Striding Folly

A Lord Peter Wimsey Story

Dorothy L. Sayers
1939

NOTE

This is one of the final Lord Peter Wimsey stories, first published in *Detection Medley*, edited by John Rhode (Hutchinson & Co. Ltd.), in 1939.

STRIDING FOLLY

A Lord Peter Wimsey Story

'Shall I expect you next Wednesday for our game as usual?' asked Mr Mellilow.

'Of course, of course,' replied Mr Creech. 'Very glad there's no ill feeling, Mellilow. Next Wednesday as usual. Unless ...' his heavy face darkened for a moment, as though at some disagreeable recollection. 'There may be a man coming to see me. If I'm not here by nine, don't expect me. In that case, I'll come on Thursday.'

Mr Mellilow let his visitor out through the french window and watched him cross the lawn to the wicket gate leading to the Hall grounds. It was a clear October night, with a gibbous moon going down the sky. Mr Mellilow slipped on his goloshes (for he was careful of his health and the grass was wet) and himself went down past the sundial and the fish-pond and through the sunk garden till he came to the fence that bounded his tiny freehold on the southern side. He leaned his arms on the rail and gazed across the little valley at the tumbling river and the wide slope beyond, which was crowned, at a mile's distance, by the ridiculous stone tower known as the Folly. The valley, the slope and the tower all belonged to Striding Hall. They lay there, peaceful and lovely in the moonlight as though nothing could ever disturb their fantastic solitude. But Mr Mellilow knew better.

He had bought the cottage to end his days in, thinking that here was a corner of England the same yesterday, today and for ever. It was strange that he, a chess-player, should not have been able to see three moves ahead. The first move had been the death of the old squire. The second had been the purchase by Creech of the whole Striding property. Even then, he had not been able to see why a rich business man—unmarried and with no rural interests—should have come to live in a spot so remote. True, there were three considerable towns at a few miles' distance, but the village itself was on the road to nowhere.

Fool! he had forgotten the Grid! It had come, like a great, ugly chess-rook swooping from an unconsidered corner, marching over the country, straddling four, six, eight parishes at a time, planting hideous pylons to mark its progress, and squatting now at Mr Mellilow's very door. For Creech had just calmly announced that he was selling the valley to the Electrical Company; and there would be a huge power-plant on the river and workmen's bungalows on the slope, and then Development—which, to Mr Mellilow, was another name for the devil. It was ironical that Mr Mellilow, alone in the village, had received Creech with kindness, excusing his vulgar humour and insensitive manners, because he thought Creech was lonely and believed him to be well-meaning, and because he was glad to have a neighbour who could give him a weekly game of chess.

Mr Mellilow came in sorrowful and restored his goloshes to their usual resting-place on the verandah by the french window. He put the chessmen away and the cat out and locked up the cottage—for he lived quite alone, with a woman coming in by the day. Then he went up to bed with his mind full of the Folly, and presently he fell asleep and dreamed.

He was standing in a landscape whose style seemed very familiar to him. There was a wide plain, intersected with hedgerows, and crossed in the middle distance by a river, over which was a small stone bridge. Enormous blue-black thunderclouds hung heavy overhead, and the air had the electric stillness of something stretched to snapping point. Far off, beyond the river, a livid streak of sunlight pierced the clouds and lit up with theatrical brilliance a tall, solitary tower. The scene had a curious unreality, as though of painted canvas. It was a picture, and he had an odd conviction that he recognised the handling and could put a name to the artist. 'Smooth and tight,' were the words that occurred to him. And then: 'It's bound to break before long.' And then: 'I ought not to have come out without my goloshes.'

It was important, it was imperative that he should get to the bridge. But the faster he walked, the greater the distance grew, and without his

goloshes the going was very difficult. Sometimes he was bogged to the knee, sometimes he floundered on steep banks of shifting shale; and the air was not merely oppressive—it was *hot* like the inside of an oven. He was running now, with the breath labouring in his throat, and when he looked up he was astonished to see how close he was to the tower. The bridge was fantastically small now, dwindled to a pin-point on the horizon, but the tower fronted him just across the river, and close on his right was a dark wood, which had not been there before. Something flickered on the wood's edge, out and in again, shy and swift as a rabbit; and now the wood was between him and the bridge and the tower behind it, still glowing in that unnatural streak of sunlight. He was at the river's brink, but the bridge was nowhere to be seen—and the tower, the tower was moving. It had crossed the river. It had taken the wood in one gigantic leap. It was no more than fifty yards off, immensely high, shining, and painted. Even as he ran, dodging and twisting, it took another field in its stride, and when he turned to flee it was there before him. It was a double tower—twin towers—a tower and its mirror image, advancing with a swift and awful stealth from either side to crush him. He was pinned now between them, panting. He saw their smooth, yellow sides tapering up to heaven, and about their feet went a monstrous stir, like the quiver of a crouching cat. Then the low sky burst like a sluice and through the drench of the rain he leapt at a doorway in the foot of the tower before him and found himself climbing the familiar stair of Striding Folly. 'My goloshes will be here,' he said, with a passionate sense of relief. The lightning stabbed suddenly through a loophole and he saw a black crow lying dead upon the stairs. Then thunder ... like the rolling of drums.

The daily woman was hammering upon the door. 'You *have* slept in,' she said, 'and no mistake.'

Mr Mellilow, finishing his supper on the following Wednesday, rather hoped that Mr Creech would not come. He had thought a good deal during the week about the electric power scheme, and the more he

thought about it, the less he liked it. He had discovered another thing which had increased his dislike. Sir Henry Hunter, who owned a good deal of land on the other side of the market town, had, it appeared, offered the Company a site more suitable than Striding in every way on extremely favourable terms. The choice of Striding seemed inexplicable, unless on the supposition that Creech had bribed the surveyor. Sir Henry voiced his suspicions without any mincing of words. He admitted, however, that he could prove nothing. 'But he's crooked,' he said; 'I have heard things about him in Town. Other things. Ugly rumours.' Mr Mellilow suggested that the deal might not, after all, go through. 'You're an optimist,' said Sir Henry. 'Nothing stops a fellow like Creech. Except death. He's a man with enemies ...' He broke off, adding, darkly, 'Let's hope he breaks his damned neck one of these days—and the sooner the better.'

Mr Mellilow was uncomfortable. He did not like to hear about crooked transactions. Business men, he supposed, were like that; but if they were, he would rather not play games with them. It spoilt things, somehow. Better, perhaps, not to think too much about it. He took up the newspaper, determined to occupy his mind, while waiting for Creech, with that day's chess problem. White to play and mate in three.

He had just become pleasantly absorbed when a knock came at the door front. Creech? As early as eight o'clock? Surely not. And in any case, he would have come by the lawn and the french window. But who else would visit the cottage of an evening? Rather disconcerted, he rose to let the visitor in. But the man who stood on the threshold was a stranger.

'Mr Mellilow?'

'Yes, my name is Mellilow. What can I do for you?'

(A motorist, he supposed, inquiring his way or wanting to borrow something.)

'Ah! that is good. I have come to play chess with you.'

‘To play chess?’ repeated Mr Mellilow, astonished.

‘Yes; I am a commercial traveller. My car has broken down in the village. I have to stay at the inn and I ask the good Potts if there is anyone who can give me a game of chess to pass the evening. He tells me Mr Mellilow lives here and plays well. Indeed, I recognise the name. Have I not read *Mellilow on Pawn-Play*? It is yours, no?’

Rather flattered, Mr Mellilow admitted the authorship of this little work.

‘So. I congratulate you. And you will do me the favour to play with me, hey? Unless I intrude, or you have company.’

‘No,’ said Mr Mellilow. ‘I am more or less expecting a friend, but he won’t turn up till nine and perhaps he won’t come at all.’

‘If he come, I go,’ said the stranger. ‘It is very good of you.’ He had somehow oozed his way into the house without any direct invitation and was removing his hat and overcoat. He was a big man with a short, thick curly beard and tinted spectacles, and he spoke in a deep voice with a slight foreign accent. ‘My name,’ he added, ‘is Moses. I represent Messrs. Cohen & Gold of Farringdon Street, the manufacturers of electrical fittings.’

He grinned widely, and Mr Mellilow’s heart contracted. Such haste seemed almost indecent. Before the site was even taken! He felt an unreasonable resentment against this harmless Jew. Then, he rebuked himself. It was not the man’s fault. ‘Come in,’ he said, with more cordiality in his voice than he really felt, ‘I shall be very glad to give you a game.’

‘I am very grateful,’ said Mr Moses, squeezing his great bulk through into the sitting-room. ‘Ha! you are working out the *Record’s* two-mover. It is elegant but not profound. You will not take long to break his back. You permit that I disturb?’

Mr Mellilow nodded, and the stranger began to arrange the board for play.

‘You have hurt your hand?’ inquired Mr Mellilow.

‘It is nothing,’ replied Mr Moses, turning back the glove he wore and displaying a quantity of sticking-plaster. ‘I break my knuckles trying to start the dam’ car. She kick me. Bah! a trifle. I wear a glove to protect him. So, we begin?’

‘Won’t you have something to drink first?’

‘No, no, thank you very much. I have refreshed myself already at the inn. Too many drinks are not good. But do not let that prevent you.’

Mr Mellilow helped himself to a modest whisky and soda and sat down to the board. He won the draw and took the white pieces, playing his king’s pawn to king’s fourth.

‘So!’ said Mr Moses, as the next few moves and countermoves followed their prescribed course, ‘the *giuco piano*, hey? Nothing spectacular. We try the strength. When we know what we have each to meet, then the surprises will begin.’

The first game proceeded cautiously. Whoever Mr Moses might be, he was a sound and intelligent player, not easily stampeded into indiscretions. Twice Mr Mellilow baited a delicate trap; twice, with a broad smile, Mr Moses stepped daintily out between the closing jaws. The third trap was set more carefully. Gradually, and fighting every step of the way, black was forced behind his last defences. Yet another five minutes and Mr Mellilow said gently, ‘Check;’ adding, ‘and mate in four.’ Mr Moses nodded. ‘That was good.’ He glanced at the clock. ‘One hour. You give me my revenge, hey? Now we know one another. Now we shall see.’

Mr Mellilow agreed. Ten minutes past nine. Creech would not come now. The pieces were set up again. This time, Mr Moses took white, opening with the difficult and dangerous Steinitz gambit. Within a few minutes Mr Mellilow realised that, up till now, his opponent had been playing with him in a double sense. He experienced that eager and palpitating excitement which attends the process of biting off more than one can chew. By half-past nine, he was definitely on the

defensive; at a quarter to ten, he thought he spied a way out; five minutes later, Mr Moses said suddenly: 'It grows late: we must begin to push a little,' and thrust forward a knight, leaving his queen *en prise*.

Mr Mellilow took prompt advantage of the oversight—and became aware, too late, that he was menaced by the advance of a white rook.

Stupid! How had he come to overlook that? There was an answer, of course ... but he wished the little room were not so hot and that the stranger's eyes were not so inscrutable behind the tinted glasses. If he could manoeuvre his king out of harm's way for the moment and force his pawn through, he had still a chance. The rook moved in upon him as he twisted and dodged; it came swooping and striding over the board, four, six, eight squares at a time; and now the second white rook had darted out from its corner; they were closing in upon him—a double castle, twin castles, a castle and its mirror-image: O God! it was his dream of striding towers, smooth and yellow and painted. Mr Mellilow wiped his forehead.

'Check!' said Mr Moses. And again, 'Check!' And then, 'Checkmate!'

Mr Mellilow pulled himself together. This would never do. His heart was thumping as though he had been running a race. It was ridiculous to be so much overwrought by a game of chess; and if there was one kind of man in the world that he despised, it was a bad loser. The stranger was uttering some polite commonplace—he could not tell what—and replacing the pieces in their box.

'I must go now,' said Mr Moses. 'I thank you very much for the pleasure you have so kindly given me ... Pardon me, you are a little unwell?'

'No, no,' said Mr Mellilow. 'It is the heat of the fire and the lamp. I have enjoyed our games very much. Won't you take anything before you go?'

'No, I thank you. I must be back before the good Potts locks me out. Again, my hearty thanks.'

He grasped Mr Mellilow's hand in his gloved grip and passed out quickly into the hall. In another moment he had seized hat and coat and was gone. His footsteps died away along the cobbled path.

Mr Mellilow returned to the sitting-room. A curious episode; he could scarcely believe that it had really happened. There lay the empty board, the pieces in their box, the *Record* on the old oak chest with a solitary tumbler beside it; he might have dozed off and dreamed the whole thing for all the trace the stranger's visit had left. Certainly the room was very hot. He threw the french window open. A lop-sided moon had risen, chequering the valley and the slope beyond with patches of black and white. High up and distant, the Folly made a pale streak upon the sky. Mr Mellilow thought he would walk down to the bridge to clear his head. He groped in the accustomed corner for his goloshes. They were not there. 'Where on earth has that woman put them?' muttered Mr Mellilow. And he answered himself, irrationally but with complete conviction: 'My goloshes are up at the Folly.'

His feet seemed to move of their own accord. He was through the garden now, walking quickly down the field to the little wooden foot-bridge. His goloshes were at the Folly. It was imperative that he should fetch them back; the smallest delay would be fatal. 'This is ridiculous,' thought Mr Mellilow to himself. 'It is that foolish dream running in my head. Mrs Gibbs must have taken them away to clean them. But while I am here, I may as well go on; the walk will do me good.'

The power of the dream was so strong upon him that he was almost surprised to find the bridge in its accustomed place. He put his hand on the rail and was comforted by the roughness of the untrimmed bark. Half a mile uphill now to the Folly. Its smooth sides shone in the moonlight, and he turned suddenly, expecting to see the double image striding the fields behind him. Nothing so sensational was to be seen, however. He breasted the slope with renewed courage. Now he stood close beneath the tower—and with a little shock he saw that the door at its base stood open.

He stepped inside, and immediately the darkness was all about him

like a blanket. He felt with his foot for the stair and groped his way up between the newel and the wall. Now in gloom, now in the gleam of a loophole, the stair seemed to turn endlessly. Then, as his head rose into the pale glimmer of the fourth window, he saw a shapeless blackness sprawled upon the stair. With a sudden dreadful certainty that *this* was what he had come to see, he mounted further and stooped over it. Creech was lying there dead. Close beside the body lay a pair of goloshes. As Mr Mellilow moved to pick them up, something rolled beneath his foot. It was a white chess-rook.

The police surgeon said that Creech had been dead since about nine o'clock. It was proved that at eight-fifty he had set out towards the wicket gate to play chess with Mr Mellilow. And in the morning light the prints of Mr Mellilow's goloshes were clear, leading down the gravelled path on the far side of the lawn, past the sundial and the fish-pond and through the sunk garden and so over the muddy field and the foot-bridge and up the slope to the Folly. Deep footprints they were and close together, such as a man might make who carried a monstrous burden. A good mile to the Folly and half of it uphill. The doctor looked inquiringly at Mr Mellilow's spare form.

'Oh, yes,' said Mr Mellilow. 'I could have carried him. It's a matter of knack, not strength. You see—' he blushed faintly, 'I'm not really a gentleman. My father was a miller and I spent my whole boyhood carrying sacks. Only I was always fond of my books, and so I managed to educate myself and earn a little money. It would be silly to pretend I couldn't have carried Creech. But I didn't do it, of course.'

'It's unfortunate,' said the superintendent, 'that we can't find no trace of this man Moses.' His voice was the most unpleasant Mr Mellilow had ever heard—a sceptical voice with an edge like a saw. 'He never come down to the Feathers, that's a certainty. Potts never set eyes on him, let alone sent him up here with a tale about chess. Nor nobody saw no car neither. An odd gentleman this Mr Moses seems to have been. No footmarks to the front door? Well it's cobbles, so you wouldn't expect none. That his glass of whisky by any chance,

sir?...Oh? he wouldn't have a drink, wouldn't he? Ah! And you played two games of chess in this very room? Ah! very absorbing pursoot, so I'm told. You didn't hear poor Mr Creech come up the garden?'

'The windows were shut,' said Mr Mellilow, 'and the curtains drawn. And Mr Creech always walked straight over the grass from the wicket gate.'

'H'm!' said the superintendent. 'So he come, or somebody come, right up on to the verandah and sneaks a pair of goloshes; and you and this Mr Moses are so occupied you don't hear nothing.'

'Come, Superintendent,' said the Chief Constable, who was sitting on Mr Mellilow's oak chest and looked rather uncomfortable. 'I don't think that's impossible. The man might have worn tennis-shoes or something. How about fingerprints on the chessmen?'

'He wore a glove on his right hand,' said Mr Mellilow, unhappily. 'I can remember that he didn't use his left hand at all—not even when taking a piece.'

'A very remarkable gentleman,' said the superintendent again. 'No fingerprints, no footprints, no drinks, no eyes visible, no features to speak of, pops in and out without leaving no trace—a kind of a vanishing gentleman.' Mr Mellilow made a helpless gesture. 'These the chessmen you was using?' Mr Mellilow nodded, and the superintendent turned the box upside-down upon the board, carefully extending a vast enclosing paw to keep the pieces from rolling away. 'Let's see. Two big 'uns with crosses on the top and two big 'uns with spikes. Four chaps with split-open 'eads. Four 'orses. Two black 'uns —what d'you call these? Rooks, eh? Look more like churches to me. One white church—rook if you like. What's gone with the other one? Or don't these rook-affairs go in pairs like the rest?'

'They must both be there,' said Mr Mellilow. 'He was using two white rooks in the end-game. He mated me with them ... I remember....'

He remembered only too well. The dream, and the double castle moving to crush him. He watched the superintendent feeling in his

pocket and suddenly knew that name of the terror that had flickered in and out of the black wood.

The superintendent set down the white rook that had lain by the corpse at the Folly. Colour, height and weight matched with the rook on the board.

'Staunton men,' said the Chief Constable, 'all of a pattern.'

But the superintendent, with his back to the french window, was watching Mr Mellilow's grey face.

'He must have put it in his pocket,' said Mr Mellilow. 'He cleared the pieces away at the end of the game.'

'But he couldn't have taken it up to Striding Folly,' said the superintendent, 'nor he couldn't have done the murder, by your own account.'

'Is it possible that you carried it up to the Folly yourself,' asked the Chief Constable, 'and dropped it there when you found the body?'

'The gentleman has said that he saw this man Moses put it away,' said the superintendent.

They were watching him now, all of them. Mr Mellilow clasped his head in his hands. His forehead was drenched. 'Something must break soon,' he thought.

Like a thunderclap there came a blow on the window; the superintendent leapt nearly out of his skin.

'Lord, my lord!' he complained, opening the window and letting a gust of fresh air into the room, 'How you startled me!'

Mr Mellilow gaped. Who was this? His brain wasn't working properly. That friend of the Chief Constable's, of course, who had disappeared somehow during the conversation. Like the bridge in his dream. Disappeared. Gone out of the picture.

'Absorbin' game, detectin',' said the Chief Constable's friend. 'Very much like chess. People come creepin' right up on to the verandah and

you never even notice them. In broad daylight, too. Tell me, Mr Mellilow—what made you go up last night to the Folly?'

Mr Mellilow hesitated. This was the point in his story that he had made no attempt to explain. Mr Moses had sounded unlikely enough; a dream about goloshes would sound more unlikely still.

'Come now,' said the Chief Constable's friend, polishing his monocle on his handkerchief and replacing it with an exaggerated lifting of the eyebrows. 'What was it? Woman, woman, lovely woman? Meet me by moonlight and all that kind of thing?'

'Certainly not,' said Mr Mellilow, indignantly. 'I wanted a breath of fresh—' He stopped, uncertainly. There was something in the other man's childish-foolish face that urged him to speak the reckless truth. 'I had a dream,' he said.

The superintendent shuffled his feet, and the Chief Constable crossed one leg awkwardly over the other.

'Warned of God in a dream,' said the man with the monocle, unexpectedly. 'What did you dream of?' He followed Mr Mellilow's glance at the board. 'Chess?'

'Of two moving castles,' said Mr Mellilow, 'and the dead body of a black crow.'

'A pretty piece of fused and inverted symbolism,' said the other. 'The dead body of a black crow become a dead man with a white rook.'

'But that came afterwards,' said the Chief Constable.

'So did the end-game with the two rooks,' said Mr Mellilow.

'Our friend's memory works both ways,' said the man with the monocle, 'like the White Queen's. She, by the way, could believe as many as six impossible things before breakfast. So can I. Pharaoh tell your dream.'

'Time's getting on, Wimsey,' said the Chief Constable.

'Let time pass,' retorted the other, 'for, as a great chess-player

observed, it helps more than reasoning.'

'What player was that?' demanded Mr Mellilow.

'A lady,' said Wimsey, 'who played with living men and mated kings, popes and emperors.'

'Oh,' said Mr Mellilow. 'Well—' he told his tale from the beginning, making no secret of his grudge against Creech and his nightmare fancy of the striding electric pylons. 'I think,' he said, 'that was what gave me the dream.' And he went on to his story of the goloshes, the bridge, the moving towers and death on the stairs at the Folly.

'A damned lucky dream for you,' said Wimsey. 'But I see now why they chose you. Look! it is all clear as daylight. If you had had no dream—if the murderer had been able to come back later and replace your goloshes—if someone else had found the body in the morning with the chess-rook beside it and your tracks leading back and home again, that might have been mate in one move. There are two men to look for, Superintendent. One of them belongs to Creech's household, for he knew that Creech came every Wednesday through the wicket-gate to play chess with you; and he knew that Creech's chessmen and yours were twin sets. The other was a stranger—probably the man whom Creech half-expected to call upon him. One lay in wait for Creech and strangled him near the wicket gate as he arrived; fetched your goloshes from the verandah and carried the body down to the Folly. And the other came here in disguise to hold you in play and give you an alibi that no one could believe. The one man is strong in his hands and strong in the back—a sturdy, stocky man with feet no bigger than yours. The other is a big man, with noticeable eyes and probably clean-shaven, and he plays brilliant chess. Look among Creech's enemies for those two men and ask them where they were between eight o'clock and ten-thirty last night.'

'Why didn't the strangler bring back the goloshes?' asked the Chief Constable.

'Ah!' said Wimsey; 'that was where the plan went wrong. I think he

waited up at the Folly to see the light go out in the cottage. He thought it would be too great a risk to come up twice on to the verandah while Mr Mellilow was there.'

'Do you mean,' asked Mr Mellilow, 'that he was there, *in* the Folly, watching me, when I was groping up those black stairs?'

'He may have been,' said Wimsey. 'But probably, when he saw you coming up the slope, he knew that things had gone wrong and fled away in the opposite direction, to the high road that runs behind the Folly. Mr Moses, of course, went, as he came, by the road that passes Mr Mellilow's door, removing his disguise in the nearest convenient place.'

'That's all very well, my lord,' said the superintendent, 'but where's the proof of it?'

'Everywhere,' said Wimsey. 'Go and look at the tracks again. There's one set going outwards in goloshes, deep and short, made when the body was carried down. One, made later, in walking shoes, which is Mr Mellilow's track going outwards towards the Folly. And the third is Mr Mellilow again, coming back, the track of a man running very fast. Two out and only one in. Where is the man who went out and never came back?'

'Yes,' said the superintendent, doggedly. 'But suppose Mr Mellilow made that second lot of tracks himself to put us off the scent, like? I'm not saying he did, mind you, but why couldn't he have?'

'Because,' said Wimsey, 'he had no time. The in-and-out tracks left by the shoes were made *after* the body was carried down. There is no other bridge for three miles on either side, and the river runs waist-deep. It can't be forded; so it must be crossed by the bridge. But at half-past ten, Mr Mellilow was in the Feathers, on *this* side of the river, ringing up the police. It couldn't be done, Super, unless he had wings. The bridge is there to prove it; for the bridge was crossed three times only.'

'The bridge,' said Mr Mellilow, with a great sigh. 'I knew in my dream

there was something important about that. I knew I was safe if only I could get to the bridge.'