son's account. The butler was listening at the door, naturally, and told the whole village about it. And then Martin Burdock came home and had a quarrel with his father you could have heard for miles. He said that the whole thing was a lie, and that he meant to marry the girl, anyway. I cannot understand how anybody could marry into a blackmailing family like that.'

'My dear,' said Mr Frobisher-Pym gently, 'I don't think you're being quite fair to Martin, or his wife's parents, either. From what Martin told me, they were quite decent people, only not his class, of course, and they came in a well-meaning way to find out what Martin's "intentions" were. You would want to do the same yourself, if it were a daughter of ours. Old Burdock, naturally, thought they meant blackmail. He was the kind of man who thinks everything can be paid for; and he considered a son of his had a perfect right to seduce a young woman who worked for a living. I don't say Martin was altogether in the right— '

'Martin is a chip off the old block, I'm afraid,' retorted the lady. 'He married the girl, anyway, and why should he do that, unless he had to?'

'Well, they've never had any children, you know,' said Mr Frobisher-Pym.

'That's as may be. I've no doubt the girl was in league with her parents. And you know the Martin Burdocks have lived in Paris ever since.'

'That's true,' admitted her husband. 'It was an unfortunate affair altogether. They've had some difficulty in tracing Martin's address, too, but no doubt he'll be coming back shortly. He is engaged in producing some film play, they tell me, so possibly he can't get away in time for the funeral.'

'If he had any natural feeling, he would not let a film play stand in his way,' said Mrs Frobisher-Pym.

'My dear, there are such things as contracts, with very heavy monetary penalties for breaking them. And I don't suppose Martin could afford to lose a big sum of money. It's not likely that his father will have left him anything.'

'Martin is the younger son, then?' asked Wimsey, politely showing more interest than he felt in the rather well-worn plot of this village melodrama.

'No, he is the eldest of the lot. The house is entailed, of course, and so is the estate, such as it is. But there's no money in the land. Old Burdock made his fortune in rubber shares during the boom, and the money will go as he leaves it—wherever that may be, for they haven't found any will yet. He's probably left it all to Haviland.'

'The younger son?'

'Yes. He's something in the City—a director of a company—connected with silk stockings, I believe. Nobody has seen very much of him. He came down as soon as he heard of his father's death. He's staying with the Hancocks. The big house has been shut up since old Burdock went to the States four years ago. I suppose Haviland thought it wasn't worth while opening it up till they knew what Martin was going to do about it. That's why the body is being taken to the church.'

'Much less trouble, certainly,' said Wimsey.

'Oh, yes—though, mind you, I think Haviland ought to take a more neighbourly view of it. Considering the position the Burdocks have always held in the place, the people had a right to expect a proper reception after the funeral. It's usual. But these business people think less of tradition than we do down here. And, naturally, since the Hancocks are putting Haviland up, he can't raise much objection to the candles and the prayers and things.'

'Perhaps not,' said Mrs Frobisher-Pym, 'but it would have been more suitable if Haviland had come to us, rather than to the Hancocks, whom he doesn't even know.'

'My dear, you forget the very unpleasant dispute I had with Haviland Burdock about shooting over my land. After the correspondence that passed between us, last time he was down here, I could scarcely offer him hospitality. His father took a perfectly proper view of it, I will say that for him, but Haviland was exceedingly discourteous to me, and things were said which I could not possibly overlook. However, we mustn't bore you, Lord Peter, with our local small-talk. If you've finished your breakfast, what do you say to a walk round the place? It's a pity it's raining so hard—and you don't see the garden at its best this time of the year, of course—but I've got some cocker span'els you might like to have a look at.'

Lord Peter expressed eager anxiety to see the spaniels, and in a few minutes' time found himself squelching down the gravel path which led to the kennels.

'Nothing like a healthy country life,' said Mr Frobisher-Pym. 'I always think London is so depressing in the winter. Nothing to do with one's self. All right to run up for a day or two and see a theatre now and again, but how you people stick it week in and week out beats me. I must speak to Plunkett about this archway,' he added. 'It's getting out of trim.'

He broke off a dangling branch of ivy as he spoke. The plant shuddered revengefully, tipping a small shower of water down Wimsey's neck.

The cocker spaniel and her family occupied a comfortable and airy stall in the stable buildings. A youngish man in breeches and leggings emerged to greet the visitors, and produced the little bundles of puppy-hood for their inspection. Wimsey sat down on an upturned bucket and examined them gravely one by one. The bitch, after cautiously reviewing his boots and grumbling a little, decided that he was trustworthy and slobbered genially over his knees.

'Let me see,' said Mr Frobisher-Pym, 'how old are they?'

'Thirteen days, sir.'

'Is she feeding them all right?'

'Fine, sir. She's having some of the malt food. Seems to suit her very well, sir.'

'Ah, yes. Plunkett was a little doubtful about it, but I heard it spoken very well of. Plunkett doesn't care for experiments, and, in a general way, I agree with him. Where is Plunkett, by the way?'

'He's not very well this morning, sir.'

'Sorry to hear that, Merridew. The rheumatics again?'

'No, sir. From what Mrs Plunkett tells me, he's had a bit of a shock.'

'A shock? What sort of a shock? Nothing wrong with Alf or Elsie, I hope?'

'No, sir. The fact is—I understand he's seen something, sir.'

'What do you mean, seen something?'

'Well, sir—something in the nature of a warning, from what he says.'

'A warning? Good heavens, Merridew, he mustn't get those sort of ideas in his head. I'm surprised at Plunkett; I always thought he was a very level-headed man. What sort of warning did he say it was?'

'He took up the ridiculous position,' said Mr Frobisher-Pym, 'that the more sinful the old man had been the more he needed praying for. I said, "I think it would need more praying than you or I could do to help old Burdock out of the place he's in now." Ha, ha! So he said, "I agree with you, Mr Frobisher-Pym; that is why I am having eight watchers to pray all through the night for him." I admit he had me there.'

'Eight people?' exclaimed Mrs Frobisher-Pym.

'Not all at once, I understand; in relays, two at a time. "Well," I said, "I think you ought to consider that you will be giving a handle to the Nonconformists." Of course, he couldn't deny that.'

Wimsey helped himself to marmalade. Nonconformists, it seemed, were always searching for handles. Though what kind—whether door-handles, tea-pot handles, pump-handles, or starting-handles—was never explained, nor what the handles were to be used for when found. However, having been brought up in the odour of the Establishment, he was familiar with this odd dissenting peculiarity, and merely said:

'Pity to be extreme in a small parish like this. Disturbs the ideas of the simple fathers of the hamlet and the village blacksmith, with his daughter singin' in the choir and the Old Hundredth and all the rest of it. Don't Burdock's family have anything to say to it? There are some sons, aren't there?'

'Only the two, now. Aldine was the one that was killed, of course, and Martin is somewhere abroad. He went off after that row with his father, and I don't think he has been back in England since.'

'What was the row about?'

'Oh, that was a disgraceful business. Martin got a girl into trouble—a film actress or a typist or somebody of that sort—and insisted on marrying her.'

'Oh?'

'Yes, so dreadful of him,' said the lady, taking up the tale, 'when he was practically engaged to the Delaprime girl—the one with glasses, you know. It made a terrible scandal. Some horribly vulgar people came down and pushed their way into the house and insisted on seeing old Mr Burdock. I will say for him he stood up to them—he wasn't the sort of person you could intimidate. He told them the girl had only herself to blame, and they could sue Martin if they liked—*he* wouldn't be blackmailed on his

'No, my dear. I don't think that is called for. There will be a grand turn-out of the village, of course. Joliffe's people are having the time of their lives; they borrowed an extra pair of horses from young Mortimer for the occasion. I only hope they don't kick over the traces and upset the hearse. Mortimer's horseflesh is generally on the spirited side.'

'But, Tom, we must show some respect to the Burdocks.'

'We're attending the funeral to-morrow, and that's quite enough. We must do that, I suppose, out of consideration for the family, though, as far as the old man himself goes, respect is the very last thing anybody would think of paying him.'

'Oh, Tom, he's dead.'

'And quite time too. No, Agatha, it's no use pretending that old Burdock was anything but a spiteful, bad-tempered, dirty-living old blackguard that the world's well rid of. The last scandal he stirred up made the place too hot to hold him. He had to leave the country and go to the States, and, even so, if he hadn't had the money to pay the people off, he'd probably have been put in gaol. That's why I'm so annoyed with Hancock. I don't mind his calling himself a priest, though clergyman was always good enough for dear old Weeks—who, after all, was a canon—and I don't mind his vestments. He can wrap himself up in a Union Jack if he likes—it doesn't worry *me*. But when it comes to having old Burdock put on trestles in the south aisle, with candles round him, and Hubbard from the "Red Cow" and Duggins's boy praying over him half the night, I think it's time to draw the line. The people don't like it, you know—as least, the older generation don't. It's all right for the young ones, I dare say; they must have their amusement; but it gives offence to a lot of the farmers. After all, they knew Burdock a bit too well. Simpson—he's people's warden, you know—came up quite in distress to speak to me about it last night. You couldn't have a sounder man than Simpson. I said I would speak to Hancock. I did speak to him this morning, as a matter of fact, but you might as well talk to the west door of the church.'

'Mr Hancock is one of those young men who fancy they know everything,' said his wife. 'A sensible man would have listened to you, Tom. You're a magistrate and have lived here all your life, and it stands to reason you know considerably more about the parish than he does.'

'I couldn't say, sir.'

'Surely he mentioned what he thought he'd seen.'

Merridew's face took on a slightly obstinate look.

'I can't say, I'm sure, sir.'

'This will never do. I must go and see Plunkett. Is he at the cottage?'

'Yes, sir.'

'We'll go down there at once. You don't mind, do you, Wimsey? I can't allow Plunkett to make himself ill. If he's had a shock he'd better see a doctor. Well, carry on, Merridew, and be sure you keep her warm and comfortable. The damp is apt to come up through these brick floors. I'm thinking of having the whole place re-set with concrete, but it takes money, of course. I can't imagine,' he went on, as he led the way past the greenhouse towards a trim cottage set in its own square of kitchen-garden, 'what can have happened to have upset Plunkett. I hope it's nothing serious. He's getting elderly, of course, but he ought to be above believing in warnings. You wouldn't believe the extraordinary ideas these people get hold of. Fact is, I expect he's been round at the "Weary Traveller," and caught sight of somebody's washing hung out on the way home.'

'Not washing,' corrected Wimsey mechanically. He had a deductive turn of mind which exposed the folly of the suggestion even while irritably admitting that the matter was of no importance. 'It poured with rain last night, and, besides, it's Thursday. But Tuesday and Wednesday were fine, so the drying would have all been done then. No washing.'

'Well, well—something else then—a post, or old Mrs Giddens's white donkey. Plunkett does occasionally take a drop too much, I'm sorry to say, but he's a very good kennel-man, so one overlooks it. They're superstitious round about these parts, and they can tell some queer tales if once you get into their confidence. You'd be surprised how far off the main track we are as regards civilisation. Why, not here, but at Abbotts Bolton, fifteen miles off, it's as much as one's life's worth to shoot a hare. Witches, you know, and that sort of thing.'

'I shouldn't be a bit surprised. They'll still tell you about werewolves in some parts of Germany.'

'Yes, I dare say. Well, here we are.' Mr Frobisher-Pym rapped loudly with his walking-stick on the door of the cottage and turned the handle without waiting for permission.

'You there, Mrs Plunkett? May we come in? Ah! good morning. Hope we're not disturbing you, but Merridew told me Plunkett was not so well. This is Lord Peter Wimsey—a very old friend of mine; that is to say, I'm a very old friend of *his*; ha, ha!'

'Good morning, sir; good morning, your lordship. I'm sure Plunkett will be very pleased to see you. Please step in. Plunkett, here's Mr Pym to see you.'

The elderly man who sat crouching over the fire turned a mournful face towards them, and half rose, touching his forehead.

'Well, now, Plunkett, what's the trouble?' enquired Mr Frobisher-Pym, with the hearty bedside manner adopted by country gentlefolk visiting their dependants. 'Sorry not to see you out and about. Touch of the old complaint, eh?'

'No, sir; no, sir. Thank you, sir. I'm well enough in myself. But I've had a warning, and I'm not long for this world.'

'Not long for this world? Oh, nonsense, Plunkett. You mustn't talk like that. A touch of indigestion, that's what you've got, I expect. Gives one the blues, I know. I'm sure I often feel like nothing on earth when I've got one of my bilious attacks. Try a dose of castor-oil, or a good old-fashioned blue pill and black draught. Nothing like it. Then you won't talk about warnings and dying.'

'No medicine won't do no good to *my* complaint, sir. Nobody as see what I've seed ever got the better of it. But as you and the gentleman are here, sir, I'm wondering if you'll do me a favour.'

'Of course, Plunkett, anything you like. What is it?'

'Why, just to draw up my will, sir. Old Parson, he used to do it. But I don't fancy this new young man, with his candles and bits of things. It don't seem as if he'd make it good and legal, sir, and I wouldn't like it if there was any dispute after I was gone. So as there ain't much time left me, I'd be grateful if you'd put it down clear for me in pen and ink that I wants my little bit all to go to Sarah here, and after her to Alf and Elsie, divided up equal.'

'Of course I'll do that for you, Plunkett, any time you like. But it's all nonsense to be talking about wills. Bless my soul, I shouldn't be surprised if you were to see us all underground.'

The Undignified Melodrama of the Bone of Contention

'I am afraid you have brought shocking weather with you, Lord Peter,' said Mrs Frobisher-Pym, with playful reproof. 'If it goes on like this they will have a bad day for the funeral.'

Lord Peter Wimsey glanced out of the morning-room window to the soaked green lawn and the shrubbery, where the rain streamed down remorselessly over the laurel leaves, stiff and shiny like mackintoshes.

'Nasty exposed business, standing round at funerals,' he agreed.

'Yes, I always think it's such a shame for the old people. In a tiny village like this it's about the only pleasure they get during the winter. It makes something for them to talk about for weeks.'

'Is it anybody's funeral in particular?'

'My dear Wimsey,' said his host, 'it is plain that you, coming from your little village of London, are quite out of the swim. There has never been a funeral like it in Little Doddering before. It's an event.'

'Really?'

'Oh dear, yes. You may possibly remember old Burdock?'

'Burdock? Let me see. Isn't he a sort of local squire, or something?'

'He was,' corrected Mr Frobisher-Pym. 'He's dead—died in New York about three weeks ago, and they're sending him over to be buried. The Burdocks have lived in the big house for hundreds of years, and they're all buried in the churchyard, except, of course, the one who was killed in the War. Burdock's secretary cabled the news of his death across, and said the body was following as soon as the embalmers had finished with it. The boat gets in to Southampton this morning, I believe. At any rate, the body will arrive here by the 6.30 from Town.'

'Are you going down to meet it, Tom?'

He picked up the pack which still lay scattered on the table, and shuffled it together.

'Catch hold of these, Colonel, and lay 'em out face downwards. That's right. First of all you cut 'em at the twentieth card—you'll see the seven of diamonds at the bottom. Correct? Now I'll call 'em. Ten of hearts, ace of spades, three of clubs, five of clubs, king of diamonds, nine, jack, two of hearts. Right? I could pick 'em all out, you see, except the ace of hearts, and that's here.'

He leaned forward and produced it dexterously from Sir Impey's breast-pocket.

'I learnt it from a man who shared my dug-out near Ypres,' he said. 'You needn't mention to-night's business, you two. There are crimes which the Law cannot reach.'

'No, sir. I've been a hale and hearty man, I'm not denying. But I've been called, sir, and I've got to go. It must come to all of us, I know that. But it's a fearful thing to see the death-coach come for one, and know that the dead are in it, that cannot rest in the grave.'

'Come now, Plunkett, you don't mean to tell me you believe in that old foolishness about the death-coach. I thought you were an educated man. What would Alf say if he heard you talking such nonsense?'

'Ah, sir, young people don't know everything, and there's many more things in God's creation than what you'll find in the printed books.'

'Oh, well,' said Mr Frobisher-Pym, finding this opening irresistible, 'we know there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy. Quite so. But that doesn't apply nowadays,' he added contradictorily. 'There are no ghosts in the twentieth century. Just you think the matter out quietly, and you'll find you've made a mistake. There's probably some quite simple explanation. Dear me! I remember Mrs Frobisher-Pym waking up one night and having a terrible fright, because she thought somebody'd been and hanged himself on our bedroom door. Such a silly idea, because I was safe in bed beside her—snoring, *she* said, ha, ha!—and, if anybody was feeling like hanging himself, he wouldn't come into our bedroom to do it. Well, she clutched my arm in a great state of mind, and when I went to see what had alarmed her, what do you think it was? My trousers, which I'd hung up by the braces, with the socks still in the legs! My word! and didn't I get a wigging for not having put my things away tidy!'

Mr Frobisher-Pym laughed, and Mrs Plunkett said dutifully, 'There now!' Her husband shook his head.

'That may be, sir, but I see the death-coach last night with my own eyes. Just striking midnight it was, by the church clock, and I see it come up the lane by the old priory wall.'

'And what were you doing out of bed at midnight, eh?'

'Well, sir, I'd been round to my sister's, that's got her boy home on leaf off of his ship.'

'And you'd been drinking his health, I dare say, Plunkett.' Mr Frobisher-Pym wagged an admonitory forefinger.

'No, sir, I don't deny I'd had a glass or two of ale, but not to fuddle me. My wife can tell you I was sober enough when I got home.'

'That's right, sir. Plunkett hadn't taken too much last night, that I'll swear to.'

'Well, what was it you saw, Plunkett?'

'I see the death-coach, same as I'm telling you, sir. It come up the lane, all ghostly white, sir, and never making no more sound than the dead—which it were, sir.'

'A wagon or something going through to Lymptree or Herriotting.'

'No, sir—tweren't a wagon. I counted the horses—four white horses, and they went by with never a sound of hoof or bridle. And that weren't— '

'Four horses! Come, Plunkett, you must have been seeing double. There's nobody about here would be driving four horses, unless it was Mr Mortimer from Abbotts Bolton, and he wouldn't be taking his horse-flesh out at midnight.'

'Four horses they was, sir. I see them plain. And it weren't Mr Mortimer, neither, for he drives a drag, and this were a big, heavy coach, with no lights on it, but shinin' all of itself, with a colour like moonshine.'

'Oh, nonsense, man! You couldn't see the moon last night. It was pitch-dark.'

'No, sir, but the coach shone all moony-like, all the same.'

'And no lights? I wonder what the police would say to that.'

'No mortal police could stop that coach,' said Plunkett contemptuously, 'nor no mortal man could abide the sight on it. I tell you, sir, that ain't the worst of it. The horses— '

'Was it going slowly?'

'No, sir. It were going at a gallop, only the hoofs didn't touch the ground. There weren't no sound, and I see the black road and the white hoofs half a foot off of it. And the horses had no heads.'

'No heads?'

'No, sir.'

Mr Frobisher-Pym laughed.

'Come, come, Plunkett, you don't expect us to swallow that. No heads? How could even a ghost drive horses with no heads? How about the reins, eh?'

'You may laugh, sir, but we know that with God all things are possible. Four white horses they was. I see them clearly, but there was neither head nor neck beyond the collar, sir. I see the reins, shining like silver, and they

'You may certainly call it blackmail, and theft too,' said Lord Peter, with a shrug. 'But why use ugly names? I hold five aces, you see. Better chuck in your hand.'

'Suppose I say I never heard of the diamonds?'

'It's a bit late now, isn't it?' said Wimsey affably. 'But, in that case, I'm beastly sorry and all that, of course, but we shall have to make to-night's business public.'

'Damn you!' muttered Melville, 'you sneering devil.'

He showed all his white teeth, half springing, with crouched shoulders. Wimsey waited quietly, his hands in his pockets.

The rush did not come. With a furious gesture, Melville pulled out his keys and unlocked his dressing-case.

'Take them,' he growled, flinging a small parcel on the table; 'you've got me. Take 'em and go to hell.'

'Eventually—why not now?' murmured his lordship. 'Thanks frightfully. Man of peace myself, you know—hate unpleasantness and all that.' He scrutinised his booty carefully, running the stones expertly between his fingers. Over the portrait he pursed up his lips. 'Yes,' he murmured, 'that *would* have made a row.' He replaced the wrapping and slipped the parcel into his pocket.

'Well, good night, Melville—and thanks for a pleasant game.'

'I say, Biggs,' said Wimsey, when he had returned to the card-room. 'You've had a lot of experience. What tactics d'you think one's justified in usin' with a blackmailer?'

'Ah!' said the K.C. 'There you've put your finger on Society's sore place, where the Law is helpless. Speaking as a man, I'd say nothing could be too bad for the brute. It's a crime crueller and infinitely worse in its results than murder. As a lawyer, I can only say that I have consistently refused to defend a blackmailer or to prosecute any poor devil who does away with his tormentor.'

'H'm,' replied Wimsey. 'What do you say, Colonel?'

'A man like that's a filthy pest,' said the little warrior stoutly. 'Shootin's too good for him. I knew a man—close personal friend, in fact—hounded to death—blew his brains out—one of the best. Don't like to talk about it.'

'I want to show you something,' said Wimsey.

'Gentlemen,' said Melville more soberly, 'I swear to you that I am absolutely innocent of this ghastly thing. Can't you believe me?'

'I can believe the evidence of my own eyes, sir,' said the Colonel, with some heat.

'For the good of the club,' said Wimsey, 'this couldn't go on, but—also for the good of the club—I think we should all prefer the matter to be quietly arranged. In the face of what Sir Impey and the Colonel can witness, Melville, I'm afraid your protestations are not likely to be credited.'

Melville looked from the soldier's face to that of the great criminal lawyer.

'I don't know what your game is,' he said sullenly to Wimsey, 'but I can see you've laid a trap and pulled it off all right.'

'I think, gentlemen,' said Wimsey, 'that, if I might have a word in private with Melville in his own room, I could get the thing settled satisfactorily, without undue fuss.'

'He'll have to resign his commission,' growled the Colonel.

'I'll put it to him in that light,' said Peter. 'May we go to your room for a minute, Melville?'

With a lowering brow, the young soldier led the way. Once alone with Wimsey, he turned furiously on him.

'What do you want? What do you mean by making this monstrous charge? I'll take action for libel!'

'Do,' said Wimsey coolly, 'if you think anybody is likely to believe your story.'

He lit a cigarette, and smiled lazily at the angry young man.

'Well, what's the meaning of it, anyway?'

'The meaning,' said Wimsey, 'is simply that you, an officer and a member of this club, have been caught red-handed cheating at cards while playing for money, the witnesses being Sir Impey Biggs, Colonel Marchbanks, and myself. Now, I suggest to you, Captain Melville, that your best plan is to let me take charge of Mrs Ruyslaender's diamond necklace and portrait, and then just to trickle away quiet-like from these halls of dazzlin' light—without any questions asked.'

Melville leapt to his feet.

'My God!' he cried. 'I can see it now. It's blackmail.'

ran up to the rings of the hames, and they didn't go no further. If I was to drop down dead this minute, sir, that's what I see.'

'Was there a driver to this wonderful turn-out?'

'Yes, sir, there was a driver.'

'Headless too, I suppose?'

'Yes, sir, headless too. At least, I couldn't see nothing of him beyond his coat, which had them old-fashioned capes at the shoulders.'

'Well, I must say, Plunkett, you're very circumstantial. How far off was this—er—apparition when you saw it?'

'I was passing by the War Memorial, sir, when I see it come up the lane. It wouldn't be above twenty or thirty yards from where I stood. It went by at a gallop, and turned off to the left round the churchyard wall.'

'Well, well, it sounds odd, certainly, but it was a dark night, and at that distance your eyes may have deceived you. Now, if you'll take my advice you'll think no more about it.'

'Ah, sir, it's all very well saying that, but everybody knows the man who sees the death-coach of the Burdocks is doomed to die within the week. There's no use rebelling against it, sir; it is so. And if you'll be so good as to oblige me over that matter of a will, I'd die happier for knowing as Sarah and the children was sure of their bit of money.'

Mr Frobisher-Pym obliged over the will, though much against the grain, exhorting and scolding as he wrote. Wimsey added his own signature as one of the witnesses, and contributed his own bit of comfort.

'I shouldn't worry too much about the coach, if I were you,' he said. 'Depend upon it, if it's the Burdock coach it'll just have come for the soul of the old squire. It couldn't be expected to go to New York for him, don't you see? It's just gettin' ready for the funeral to-morrow.'

'That's likely enough,' agreed Plunkett. 'Often and often it's been seen in these parts when one of the Burdocks was taken. But it's terrible unlucky to see it.'

The thought of the funeral seemed, however, to cheer him a little. The visitors again begged him not to think about it, and took their departure.

'Isn't it wonderful,' said Mr Frobisher-Pym, 'what imagination will do with these people? And they're obstinate. You could argue with them till you were black in the face.'

'Yes. I say, let's go down to the church and have a look at the place. I'd like to know how much he could really have seen from where he was standing.'

The parish church of Little Doddering stands, like so many country churches, at some distance from the houses. The main road from Herriotting, Abbotts Bolton, and Frimpton runs past the west gate of the churchyard—a wide God's acre, crowded with ancient stones. On the south side is a narrow and gloomy lane, heavily overhung with old elm-trees, dividing the church from the still more ancient ruins of Doddering Priory. On the main road, a little beyond the point where Old Priory Lane enters, stands the War Memorial, and from here the road runs straight on into Little Doddering. Round the remaining two sides of the churchyard winds another lane, known to the village simply as the Back Lane. This branches out from the Herriotting road about a hundred yards north of the church, connects with the far end of Priory Lane, and thence proceeds deviously to Shootering Underwood, Hamsey, Thripsey, and Wyck.

'Whatever it was Plunkett thinks he saw,' said Mr Frobisher-Pym, 'it must have come from Shootering. The Back Lane only leads round by some fields and a cottage or two, and it stands to reason anybody coming from Frimpton would have taken the main road, going and coming. The lane is in a very bad state with all this rain. I'm afraid even your detective ability, my dear Wimsey, would not avail to find wheel-marks on this modern tarmac.'

'Hardly,' said Wimsey, 'especially in the case of a ghostly chariot which gets along without touching the ground. But your reasoning seems perfectly sound, sir.'

'It was probably a couple of belated wagons going to market,' pursued Mr Frobisher-Pym, 'and the rest of it is superstition and, I am afraid, the local beer. Plunkett couldn't have seen all those details about drivers and hames and so on at this distance. And, if it was making no noise, how did he come to notice it at all, since he'd got past the turn and was walking in the other direction? Depend upon it, he heard the wheels and imagined the rest.'

'Probably,' said Wimsey.

'Of course,' went on his host, 'if the wagons really were going about without lights, it ought to be looked into. It is a very dangerous thing,

The Colonel got out, and after a short time Biggs followed his example. Melville held on till the pool mounted to something under a hundred pounds, when Wimsey suddenly turned restive and demanded to see him.

'Four kings,' said Melville.

'Blast you!' said Lord Peter, laying down four queens. 'No holdin' this feller to-night, is there? Here, take the ruddy cards, Melville, and give somebody else a look in, will you.'

He shuffled them as he spoke, and handed them over. Melville dealt, satisfied the demands of the other three players, and was in the act of taking three new cards for himself, when Wimsey gave a sudden exclamation, and shot a swift hand across the table.

'Hullo! Melville,' he said, in a chill tone which bore no resemblance to his ordinary speech, 'what exactly does this mean?'

He lifted Melville's left arm clear of the table and, with a sharp gesture, shook it. From the sleeve something fluttered to the table and glided away to the floor. Colonel Marchbanks picked it up, and in a dreadful silence laid the joker on the table.

'Good God!' said Sir Impey.

'You young blackguard!' gasped the Colonel, recovering speech.

'What the hell do you mean by this?' gasped Melville, with a face like chalk. 'How dare you! This is a trick—a plant—' A horrible fury gripped him. 'You dare to say that I have been cheating. You liar! You filthy sharper. You put it there. I tell you, gentlemen," he cried, looking desperately round the table, "he must have put it there.'

'Come, come,' said Colonel Marchbanks, 'no good carryin' on that way, Melville. Dear me, no good at all. Only makes matters worse. We all saw it, you know. Dear, dear, I don't know what the Army's coming to.'

'Do you mean you believe it?' shrieked Melville. 'For God's sake, Wimsey, is this a joke or what? Biggs—you've got a head on your shoulders—are you going to believe this half-drunk fool and this doddering old idiot who ought to be in his grave?'

'That language won't do you any good, Melville,' said Sir Impey. 'I'm afraid we all saw it clearly enough.'

'I've been suspectin' this some time, y'know,' said Wimsey. 'That's why I asked you two to stay to-night. We don't want to make a public row, but— '