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'NECKLACE OF PEARLS': A PETER WIMSEY STORY

A Christmas Detective Story by Dorothy L. Sayers, the author of 'Lord Peter Views the Body,' and other triumphs of mystery and detection

SIR SEPTIMUS SHALE was accustomed to assert his authority once in the year and once only. He allowed his young and fashionable wife to fill his house with diagrammatic furniture made of steel; to collect advanced artists and anti-grammatical poets; to believe in cocktails and relativity, and to dress as extravagantly as she pleased; but he did insist on an old-fashioned Christmas. He was a simple-hearted man, who really liked plum-pudding and cracker mottoes, and he could not get it out of his head that other people, 'at bottom,' enjoyed these things also. At Christmas, therefore, he firmly retired to his country house in Essex, called in the servants to hang holly and mistletoe upon the cubist electric fittings; loaded the steel sideboard with delicacies from Fortnum and Mason; hung up stockings at the heads of the polished walnut bedsteads, and even, on this occasion only, had the electric radiators removed from the modernist grates and installed wood fires and a Yule log. He then gathered his family and friends about him, filled them with as much Dickensian good fare as he could persuade them to swallow, and, after their Christmas dinner, set them down to play charades and 'Clumps' and 'Animal, Vegetable or Mineral' in the drawing-room, concluding these diversions by Hide-and-Seek in the dark all over the house. Because Sir Septimus was a very rich man, his guests fell in with this invariable programme, and, if they were bored, they did not tell him so.

Another charming and traditional custom which he followed was that of presenting to his daughter, Margarita, a pearl on each successive birthday—this anniversary happening to coincide with Christmas Eve. The pearls now numbered twenty, and the collection was beginning to enjoy a certain celebrity, and had been photographed in the Society papers. Though not sensationally large—each one being about the size of a marrow-fat pea—the pearls were of very great value. They were of exquisite colour and perfect shape, and matched to a hair's weight. On this particular Christmas Eve, the presentation of the twenty-first pearl had been the occasion of a very special ceremony. There was a dance and there were speeches. On the Christmas night following, the more restricted family party took place, with the turkey and the Victorian games. There were eleven guests, in addition to Sir Septimus and Lady Shale and their daughter, nearly all related or connected to them in some way: John Shale, a brother, with his wife and their son and daughter, Henry and Betty; Betty's fiancé, Oswald Truegood, a young man with Parliamentary ambitions; George Comphrey, a cousin of Lady Shale's, aged about thirty and known as a man about town; Lavinia Prescott, asked on George's account; Joyce Trivett, asked on Henry Shale's account; Richard and Beryl Dennison, distant relations of Lady Shale, who lived a gay and expensive life in town on nobody precisely knew what resources, and Lord Peter Wimsey, asked, in a touching spirit of unreasonable hope, on Margarita's account. There were also, of course, William Norgate, secretary to Sir Septimus, and Miss Tomkins, secretary to Lady Shale, who had to be there because, without their calm efficiency, the Christmas arrangements could not have been carried through.

Dinner was over—a seemingly endless succession of soup, fish, turkey, roast beef, plum pudding, mincepies, crystallized fruit, nuts and

five kinds of wine, presided over by Sir Septimus, all smiles, by Lady Shale, all mocking deprecation, and by Margarita, pretty and bored, with the necklace of twenty-one pearls gleaming softly on her slender throat. Gorged and dyspeptic, and longing only for the horizontal position, the company had been shepherded into the drawing-room and set to play 'Musical Chairs' (Miss Tomkins at the piano), 'Hunt the Slipper' (slipper provided by Miss Tomkins), and 'Dumb Crambo' (costumes by Miss Tomkins and Mr. William Norgate). The back drawing-room (for Sir Septimus clung to these old-fashioned names) provided an ad-



'Margarita, pretty and bored, with the necklace of twenty-one pearls gleaming softly on her slender throat.'

mirable dressing-room, being screened by folding-doors from the large drawing-room in which the audience sat on aluminium chairs, scrabbling uneasy toes on a floor of black glass, under the tremendous illumination of electricity reflected from a brass ceiling.

It was William Norgate who, after taking the temperature of the meeting, suggested to Lady Shale that they should play at something less athletic. Lady Shale agreed and, as usual, suggested bridge. Sir Septimus, as usual, blew the suggestion aside.

'Bridge? Nonsense! Nonsense! Play bridge every day of your lives. This is Christmas time. Something we can all play together. How about "Animal, Vegetable or Mineral"?'

This intellectual pastime was a favourite with Sir Septimus; he was rather good at putting pregnant questions. After a brief discussion, it became evident that this game was an inevitable part of the programme. The party settled down to it, Sir Septimus undertaking to 'go out' first and set the thing going.

Presently they had guessed, among other things, Miss Tomkins's mother's photograph,

a gramophone record of 'I want to be happy' (much scientific research into the exact composition of records, settled by William Norgate out of the 'Encyclopædia Britannica'), the smallest stickleback in the stream at the bottom of the garden, the new planet Pluto, the scarf worn by Mrs. Dennison (very confusing, because it was not silk, which would be animal, or artificial silk, which would be vegetable, but made of spun glass—mineral, a very clever choice of subject), and had failed to guess the Prime Minister's wireless speech—which was voted not fair, since nobody could decide whether it was of animal origin or a kind of gas. It was decided that they should do one more word and then go on to 'Hide and Seek.' Oswald Truegood had retired into the back room and shut the door behind him while the party discussed the next subject of examination, when, suddenly, Sir Septimus broke in on the argument by calling to his daughter:—

'Hullo, Margy! What have you done with your necklace?'

'I took it off, Dad, because I thought it might get broken in "Dumb Crambo." It's over here on this table. No, it isn't. Did you take it, Mother?'

'No, I didn't. If I'd seen it, I should have. You are a careless child.'

'I believe you've got it yourself, Dad. You're teasing.'

Sir Septimus denied the accusation with some energy. Everybody got up and began to hunt about. There were not many places in that bare and polished room where a necklace could be hidden. After ten minutes' fruitless investigation, Richard Dennison, who had been seated next to the table where the pearls had been placed, began to look rather uncomfortable.

'Awkward, you know,' he remarked to Wimsey.

'At this moment Oswald Truegood put his head through the folding-doors and asked whether they hadn't settled on something by now, because he was getting the fidgets.'

This directed the attention of the searchers to the inner room. Margarita must have been mistaken. She had taken the necklace in there and it had got mixed up with the dressing-up clothes somehow. The room was ransacked. Everything was lifted up and shaken. The thing began to look serious. After half an hour of desperate energy it became apparent that the pearls were nowhere to be found.

'They must be somewhere in these two rooms, you know,' said Wimsey. 'The back drawing-room has no door, and nobody could have gone out of the front drawing-room without being seen. Unless the windows—'

No. The windows were all guarded on the outside by heavy shutters which it needed two footmen to take down and replace. The pearls had not gone out that way. In fact, the mere suggestion that they had left the drawing-room at all was disagreeable. Because—because—

It was William Norgate, efficient as ever, who coldly and boldly faced the issue.

'I think, Sir Septimus, it would be a relief to the minds of everybody present if we could all be searched.'

Sir Septimus was horrified, but the guests, having found a leader, backed up Norgate. The door was locked and the search was conducted—the ladies in the inner room and the men in the outer.

(Continued overleaf.)

'NECKLACE OF PEARLS': A Peter Wimsey Story (Continued from the previous page)

Nothing resulted from it except some very interesting information about the belongings habitually carried about by the average man and woman. It was natural that Lord Peter Wimsey should possess a pair of forceps, a pocket lens, and a small folding foot-rule—was he not a Sherlock Holmes in high life? But that Oswald Truegood should have two liver pills in a screw of paper and Henry Shale a pocket edition of 'The Odes of Horace' was unexpected. Why did John Shale distend the pockets of his dress-suit with a stump of red sealing wax, an ugly little mascot, and a five-shilling piece? George Comphrey had a pair of folding scissors and three wrapped lumps of sugar, of the sort served in restaurants and dining cars—evidence of a not uncommon form of kleptomania; but that the tidy and exact Norgate should burden himself with a reel of white cotton, three separate lengths of string, and twelve safety-pins on a card seemed really remarkable till one remembered that he had superintended all the Christmas decorations. Richard Dennison, amid some confusion and laughter, was found to cherish a lady's garter, a powder-compact, and half a potato; the last-named, he said, was a prophylactic against rheumatism (to which he was subject), while the other objects belonged to his wife. On the ladies' side, the more striking exhibits were a little book on palmistry, three invisible hair-pins, and a baby's photograph (Miss Tomkins); a Chinese trick cigarette-case with a secret compartment (Beryl Dennison); a very private letter and an outfit for mending stocking ladders (Lavinia Prescott); and a pair of eyebrow tweezers and a small packet of white powder, said to be for headaches (Betty Shale). An agitating moment followed the production from Joyce Trivett's handbag of a small string of pearls—but it was promptly remembered that these had come out of one of the crackers at dinner time, and they were, in fact, synthetic. In short, the search was unproductive of anything beyond a general shamefacedness and the discomfort always produced by undressing and redressing in a hurry at the wrong time of the day.

It was then that somebody, very grudgingly and haltingly, mentioned the horrid word 'Police.' Sir Septimus, naturally, was appalled by the idea. It was disgusting. He would not allow it. The pearls must be somewhere. They must search the rooms again. Could not Lord Peter Wimsey, with his experience of—er—mysterious happenings, do something to assist them?

'Eh?' said his lordship. 'Oh, by Jove! yes—by all means, certainly. That is to say, provided nobody supposes—eh, what? I mean to say, you don't know that I'm not a suspicious character, do you, what?'

Lady Shale interposed with authority.

'We don't think anybody ought to be suspected,' she said, 'but, if we did, we'd know it couldn't be you. You know far too much about crimes to want to commit one.'

'All right,' said Wimsey. 'But after the way the place has been gone over—' He shrugged his shoulders.

'Yes, I'm afraid you won't be able to find any footprints,' said Margarita. 'But we may have overlooked something.'

Wimsey nodded.

'I'll try. Do you all mind sitting down on your chairs in the outer room and staying there? All except one of you—I'd better have a witness to anything I do or find. Sir Septimus—you'd be the best person, I think.'

He shepherded them to their places and began a slow circuit of the two rooms, exploring every

surface, gazing up to the polished brazen ceiling, and crawling on hands and knees in the approved fashion across the black and shining desert of the floors. Sir Septimus followed, staring when Wimsey stared, bending with his hands upon his knees, when Wimsey crawled, and puffing at intervals with astonishment and chagrin. Their progress rather resembled that of a man taking out a very inquisitive puppy for a very leisurely constitutional. Fortunately, Lady Shale's taste in furnishing made investigation easier; there were scarcely any nooks or corners where anything could be concealed.

They reached the inner drawing-room, and here the dressing-up clothes were again minutely examined, but without result. Finally, Wimsey lay down flat on his stomach to squint under a steel cabinet which was one of the very few pieces of furniture which possessed short legs. Something about it seemed to catch his attention. He rolled up his sleeve and plunged his arm into the cavity, kicked convulsively in the effort to reach farther than was humanly possible, pulled out from his pocket and extended his folding foot-rule, fished with it under the cabinet and eventually succeeded in extracting what he sought.

It was a very minute object—in fact, a pin. Not an ordinary pin, but one resembling those used by entomologists to impale extremely small moths on the setting-board. It was about

by

DOROTHY L. SAYERS

three-quarters of an inch in length, as fine as a very fine needle, with a sharp point and a particularly small head.

'Bless my soul!' said Sir Septimus. 'What's that?'

'Does anybody here happen to collect moths or beetles or anything?' asked Wimsey, squatting on his haunches and examining the pin.

'I'm pretty sure they don't,' replied Sir Septimus. 'I'll ask them.'

'Don't do that,' Wimsey bent his head and stared at the floor, from which his own face stared meditatively back at him.

'I see,' said Wimsey, presently. 'That's how it was done. All right, Sir Septimus. I know where the pearls are, but I don't know who took them. Perhaps it would be as well—for everybody's satisfaction—just to find out. In the meantime, they are perfectly safe. Don't tell anyone that we've found this pin or that we've discovered anything. Send all these people to bed. Lock the drawing-room door and keep the key, and we'll get our man—or woman—by breakfast-time.'

'God bless my soul,' said Sir Septimus, very much puzzled.

Lord Peter Wimsey kept careful watch that night upon the drawing-room door. Nobody, however, came near it. Either the thief suspected a trap or he felt confident that any time would do to recover the pearls. Wimsey, however, did not feel that he was wasting his time. He was making a list of people who had been left alone in the back drawing-room during the playing of 'Animal, Vegetable or Mineral.' The list ran as follows:—

Sir Septimus Shale,
Lavinia Prescott,
William Norgate,
Joyce Trivett and Henry Shale (together, because they had each claimed to be incapable of guessing anything unaided),

Mrs. Dennison,
Betty Shale,
George Comphrey,
Richard Dennison,
Miss Tomkins,
Oswald Truegood,

He also made out a list of the persons to whom pearls might be useful or desirable. Unfortunately, this list agreed in almost all respects with the first (always excepting Sir Septimus) and so was not very helpful. The two secretaries had both come well recommended, but that was exactly what they would have done had they come with ulterior designs; the Dennisons were notorious livers from hand to mouth; Betty Shale carried mysterious white powders in her handbag, and was known to be in with a rather rapid set in town; Henry was a harmless dilettante, but Joyce Trivett could twist him round her little finger and was what Jane Austen liked to call 'expensive and dissipated'; Comphrey speculated; Oswald Truegood was rather frequently present at Epsom and Newmarket—the search for motives was only too fatally easy.

When the second housemaid and the underfootman appeared in the passage with household implements, Wimsey abandoned his vigil, but he was down early to breakfast. Sir Septimus and his wife and daughter were down before him, and a certain air of tension made itself felt.

Wimsey, standing on the hearth before the fire, made conversation about the weather and politics.

The party assembled gradually, but, as though by common consent, nothing was said about pearls until after breakfast, when Oswald Truegood took the bull by the horns.

'Well, now!' said he. 'How's the detecting getting along? Got your man, Wimsey?'

'Not yet,' said Wimsey, easily.

Sir Septimus, looking at Wimsey as though for his cue, cleared his throat and dashed into speech.

'All very tiresome,' he said, 'all very unpleasant. Hr'm. Nothing for it but the police, I'm afraid. Just at Christmas, too. Hr'm. Spoilt the party. Can't stand seeing all this stuff about the place.' He waved his hand towards the festoons of evergreens and coloured paper that adorned the walls. 'Take it all down, eh, what? No heart in it. Hr'm. Burn the lot.'

'What a pity, when we worked so hard over it,' said Joyce.

'Oh, leave it, Uncle,' said Henry Shale. 'You're bothering too much about the pearls. They're sure to turn up.'

'Shall I ring for James?' suggested William Norgate.

'No,' interrupted Comphrey. 'Let's do it ourselves. It'll give us something to do and take our minds off our troubles.'

'That's right,' said Sir Septimus. 'Start right away. Hate the sight of it.'

He savagely hauled a great branch of holly down from the mantelpiece and flung it, crackling, into the fire.

'That's the stuff,' said Richard Dennison. 'Make a good old blaze!' He leapt up from the table and snatched the mistletoe from the chandelier. 'Here goes! One more kiss for somebody before it's too late.'

'Isn't it unlucky to take it down before the New Year?' suggested Miss Tomkins.

'Unlucky be hanged. We'll have it all down. Off the stairs and out of the drawing-room, too. Somebody go and collect it.'

'Isn't the drawing-room locked?' asked Oswald.

'NECKLACE OF PEARLS': A Peter Wimsey Story (Continued from the opposite page)

'No. Lord Peter says the pearls aren't there, wherever else they are, so it's unlocked. That's right, isn't it, Wimsey?'

'Quite right. The pearls were taken out of these rooms. I can't yet tell you how, but I'm positive of it. In fact, I'll pledge my reputation that wherever they are, they're not up there.'

'Oh, well,' said Comphrey, 'in that case, have at it! Come along, Lavinia—you and Dennison do the drawing-room and I'll do the back room. We'll have a race.'

'But if the police are coming in,' said Dennison, 'oughtn't everything to be left just as it is?'

'Damn the police!' shouted Sir Septimus. 'They don't want evergreens.'

Oswald and Margarita were already pulling the holly and ivy from the staircase, amid peals of laughter. The party dispersed. Wimsey went quietly upstairs and into the drawing-room, where the work of demolition was taking place at a great rate, George having bet the other two ten shillings to a tanner that they would not finish their part of the job before he finished his.

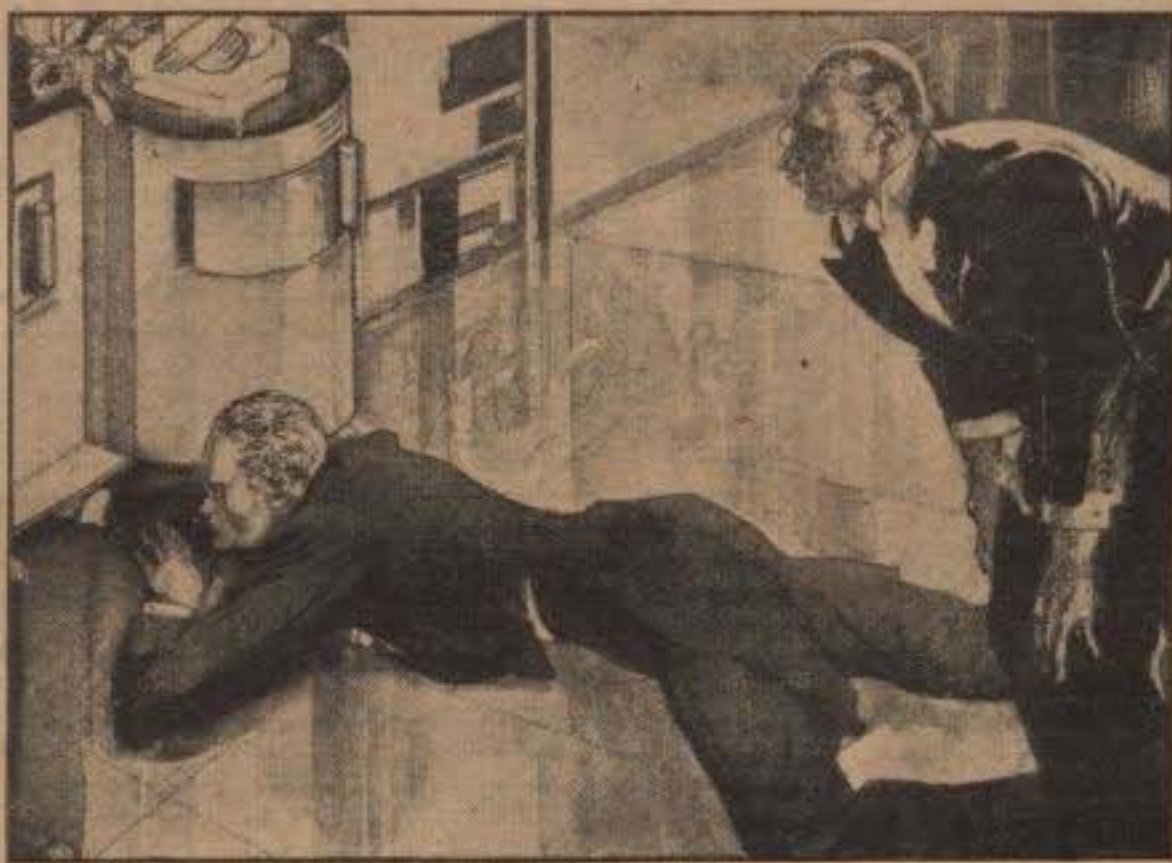
'You mustn't help,' said Lavinia, laughing to Wimsey. 'It wouldn't be fair.'

Wimsey said nothing, but waited till the room was clear. Then he followed them down again to the hall, where the fire was sending up a great roaring and spluttering, suggestive of Guy Fawkes night. He whispered to Sir Septimus, who went forward and touched George Comphrey on the shoulder.

'Lord Peter wants to say something to you, my boy,' he said.

Comphrey started and went with him a little reluctantly, as it seemed. He was not looking very well.

'Mr. Comphrey,' said Wimsey, 'I fancy



'Lord Peter Wimsey rolled up his sleeve and plunged his arm into the cavity'

these are some of your property.' He held out the palm of his hand, in which rested twenty-two fine, small-headed pins.

'Ingenious,' said Wimsey, but something less ingenious would have served his turn better. It was very unlucky for him, Sir Septimus, that you should have mentioned the pearls when you did. Of course, he hoped that the loss wouldn't be discovered till we'd chucked guessing games and taken to Hide and Seek. Then the pearls might have been anywhere in the house, we shouldn't have locked the drawing-room door, and he could have recovered them at his leisure. He had had this possibility in his mind when he came here, obviously, and that was why he brought the pins, and Miss Shale's taking off the necklace to play 'Dumb Crambo,' gave him his opportunity.

'He had spent Christmas here before, and knew perfectly well that "Animal, Vegetable or Mineral" would form part of the entertainment. He had only to gather up the necklace from the table when it came to his turn to retire, and he knew he could count on at least five minutes by himself while we were all arguing about the choice of a word. He had only to snip the pearls from the string with his pocket scissors, burn the string in the grate and fasten the pearls to the mistletoe with the fine pins. The mistletoe was hung on the chandelier, pretty high—it's a lofty room—but he could easily reach it by standing on the glass table, which wouldn't show footmarks, and it was almost certain that nobody would think of examining the mistletoe for extra berries. I shouldn't have thought of it myself if I hadn't found that pin which he had

dropped. That gave me the idea that the pearls had been separated and the rest was easy. I took the pearls off the mistletoe last night—the clasp was there, too, pinned among the holly-leaves. Here they are. Comphrey must have got a nasty shock this morning. I knew he was our man, when he suggested that the guests should tackle the decorations themselves and that he should do the back drawing-room—but I wish I had seen his face when he came to the mistletoe and found the pearls gone.'

'And you worked it all out when you found the pin?' said Sir Septimus.

'Yes; I knew then where the pearls had gone to.'

'But you never even looked at the mistletoe.'

'I saw it reflected in the black glass floor, and it struck me, then, how much the mistletoe berries looked like pearls.' DOROTHY L. SAYERS.

PANTOMIME IS A PANORAMA OF THE STAGE

(Continued from page 923.)

fairies supporting a coronet of jewels, produced such an effect as I scarcely remember having witnessed on any similar occasion up to that period. But, alas! . . . it has been the cause of serious injury to the Drama subsequently. . . . The epidemic spread in all directions. The last scene became the first in the estimation of the management of every theatre, where harlequinades were indispensable at Christmas. The ingenious method was hit upon of dovetailing extravaganza and pantomime. A long burlesque, the characters of which had nothing to do with the harlequinade, terminates with one of those elaborate and gorgeous displays which have acquired the name of "Transformation Scenes." They are the objects of attraction, all the rest is "inexplicable dumb show and noise."

So died Harlequin, partly because he had grown difficult, but partly because he had grown dull. Planché deplored it. 'The fatal folly'

could not last. Nor did it: the Victorian extravaganza tittered itself to death. But it had in its reign imparted a powerful impetus to the burlesque spirit. It produced (as Planché prophetically recognized) W. S. Gilbert. It also left upon pantomime a permanent impression. The English comic genius, in the shape of Planché, Henry J. Byron, and other facetious souls, infused a fresh and lively blood into pantomime at a moment when it was losing at once its meaning and its fun. Then was the age of mothers-in-law and lodgers and brokers. No modern writer would have selected the names of Widow Twankey and Prince Pekoe. They are Victorian puns; both names are brands of



China tea—and that's a good joke about China (see?); and anyhow, all jokes about tea-drinking were established as definitely funny by the common assent of our grandfathers. We should not originate such jokes today; but as part of a rich tradition they are irresistible.

A rich tradition; the high spirits of the nineteenth century, the high jinks of the original acrobatic tradition (not yet a lost art: at the Drury Lane pantomime last Christmas Mr. Lupino Lane made eighty-four consecutive appearances through traps in two and a half minutes); the patriotic song of Sheridan's invention; the rhymed heroic couplets—a burlesque of Augustan rhymed tragedy; scenic splendours which have been for centuries a part of English theatrical tradition; the funny animals—which are older still; the patter which is the historic insolence of clowns; the superb accretions of principal boy, brokers' men, and Dame; the crystallization of Baron, Fairy Queen, and Demon into an inalienable shape. A rich tradition. Do not receive it lightly. It is a panorama of the theatrical history of England.

V. C. CLINTON BADDELEY.