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The Story of a PERFECT ALIBI

By Anthony Berkeley

Mr. Anthony Berkeley, one of the most famous of detective story writers, is well known to listeners for his part in the recent broadcast mystery serial and the discussion in which he and Miss Dorothy Sayers revealed some of the mysteries of their craft. He is also the Secretary of that most exclusive body, the Detection Club.



'MURDERS?' repeated Sir Wilfred, reflectively. 'No. We're a peaceful county here, and a small one, too. No, I'm sorry, but we haven't had a case of murder since I became Chief Constable.'

'Oh,' said Roger Sberingham, disappointed. 'Help yourself to more port' the Chief Constable consoled. 'And pass on the decanter,' he added.

Roger fulfilled both behests. 'This is very disappointing of you, Wilfred.'

'Is it? I don't know. Even if we had had a murder or two, I don't suppose they'd interest you much. Murders in the country are usually very obvious, very sordid, and very dull.'

'Are they?' doubted Roger, thinking of one murder in the country at any rate which had been neither obvious, nor sordid, nor dull. 'But perhaps you have had a murder or two, after all, without knowing it,' he went on, brightening. 'That wouldn't be obvious, or dull, would it?'

'If you're suggesting that murder has ever been committed during the last five years right under my nose,' said his host, drily, 'you can hardly expect me to agree to the possibility.'

'But it's happening every day. Must be. Your nose wouldn't be exceptional. Do you mean to tell me you've never had a case at all in which you *know* murder had been committed, but couldn't bring it home to anyone?'

'Never,' said the Chief Constable, firmly. 'Never a case even in which you *smell* murder?'

Sir Wilfred hesitated. He sipped at his port. He toyed uneasily with its glass, under Roger's accusing eye. 'Oh, but it's really too absurd,' he said.

'Come along, Wilfred. Out with it, please. We're all alone, so you can be as libellous as you like. You've got to tell me, so you may as well begin now.'

'Mind you, there never was any suggestion of murder,' Sir Wilfred said, hastily. 'Nobody raised the point at all, least of all myself. The coroner never referred to the possibility of

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-RELF-

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it being anything else but straightforward accident. In fact, it couldn't possibly have been. You must realize that from the outset, Roger, or I shan't say a word. All that happened was that the merest feeling did occur to me that the accident—

'Begin at the beginning,' said Roger.

Sir Wilfred took another sip at his port and resumed. It seemed to be considering exactly where the beginning lay.

'If it hadn't happened to the Allfreys,' he said, slowly, 'I should probably never have had even that amount of suspicion. But I knew the Allfreys pretty well. In fact, they were the only people I knew at all in this neighbourhood before I was posted here, so naturally I got to know them a good deal better; and equally naturally (though I suppose officially it shouldn't have been so) I took a good deal more interest in the case than if it had happened to complete strangers. So you can imagine that if there had been even the faintest suspicion of murder, really, I'd have left no stone unturned to discover the perpetrator.

'Begin at the beginning,' Roger repeated. 'And try not to use so many clichés.' I don't like 'em.

'Eh?' said Sir Wilfred.

'Begin at the beginning,' said Roger.

Sir Wilfred sighed (Roger often seemed to have that effect upon people), and did so.

'IT was one June, after I'd been here only four months. I was still feeling pretty new to the job, and this was the—how shall I put it without sounding snobbish?—the first case of sudden death in the class where such things get reported in the newspapers. So, of course, I was out of my mind not only my p's and q's but my a's to my z's.

'John Allfrey took up farming after the War. You don't know them, do you? Very good sorts, both of them. He's about forty-five, I suppose, and Ethel, his wife, a few years younger. They've got no children of their own, but John's ward, Elsa Pennefather, lives with them—or rather, did then. She's an orphan, the daughter of an old friend of John Allfrey's, and was brought up by being quite a considerable number of times to take a considerable interest in them. When this affair happened she'd just turned twenty-one, so that she'd come into control of her own money; but that apparently was no reason for her leaving what had for years amounted to her own home. The money hadn't spoilt her a bit, either; she was a charmingly-unaffected girl, modest and as pretty as a picture; and apart from different from the usual picture, her nose was a little crooked—

'Chalk from cheese,' suggested Roger.

'Exactly. Chalk from cheese,' agreed the Chief Constable, with relief. 'Well, the Allfreys had a few people staying with them at the time. Not a house-party; nothing so pretentious as that—just a few friends staying at the farm. I don't know that I need describe them in detail, but—

'In detail, please,' said Roger, firmly.

'Sir Wilfred groaned. 'What a devil of a fellow you are. All right, then. There was a married couple, the De Henneys; Paul and Sylvia de Henzey. Know them? No? You haven't missed much. I didn't cotton to them, either before or after. He was English after a fashion, in spite of his name; at least, his mother had been pure English and his father, French on both sides, had been born and brought up in England. De Henzey was terribly touchy if you hinted he might not be altogether the genuine article. More English than the English, you know. He didn't look the part, though. Slim little fellow, wiry enough but not tall, olive-coloured oval face, little black moustache, and as excitable as any Frenchman ever was.

'His wife was English all right, but she didn't really look the part either. A good two inches taller than him, one of the willowy, queenly kind that make you feel you've got your collar on back to front and forgotten to shave. You know, flaming red hair, though, and the proper green eyes. She always reminded me of a tiger, somehow. She had that sort of sleepy alertness. I believe she'd been an actress before she married, and a pretty good one, too. De Henzey absolutely worshipped her. Used to follow her about with his eyes whenever she moved, as if he couldn't bear to take them off her. Never saw a fellow so infatuated with a woman. And his own wife, too,' added Sir Wilfred, cynically.

'Then there was another couple. Not married this time. Cousins. They'd been brought up together, though, since the girl's parents died, and they were more like brother and sister. Armored and Eric Scott-Davies.

'Ah!' said Roger, suddenly.

'You knew 'em?'

'I had met 'em. But I'd heard a good deal about them. In fact, I gathered there wasn't much love lost between the two of them.'

'I said they were more like brother and sister. Well, if you knew him I couldn't describe him. Don't expect you had much use for him any more than I had. A waster and a chaser after other men's wives. Rotten all through.'

'He was a fine fellow to look at,' Roger murmured. 'Six foot, if he was an inch.'

'Oh, yes, and he was a good shot, and had played cricket for Kent, and a thorough sportsman, and so damned good-looking no woman could resist him,' sneered the Chief Constable.

'All that, and rotten to—'

'The core.'

'That's it. The core. And I dare say the girl, Armored, wasn't much better. No, perhaps I shouldn't say that; I never had anything against her. But to tell the truth, I can't stand these crop-eared, lip-sticked, leggy young women,' observed the prejudiced Sir Wilfred, fiercely.

'Well, that's four of 'em; Elsa Pennefather (John's ward, you remember) makes five, John and Ethel seven, and the eighth was a fellow called Pinkerton. I couldn't stand him,' said Sir Wilfred, with candour, 'at any blessed price.'

'THERE don't seem to have been many of them you could stand,' Roger remarked.

'Oh, Ethel and John are two of the best. And the little girl. Rest of 'em certainly were a messy bunch.' This chap Pinkerton was the worst, though. Last sort of fellow I'd ever have expected to see in John Allfrey's house. Writer of some sort, I believe. Prim, precise, conceived little ass with pince-nez and a dashed inferior smile. Didn't shoot, didn't fish, didn't hunt, didn't even play games. Didn't do anything, in fact, said Sir Wilfred in wrathful reminiscence, 'except try to teach other people their business. About the only good thing Eric Scott-Davies ever did was to chuck him into the swimming pool one night in his dress clothes.'

'Did he, though?' said Roger, with interest. 'So I heard afterwards. Well, that's the whole eight, and I hope you're satisfied.' Sir Wilfred began to toy with his glass again.

'Quite satisfied,' said Roger. 'Thank you, Wilfred. Go on.'

But Sir Wilfred did not go on. He continued to twirl, almost coyly, the stem of his wine-glass.

Roger pressed him.

'Well, said the Chief Constable at last, with official heaviness, 'I'm not at all sure that I ought to tell you the point I've got in mind at the moment.'

'You tell me,' threatened Roger, 'or I'll tell Agatha what it was you put on top of the

Martyn's Memorial at Oxford that night. And all the leading citizens of this town, too. That would show up their Chief Constable in a nice light, wouldn't it?'

'I say, Roger, you wouldn't do that?' said the Chief Constable, alarmed.

'I certainly would, if you don't tell me.'

'Then I will tell you,' hastily said Sir Wilfred, who believed his guest quite capable of carrying out this threat. 'It's this. Every single one of those seven people, with the solitary exception of Elsa Pennefather, had a perfectly good reason for wishing Eric Scott-Davies out of this world.'

'And therefore it was Eric Scott-Davies who was killed,' Roger nodded, with approval.

'I don't say "therefore." But it certainly was Eric Scott-Davies on whom the inquest was held.'

'What were the various motives?'

'"Motive" may be too strong a word altogether,' replied the Chief Constable, cautiously. 'I'll tell you what the reasons were.

'IN the first place, the party, innocent though it may have seemed to an outsider like myself, wasn't innocently arranged at all. (I only found all this out afterwards, of course, from John himself; he let me quite candidly.) It had been very cunningly devised by Mrs. Allfrey herself. The facts were these, Eric Scott-Davies, to put the thing shortly, was in a nasty hole; he'd got through nearly all the very respectable fortune he'd stepped into half-a-dozen years earlier, and he was talking of selling Stakeleigh itself. Marvellous old place; I expect you know it; the Scott-Davises have owned it since the last two hundred years and more. So leaving other men's wives for a time, he was going all out for Elsa Pennefather, the heiress. Everybody except the poor girl herself knew he didn't care two raps for her; she wasn't his type at all—it was just her money he was after. And he'd made good progress. The girl was well on the way to falling head over heels in love with the brute.

'Now Ethel Allfrey, as she told me with her own lips, would rather have seen Elsa at the bottom of the sea than married to a fellow like Scott-Davies, because it was obvious enough what would happen when once he'd got her and her money. But she knew well enough that the surest way of driving the girl straight into his arms was to tell her the real truth about Scott-Davies and what he herself thought of any such engagement. So she cunningly let the girl hint down to the farm to stay, and she insisted at the same time one of the other men's wives—Mrs. de Henzey, and her husband.

'She knew Mrs. de Henzey, you see, and she knew that Mrs. de Henzey wasn't like Scott-Davies' other conquests, who apparently allowed themselves to be dropped with a thud as soon as the fellow was fit. Mrs. de Henzey would fight any such proposition tooth and nail, because (really, you know, women are extraordinary!) she really was in love with the fellow. At any rate, she would never allow Scott-Davies to walk off right under her nose with an heiress; and between the three of them Ethel made sure that the girl couldn't help having her eyes opened to the suit of fellow Scott-Davies. John Allfrey thought the same.'

'Roger nodded. 'Yes, very sound. But why was the husband asked, too?'

'Well that, I must admit, was in the nature of playing with fire,' replied Sir Wilfred, gravely.

'But the truth was that the Allfreys were getting desperate. The announcement of the engagement was expected at any moment, and once it was made, things might have gone too far for retraction. John told me that they both felt it was no use wearing kid gloves to a situation

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Perfect Alibi, Anthon Berkeley's Mystery Story

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so serious. They asked Paul de Henzey with the idea that if things came to their worst, his eyes might be opened first. And the opening of his couldn't fail to open the girl's, because de Henzey would never (as the Americans say) keep a thing like that under his hat.

'De Henzey, you see, knew nothing of his wife's affair with Scott-Davies—though there was hardly a club in London where it hadn't been discussed. A husband who trusts his wife is always the last to hear of anything like that. And de Henzey trusted his wife absolutely. That meant that the explosion, if it did come, would be all the worse; but so long as it blew Scott-Davies away from Elsa for good and all, the Allfreys didn't seem to care what else it blew up, too.'

'Playing with fire, as you say,' Roger agreed. 'Well, that gives four with a motive (including de Henzey, if he ever did learn the truth). What about the other two?'

'Oh, the cousin, Armored, stood to inherit Stukeleigh and anything else that was left, under the terms of her uncle's will; and what wouldn't be enough for him might have been plenty for her. Besides, she wasn't so bad as her cousin. She was really distressed at the idea of his selling Stukeleigh. Thought it sacrilege and all that. As, of course, it was.'

'Well, that was a strong enough motive. And Pinkerton?'

'Oh, well, that was really rather funny. He'd been brought into the scheme by Ethel Allfrey, who told him the whole trouble (he was a very old friend of hers), and asked him to try to distract Miss Pennefather's attention from Scott-Davies. And he'd tried to do it so successfully that he'd fallen in love with her himself. In fact, they're married now, Heaven help the girl! On top of which Scott-Davies had thrown him into the swimming-pool in front of the girl, having warned him privately, and unsuccessfully, off the grass. I worried that out of him myself.'

'I SEE,' Roger said, thoughtfully. 'This is very interesting, Wilfred. How lucky for what a lot of people that Eric Scott-Davies met with a fatal accident! What was the accident, by the way?'

'Shot himself,' the Chief Constable answered, soberly. 'Went out one afternoon with a gun under his arm (sort of fellow who can't walk two yards in the country without a gun, and, of course, John's place is swarming with rabbits), and they found him at the edge of a little clearing in a wood with the back of his head blown off. It was a twelve-bore, and he must have been dragging it behind him by the barrel. A bit of bramble had got inside the trigger guard, and both barrels had gone off.'

'Oh, come!' Roger exclaimed. 'That's a bit thin. Experienced shots don't pull their guns along the ground behind them by the barrel.'

'They don't,' Sir Wilfred agreed, soberly. 'And that's precisely why I'm telling you this story. You asked me if I hadn't even smelt murder. I can tell you, I smelt it pretty strongly down in that wood; and more strongly still when I began to get under the surface of things and learned what I've just been telling you. But it wasn't murder. There's no doubt about that. First of all, there were no fingerprints on the gun but the dead man's.'

'Finger-prints can be wiped off.'

'Yes, I know that,' retorted Sir Wilfred, tersely. 'But every single person, except Miss Pennefather, who didn't need one, had an

absolutely perfect alibi for the moment when the double shot was fired.'

'Oh, you know when it was fired, then?'

'Yes, several people heard it. They didn't pay any attention, because there are always odd shots in a place like that; but it was the only one that afternoon, so we were able to fix the time of death precisely. It was seventeen minutes past three, I remember.'

'AS to the alibis, they were unassailable. Ethel Allfrey was in the house, seen from time to time by the servants; John Allfrey was half a mile away, inspecting a field of grass with one of his men; Pinkerton was taking a walk, and was seen by various persons at different points, and he must have been nearly two miles away from the farm at a quarter-past three; Elsa Pennefather was lying in a corner of a field with a rug and a book, waiting for Scott-Davies to join her; the de Henzys were sun-bathing by the swimming-pool in preparation for Deauville, and confirmed each other's stories absolutely; Armored Scott-Davies was picking wild fox-gloves in the hedge-bottoms on the hillside above the house.'

'Oh, was she? And who confirms that?'

'One of my own men,' countered the Chief Constable, triumphantly. 'By a stroke of luck the constable for that district (and a pretty big beat it is for one man) was visiting the farm that afternoon in connection with some agricultural return or other that Allfrey ought to have sent in. He passed Miss Scott-Davies on his way down to the house, and by another lucky chance he mistook the directions they gave him there, so that instead of going up to the field at the top of the hill, where Allfrey was, he went down the hill and actually saw the two de Henzys at their sun-bathing too; so that confirmed what might have been a fishy alibi. Lastly, he was just entering the wood itself, which he had to pass through to get to the field where he thought Allfrey was, when he heard the double shot ahead of him. He didn't pay any particular attention either, but when he reached the clearing two or three minutes later, there was Scott-Davies lying almost across his path.'

'That's pretty conclusive, you see. He must have been within three hundred yards at the outside when the gun went off, probably less. If anyone had been crashing about in the undergrowth he would certainly have heard him; if anyone had run ahead of him along the path he would certainly have been seen by another labourer who was working in the field for which my man was bound. And he establishes the only two doubtful alibis. What about that?'

'It's fairly conclusive, on the face of it,' Roger had to admit. 'At least, so far as the boose-party is concerned. But what about a stranger? Or someone from the village? But, of course, none of the local yokels could have had any motive.'

'Well, Scott-Davies had stayed with the Allfreys two years previously, and I heard that it was rumoured at the time that he was going down to the village rather more than he should perhaps have done, but it was all quite indefinite, and no names even were mentioned. No, none of the local yokels could possibly have had a motive. In any case, the great thing is that nobody was, or could possibly have been, at the farm that afternoon except the ones we know all about. There's only one way of approach from the road, and Allfrey's third man had that under observation the whole day;

moreover, he and the second man had each other under observation. It's rather too much to suppose that any intruder swam the stream at the bottom of the valley, which is Allfrey's longest boundary; and that's the only boundary which wasn't observed for its whole length. The place, in fact, was like a fortress, and at 3.17 every single person inside it is accounted for.'

'Besides, one last point: the luck was with us still further, in that it was my man who found the body within a couple of minutes of death. There was an official eye on it, you see, right from the very beginning. Very rare, as you know. Not the faintest chance of anyone monkeying with the body, covering up traces, or wiping off finger-prints.'

'Well, Roger, you're supposed to be pretty strong on deduction in these days, aren't you?' concluded Sir Wilfred, with an impish grin. 'See what you can deduce from all that.' And he refilled his glass with the air of one who certainly deserved something like that.

'Certainly,' said Roger, promptly. 'I deduce that murder was committed in that wood. Anything more obvious I never heard.'

'But I tell you it's impossible.'

'Were there any signs of a struggle?'

'Not one.'

'Humph! Do you challenge me, Wilfred? I'll take you on. I'll go and have a word with that constable tomorrow and get his version.'

SIR WILFRED looked grave. 'Unfortunately that's out of the question. He's no longer alive.'

'What?' Roger cried in high disappointment.

'The Chief's witness dead?'

'Yes. It's a sad story. He had a daughter, a charmingly pretty girl; he brought her up himself after his wife died, and she was the apple of his eye. I suppose her prettiness gave her inflated ideas. It's the old tale. She went up to London, and—well, she went to the bad. It broke his heart, and he hanged himself on his kitchen door. I never regretted a man more. A most intelligent chap, and the most conscientious man I've ever had under me. It happened just before the affair we've been talking about, and he killed himself shortly afterwards. He must have been contemplating it then, but, of course, I never had the faintest idea. So I'm afraid you won't get your evidence.'

'Not from him, evidently,' Roger said. 'But after all, it isn't necessary. I'm surprised at you, Wilfred. The thing's perfectly plain.'

'That murder was committed?' said the Chief Constable, incredulously. 'Nonsense, my dear fellow. I keep telling you that everyone on the farm that afternoon had an absolutely cast-iron alibi.'

Roger rose. 'Yes, including the murderer himself. The most perfect alibi I can imagine. Hadn't we better be moving, by the way? I know Agatha will blame me for this.'

Sir Wilfred was gazing at him in bewilderment. 'The most perfect alibi you can imagine? My dear Roger, what do you mean?'

'Why, a blue tunic, of course,' said Roger, briskly. 'And then, like the conscientious fellow he was, he executed on himself the due sentence of the law. Though I'm inclined to think,' Roger added, judicially, 'that there he was a little too conscientious. By riding the world of the man who betrayed his daughter he did more good than he don't. Come along, Wilfred—for goodness sake don't sit there gaping at me!'