what I said—she's a bit cracked about sex. Lots of 'em are. Naomi Rushworth, for instance. That's why I asked her to marry me. I had to be engaged to somebody, and I knew she'd take any one who asked her....

It was so hideously easy, you see...that was the devil of it. The old man came along and put himself into my hands. Told me with one breath that I hadn't a dog's chance of the money, and in the next, asked me for a dose. I just had to put the stuff into a couple of capsules and tell him to take them at 7 o'clock. He put them in his spectacle-case, to make sure he wouldn't forget them. Not even a bit of paper to give me away. And the next day I'd only to get a fresh supply of the stuff and fill up the bottle. I'll give you the address of the chemist who sold it. Easy?—it was laughable...people put such power in our hands....

I never meant to get led into all this rotten way of doing things—it was just self-defence. I still don't care a damn about having killed the old man. I could have made better use of the money than Robert Fentiman. He hasn't got two ideas in his head, and he's perfectly happy where he is. Though I suppose he'll be leaving the Army now.... As for Ann, she ought to be grateful to me in a way. I've secured her the money anyhow.'

Colophon

The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club was Dorothy L. Sayers' (1893–1957) fourth Lord Peter Wimsey novel. It was originally published in 1928 by Ernest Benn, in London (UK).

Text is set in 'EB Garamond', Georg Mayr-Duffner's free and open source implementation of Claude Garamond's famous humanist typefaces from the mid-sixteenth century. Title is set in 'Gramophone', by Nick Curtis, based on French artist Achille Mauzan's 1927 poster for Carpano, an Italian vermouth. Chapter dropcaps are set in 'Deco Caps', by Petra Heidorn.

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Title page decoration is cropped from an illustration by German artist Ernst Kreuscher entitled 'Im Club' ('In the Club'). It was published in a 1922 issue of *STYL: Blätter für Mode und die angenehmen Dinge des Lebens*, a fashion and lifestyle magazine published in Berlin from 1922–1924.

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Chapter 22

The Cards on the Table

THERE was nobody in the library at the Bellona Club; there never is. Wimsey led Penberthy into the farthest bay and sent a waiter for two double whiskies.

'Here's luck!' he said.

'Good luck,' replied Penberthy. 'What is it?'

'Look here,' said Wimsey. 'You've been a soldier. I think you're a decent fellow. You've seen George Fentiman. It's a pity, isn't it?'

'What about it?'

'If George Fentiman hadn't turned up with that delusion of his,' said Wimsey, 'you would have been arrested for the murder this evening. Now the point is this. When you are arrested, nothing, as things are, can prevent Miss Dorland's being arrested on the same charge. She's quite a decent girl, and you haven't treated her any too well, have you? Don't you think you might make things right for her by telling the truth straight away?'

Penberthy sat with a white face and said nothing.

'You see,' went on Wimsey, 'if once they get her into the dock, she'll always be a suspected person. Even if the jury believe her story—and they may not, because juries are often rather stupid—people will always think there was "something in it". They'll say she was a very lucky woman to get off. That's damning for a girl, isn't it? They might even bring her in guilty. You and I know she isn't—but—you don't want the girl hanged, Penberthy, do you?'

Penberthy drummed on the table.

'What do you want me to do?' he said at last.