Penberthy ran practised hands quickly over neck, wrists and knee-joints.

'Dead several hours,' he pronounced, sharply. 'Rigour well-established—beginning to pass off.' He moved the dead man's left leg in illustration; it swung loose at the knee. 'I've been expecting this. Heart very weak. Might happen any moment. Any one spoken to him to-day?'

He glanced around interrogatively.

'I saw him here after lunch,' volunteered somebody. 'I didn't speak.'

'I thought he was asleep,' said another.

Nobody remembered speaking to him. They were so used to old General Fentiman, slumbering by the fire.

'Ah, well,' said the doctor. 'What's the time? Seven?' He seemed to make a rapid calculation. 'Say five hours for rigour to set in—must have taken place very rapidly—he probably came in at his usual time, sat down and died straight away.'

'He always walked from Dover Street,' put in an elderly man, 'I told him it was too great an exertion at his age. You've heard me say so, Ormsby.'

'Yes, yes, quite,' said the purple-faced Ormsby. 'Dear me, just so.'

'Well, there's nothing to be done,' said the doctor. 'Died in his sleep. Is there an empty bedroom we can take him to, Culyer?'

'Yes, certainly,' said the Secretary. 'James, fetch the key of number sixteen from my office and tell them to put the bed in order. I suppose, eh, doctor?—when the rigour passes off we shall be able to—eh?'

'Oh, yes, you'll be able to do everything that's required. I'll send the proper people in to lay him out for you. Somebody had better let his people know—only they'd better not show up till we can get him more presentable.'

'Captain Fentiman knows already,' said Colonel Marchbanks. 'And Major Fentiman is staying in the Club—he'll probably be in before long. Then there's a sister, I think.'

'Yes, old Lady Dormer,' said Penberthy, 'she lives round in Portman Square. They haven't been on speaking terms for years. Still, she'll have to know.'

'I'll ring them up,' said the Colonel. 'We can't leave it to Captain Fentiman, he's in no fit state to be worried, poor fellow. You'll have to have a look at him, doctor, when you've finished here. An attack of the old trouble—nerves, you know.'

'All right. Ah! is the room ready, Culyer? Then we'll move him. Will somebody take his shoulders—no, not you, Culyer' (for the Secretary had only one sound arm), 'Lord Peter, yes, thank you—lift carefully.'

Wimsey put his long, strong hands under the stiff arms; the doctor gathered up the legs; they moved away. They looked like a dreadful little Guy Fawkes procession, with that humped and unreverend mannikin bobbing and swaying between them.

The door closed after them, and a tension seemed removed. The circle broke up into groups. Somebody lit a cigarette. The planet's tyrant, dotard Death, had held his gray mirror before them for a moment and shown them the image of things to come. But now it was taken away again. The unpleasantness had passed. Fortunate, indeed, that Penberthy was the old man's own doctor. He knew all about it. He could give a certificate. No inquest. Nothing undesirable. The members of the Bellona Club could go to dinner.

Colonel Marchbanks turned to go through the far door towards the library. In a narrow ante-room between the two rooms there was a convenient telephone cabinet for the use of those members who did not wish to emerge into the semi-publicity of the entrance-hall.

'Hi, colonel! not that one. That instrument's out of order,' said a man called Wetheridge, who saw him go. 'Disgraceful, I call it. I wanted to use the 'phone this morning, and—oh! hullo! the notice has gone. I suppose it's all right again. They ought to let one know.'

Colonel Marchbanks paid little attention to Wetheridge. He was the club grumbler, distinguished even in that fellowship of the dyspeptic and peremptory—always threatening to complain to the Committee, harassing the Secretary and constituting a perennial thorn in the sides of his fellow-members. He retired, murmuring, to his chair and the evening paper, and the Colonel stepped into the telephone cabinet to call up Lady Dormer's house in Portman Square.

Presently he came out through the library into the entrance-hall, and met Penberthy and Wimsey just descending the staircase.

'Have you broken the news to Lady Dormer?' asked Wimsey.

'Lady Dormer is dead,' said the Colonel. 'Her maid tells me she passed quietly away at half-past ten this morning.'

Chapter 2

The Queen is Out

It is doubtful which occurrence was more disagreeable to the senior members of the Bellona Club—the grotesque death of General Fentiman in their midst or the indecent neurasthenia of his grandson. Only the younger men felt no sense of outrage; they knew too much. Dick Challoner—known to his intimates as Tin-Tummy Challoner, owing to the fact that he had been fitted with a spare part after the second battle of the Somme—took the gasping Fentiman away into the deserted library for a stiffener. The Club Secretary hurried in, in his dress-shirt and trousers, the half-dried lather still clinging to his jaws. After one glance he sent an agitated waiter to see if Dr Penberthy was still in the Club. Colonel Marchbanks laid a large silk handkerchief reverently over the rigid face in the arm-chair and remained quietly standing. A little circle formed about the edge of the hearthrug, not quite certain what to do. From time to time it was swelled by fresh arrivals, whom the news had greeted in the hall as they wandered in. A little group appeared from the bar. 'What? old Fentiman?' they said. 'Good God, you don't say so. Poor old blighter. Heart gone at last, I suppose'; and they extinguished cigars and cigarettes, and stood by, not liking to go away again.

Dr Penberthy was just changing for dinner. He came down hurriedly, caught just as he was going out to an Armistice dinner, his silk hat tilted to the back of his head, his coat and muffler pushed loosely open. He was a thin, dark man with the abrupt manner which distinguishes the Army Surgeon from the West-end practitioner. The group by the fire made way for him, except Wimsey, who hung rather foolishly upon the big elbow-chair, gazing in a helpless way at the body.

The Colonel came back to them, walking very quietly and precisely. Wimsey rose and went to meet him.

'I say, Peter,' said the Colonel, his kind face gravely troubled, 'just come over here a moment. I'm afraid something rather unpleasant has happened.'

Fentiman looked round, and something in their manner made him get up and follow them over to the fire.

Wimsey bent down over General Fentiman and drew the *Morning Post* gently away from the gnarled old hands, which lay clasped over the thin chest. He touched the shoulder—put his hand under the white head huddled against the side of the chair. The Colonel watched him anxiously. Then, with a quick jerk, Wimsey lifted the quiet figure. It came up all of a piece, stiff as a wooden doll.

Fentiman laughed. Peal after hysterical peal shook his throat. All round the room, scandalized Bellonians creaked to their gouty feet, shocked by the unmannerly noise.

'Take him away!' said Fentiman, 'take him away. He's been dead two days! So are you! So am I! We're all dead and we never noticed it!'

Chapter 3

Hearts Count More Than Diamonds

About ten days after that notable Armistice Day, Lord Peter Wimsey was sitting in his library, reading a rare fourteenth century manuscript of Justinian. It gave him particular pleasure, being embellished with a large number of drawings in sepia, extremely delicate in workmanship, and not always equally so in subject. Beside him on a convenient table stood a long-necked decanter of priceless old port. From time to time he stimulated his interest with a few sips, pursing his lips thoughtfully, and slowly savouring the balmy after-taste.

A ring at the front door of the flat caused him to exclaim 'Oh, hell!' and cock an attentive ear for the intruder's voice. Apparently the result was satisfactory, for he closed the Justinian and had assumed a welcoming smile when the door opened.

'Mr Murbles, my lord.'

The little elderly gentleman who entered was so perfectly the family solicitor as really to have no distinguishing personality at all, beyond a great kindliness of heart and a weakness for soda-mint lozenges.

'I am not disturbing you, I trust, Lord Peter.'

'Good lord, no, sir. Always delighted to see you. Bunter, a glass for Mr Murbles. Very glad you've turned up, sir. The Cockburn '80 always tastes a lot better in company—discernin' company, that is. Once knew a fellow who polluted it with a Trichinopoly. He was not asked again. Eight months

later, he committed suicide. I don't say it was on that account. But he was earmarked for a bad end, what?'

'You horrify me,' said Mr Murbles, gravely. 'I have seen many men sent to the gallows for crimes with which I could feel much more sympathy. Thank you, Bunter, thank you. You are quite well, I trust?'

'I am in excellent health, I am obliged to you, sir.'

'That's good. Been doing any photography lately?'

'A certain amount, sir. But merely of a pictorial description, if I may venture to call it so. Criminological material, sir, has been distressingly deficient of late.'

'Perhaps Mr Murbles has brought us something,' suggested Wimsey.

'No,' said Mr Murbles, holding the Cockburn '80 beneath his nostrils and gently agitating the glass to release the ethers, 'no, I can't say I have, precisely. I will not disguise that I have come in the hope of deriving benefit from your trained habits of observation and deduction, but I fear—that is, I trust—in fact, I am confident—that nothing of an undesirable nature is involved. The fact is,' he went on, as the door closed upon the retreating Bunter, 'a curious question has arisen with regard to the sad death of General Fentiman at the Bellona Club, to which, I understand, you were a witness.'

'If you understand that, Murbles,' said his lordship, cryptically, 'you understand a damn sight more than I do. I did not witness the death—I witnessed the discovery of the death—which is a very different thing, by a long chalk.'

'By how long a chalk?' asked Mr Murbles, eagerly. 'That is just what I am trying to find out.'

'That's very inquisitive of you,' said Wimsey. 'I think perhaps it would be better ...' he lifted his glass and tilted it thoughtfully, watching the wine coil down in thin flower-petallings from rim to stem …'if you were to tell me exactly what you want to know …and why. After all …I'm a member of the Club …family associations chiefly, I suppose …but there it is.'

Mr Murbles looked up sharply, but Wimsey's attention seemed focussed upon the port.

'Quite so,' said the solicitor. 'Very well. The facts of the matter are these. General Fentiman had, as you know, a sister Felicity, twelve years younger than himself. She was very beautiful and very wilful as a girl, and ought to have made a very fine match, but for the fact that the Fentimans, though extremely

All my criminological investigations are done for me by a "ghost" at £3 a week, while I get the headlines and frivol with well-known journalists at the Savoy.'

'I find you refreshing, Wimsey,' said Fentiman, languidly. 'You're not in the least witty, but you have a kind of obvious facetiousness which reminds me of the less exacting class of music-hall.'

'It's the self-defence of the first-class mind against the superior person,' said Wimsey. 'But, look here, I'm sorry to hear about Sheila. I don't want to be offensive, old man, but why don't you let me— '

'Damned good of you,' said Fentiman, 'but I don't care to. There's honestly not the faintest chance I could ever pay you, and I haven't quite got to the point yet— '

'Here's Colonel Marchbanks,' broke in Wimsey, 'we'll talk about it another time. Good evening, Colonel.'

'Evening, Peter. Evening, Fentiman. Beautiful day it's been. No—no cocktails, thanks, I'll stick to whisky. So sorry to keep you waiting like this, but I was having a yarn with poor old Grainger upstairs. He's in a baddish way, I'm afraid. Between you and me, Penberthy doesn't think he'll last out the winter. Very sound man, Penberthy—wonderful, really, that he's kept the old man going so long with his lungs in that frail state. Ah, well! it's what we must all come to. Dear me, there's your grandfather, Fentiman. He's another of Penberthy's miracles. He must be ninety, if he's a day. Will you excuse me for a moment? I must just go and speak to him.'

Wimsey's eyes followed the alert, elderly figure as it crossed the spacious smoking-room, pausing now and again to exchange greetings with a fellow-member of the Bellona Club. Drawn close to the huge fireplace stood a great chair with ears after the Victorian pattern. A pair of spindle shanks with neatly-buttoned shoes propped on a foot stool were all that was visible of General Fentiman.

'Queer, isn't it,' muttered his grandson, 'to think that for Old Mossy-face there the Crimea is still *the* War, and the Boer business found him too old to go out. He was given his commission at seventeen, you know—was wounded at Majuba— '

He broke off. Wimsey was not paying attention. He was still watching Colonel Marchbanks.

'Yes.'

Fentiman nodded quietly. He knew that young Marchbanks had been killed at Hill 60, and that the Colonel was wont to give a small, informal dinner on Armistice night to his son's intimate friends.

'I don't mind old Marchbanks,' he said, after a pause. 'He's a dear old boy.'

Wimsey assented.

'And how are things going with you?' he asked.

'Oh, rotten as usual. Tummy all wrong and no money. What's the damn good of it, Wimsey? A man goes and fights for his country, gets his inside gassed out, and loses his job, and all they give him is the privilege of marching past the Cenotaph once a year and paying four shillings in the pound income-tax. Sheila's queer too—overwork, poor girl. It's pretty damnable for a man to have to live on his wife's earnings, isn't it? I can't help it, Wimsey. I go sick and have to chuck jobs up. Money—I never thought of money before the War, but I swear nowadays I'd commit any damned crime to get hold of a decent income.'

Fentiman's voice had risen in nervous excitement. A shocked veteran, till then invisible in a neighbouring arm-chair, poked out a lean head like a tortoise and said 'Sh!' viperishly.

'Oh, I wouldn't do that,' said Wimsey, lightly. 'Crime's a skilled occupation, y' know. Even a comparative imbecile like myself can play the giddy sleuth on the amateur Moriarty. If you're thinkin' of puttin' on a false moustache and lammin' a millionaire on the head, don't do it. That disgustin' habit you have of smoking cigarettes down to the last millimetre would betray you anywhere. I'd only have to come on with a magnifyin' glass and a pair of callipers to say "The criminal is my dear old friend George Fentiman. Arrest that man!" You might not think it, but I am ready to sacrifice my nearest and dearest in order to curry favour with the police and get a par. in the papers.'

Fentiman laughed, and ground out the offending cigarette stub on the nearest ash-tray.

'I wonder anybody cares to know you,' he said. The strain and bitterness had left his voice and he sounded merely amused.

'They wouldn't,' said Wimsey, 'only they think I'm too well-off to have any brains. It's like hearing that the Earl of Somewhere is taking a leading part in a play. Everybody takes it for granted he must act rottenly. I'll tell you my secret.

well-descended, were anything but well-off. As usual at that period, all the money there was went to educating the boy, buying him a commission in a crack regiment and supporting him there in the style which was considered indispensable for a Fentiman. Consequently there was nothing left to furnish a marriage-portion for Felicity, and that was rather disastrous for a young woman sixty years ago.

Well, Felicity got tired of being dragged through the social round in her darned muslins and gloves that had been to the cleaners—and she had the spirit to resent her mother's perpetual strategies in the match-making line. There was a dreadful, decrepit old viscount, eaten up with diseases and dissipations, who would have been delighted to totter to the altar with a handsome young creature of eighteen, and I am sorry to say that the girl's father and mother did everything they could to force her into accepting this disgraceful proposal. In fact, the engagement was announced and the wedding-day fixed, when, to the extreme horror of her family, Felicity calmly informed them one morning that she had gone out before breakfast and actually got married, in the most indecent secrecy and haste, to a middle-aged man called Dormer, very honest and abundantly wealthy, and—horrid to relate—a prosperous manufacturer. Buttons, in fact—made of papier mâché or something, with a patent indestructible shank—were the revolting antecedents to which this head-strong young Victorian had allied herself.

Naturally there was a terrible scandal, and the parents did their best—seeing that Felicity was a minor—to get the marriage annulled. However, Felicity checkmated their plans pretty effectually by escaping from her bedroom—I fear, indeed, that she actually climbed down a tree in the back-garden, crinoline and all—and running away with her husband. After which, seeing that the worst had happened—indeed, Dormer, a man of prompt action, lost no time in putting his bride in the family way—the old people put the best face they could on it in the grand Victorian manner. That is, they gave their consent to the marriage, forwarded their daughter's belongings to her new home in Manchester, and forbade her to darken their doors again.'

'Highly proper,' murmured Wimsey. 'I'm determined never to be a parent. Modern manners and the break-up of the fine old traditions have simply ruined the business. I shall devote my life and fortune to the endowment of research

on the best method of producin' human beings decorously and unobtrusively from eggs. All parental responsibility to devolve upon the incubator.'

'I hope not,' said Mr Murbles. 'My own profession is largely supported by domestic entanglements. To proceed. Young Arthur Fentiman seems to have shared the family views. He was disgusted at having a brother-in-law in buttons, and the jests of his mess-mates did nothing to sweeten his feelings toward his sister. He became impenetrably military and professional, crusted over before his time, and refused to acknowledge the existence of anybody called Dormer. Mind you, the old boy was a fine soldier, and absolutely wrapped up in his Army associations. In due course he married—not well, for he had not the means to entitle himself to a noble wife, and he would not demean himself by marrying money, like the unspeakable Felicity. He married a suitable gentlewoman with a few thousand pounds. She died (largely, I believe, owing to the military regularity with which her husband ordained that she should perform her maternal functions), leaving a numerous but feeble family of children. Of these, the only one to attain maturity was the father of the two Fentimans you know—Major Robert and Captain George Fentiman.'

'I don't know Robert very well,' interjected Wimsey. 'I've met him. Frightfully hearty and all that—regular army type.'

'Yes, he's of the old Fentiman stock. Poor George inherited a weakly strain from his grandmother, I'm afraid.'

'Well, nervous, anyhow,' said Wimsey, who knew better than the old solicitor the kind of mental and physical strain George Fentiman had undergone. The War pressed hardly upon imaginative men in responsible positions. 'And then he was gassed and all that, you know,' he added, apologetically.

'Just so,' said Mr Murbles. 'Robert, you know, is unmarried and still in the Army. He's not particularly well-off, naturally, for none of the Fentimans ever had a bean, as I believe one says nowadays; but he does very well. George— '

'Poor old George! All right, sir, you needn't tell me about him. Usual story. Decentish job—imprudent marriage—chucks everything to join up in 1914—invalided out—job gone—health gone—no money—heroic wife keeping the home-fires burning—general fed-upness. Don't let's harrow our feelings. Take it as read.'

'Yes, I needn't go into that. Their father is dead, of course, and up till ten days ago there were just two surviving Fentimans of the earlier generation.

Chapter 1

Old Mossy-face

'WHAT in the world, Wimsey, are you doing in this Morgue?' demanded Captain Fentiman, flinging aside the *Evening Banner* with the air of a man released from an irksome duty.

'Oh, I wouldn't call it that,' retorted Wimsey, amiably. 'Funeral Parlour at the very least. Look at the marble. Look at the furnishings. Look at the palms and the chaste bronze nude in the corner.'

'Yes, and look at the corpses. Place always reminds me of that old thing in *Punch*, you know—"Waiter, take away Lord Whatsisname, he's been dead two days." Look at Old Ormsby there, snoring like a hippopotamus. Look at my revered grandpa—dodders in here at ten every morning, collects the *Morning Post* and the arm-chair by the fire, and becomes part of the furniture till the evening. Poor old devil. Suppose I'll be like that one of these days. I wish to God Jerry had put me out with the rest of 'em. What's the good of coming through for this sort of thing? What'll you have?'

'Dry martini,' said Wimsey. 'And you? Two dry martinis, Fred, please. Cheer up. All this remembrance-day business gets on your nerves, don't it? It's my belief most of us would be only too pleased to chuck these community hysterics if the beastly newspapers didn't run it for all it's worth. However, it don't do to say so. They'd hoof me out of the Club if I raised my voice beyond a whisper.'

'They'd do that anyway, whatever you were saying,' said Fentiman, gloomily. 'What *are* you doing here?'

'Waitin' for Colonel Marchbanks,' said Wimsey. 'Bung-ho!'

'Dining with him?'

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The old General lived on the small fixed income which came to him through his wife and his retired pension. He had a solitary little flat in Dover Street and an elderly man-servant, and he practically lived at the Bellona Club. And there was his sister, Felicity.'

'How did she come to be Lady Dormer?'

'Why, that's where we come to the interesting part of the story. Henry Dormer— '

'The button-maker?'

'The button-maker. He became an exceedingly rich man indeed—so rich, in fact, that he was able to offer financial assistance to certain exalted persons who need not be mentioned and so, in time, and in consideration of valuable services to the nation not very clearly specified in the Honours List, he became Sir Henry Dormer, Bart. His only child—a girl—had died, and there was no prospect of any further family, so there was, of course, no reason why he should not be made a baronet for his trouble.'

'Acid man you are,' said Wimsey. 'No reverence, no simple faith or anything of that kind. Do lawyers ever go to heaven?'

'I have no information on that point,' said Mr Murbles, dryly. 'Lady Dormer— '

'Did the marriage turn out well otherwise?' inquired Wimsey.

'I believe it was perfectly happy,' replied the lawyer, 'an unfortunate circumstance in one way, since it entirely precluded the possibility of any reconciliation with her relatives. Lady Dormer, who was a fine, generous-hearted woman, frequently made overtures of peace, but the General held sternly aloof. So did his son—partly out of respect for the old boy's wishes, but chiefly, I fancy, because he belonged to an Indian regiment and spent most of his time abroad. Robert Fentiman, however, showed the old lady a certain amount of attention, paying occasional visits and so forth, and so did George at one time. Of course they never let the General know a word about it, or he would have had a fit. After the War, George rather dropped his great-aunt—I don't know why.'

'I can guess,' said Wimsey. 'No job—no money, y' know. Didn't want to look pointed. That sort of thing, what?'

'Possibly. Or there may have been some kind of quarrel. I don't know. Anyway, those are the facts. I hope I am not boring you, by the way?'

'I am bearing up,' said Wimsey, 'waiting for the point where the Money comes in. There's a steely legal glitter in your eye, sir, which suggests that the thrill is not far off.'

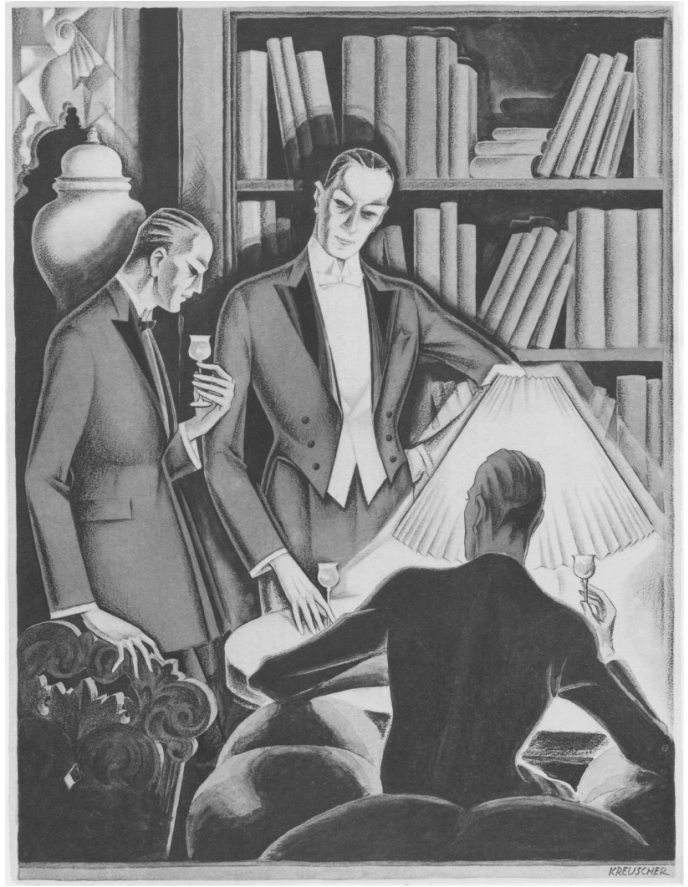
'Quite correct,' said Mr Murbles. 'I now come—thank you, well, yes—I will take just one more glass. I thank Providence I am not of a gouty constitution. Yes. Ah!—We now come to the melancholy event of November 11th last, and I must ask you to follow me with the closest attention.'

'By all means,' said Wimsey, politely.

'Lady Dormer,' pursued Mr Murbles, leaning earnestly forward, and punctuating every sentence with sharp little jabs of his gold-mounted eye-glasses, held in his right finger and thumb, 'was an old woman, and had been ailing for a very long time. However, she was still the same head-strong and vivacious personality that she had been as a girl, and on the fifth of November she was suddenly seized with a fancy to go out at night and see a display of fireworks at the Crystal Palace or some such place—it may have been Hampstead Heath or the White City—I forget, and it is of no consequence. The important thing is, that it was a raw, cold evening. She insisted on undertaking her little expedition nevertheless, enjoyed the entertainment as heartily as the youngest child, imprudently exposed herself to the night air and caught a severe cold which, in two days' time, turned to pneumonia. On November 10th she was sinking fast, and scarcely expected to live out the night. Accordingly, the young lady who lived with her as her ward—a distant relative, Miss Ann Dorland—sent a message to General Fentiman that if he wished to see his sister alive, he should come immediately. For the sake of our common human nature, I am happy to say that this news broke down the barrier of pride and obstinacy that had kept the old gentleman away so long. He came, found Lady Dormer just conscious, though very feeble, stayed with her about half an hour and departed, still stiff as a ramrod, but visibly softened. This was about four o'clock in the afternoon. Shortly afterwards, Lady Dormer became unconscious, and, indeed, never moved or spoke again, passing peacefully away in her sleep at half-past ten the following morning.

Presumably the shock and nervous strain of the interview with his long-estranged sister had been too much for the old General's feeble system, for, as you know, he died at the Bellona Club at some time—not yet clearly ascertained—on the same day, the eleventh of November.

THE UNPLEASANTNESS AT THE BELLONA CLUB



DOROTHY L. SAYERS