Never expected

by MissingMissFisher (bokchoynomad)

Summary

"I never expected her. Sometimes people sneak up on you, and suddenly, you don’t know you ever lived without them."
— Elle Kennedy

Jack Robinson heads to England, mainly to go after a certain lady detective, and to assist a war friend from Scotland Yard with an intriguing international mystery. The case calls upon both of the detectives’ sleuthing skills when their English holiday cottage unwittingly becomes the base for their undercover operation...as a married couple.

Notes

Yes, I couldn’t resist.

After the amazingly positive responses to my very first casefic, "Someone we don’t fool", I got bitten by the casefic bug and started on this next one.

I loved writing about Archie and Fern so much that I decided Phrack just had to adopt their undercover aliases once again. Then @comeaftermejackrobinson convinced me to create my own series for it...so here we go!

Includes some very brief cross-over with the main characters from the Daisy Dalrymple Mysteries novels by Carola Dunn. You don’t need to have read them to enjoy this fully MFMM-centric story (but knowing about them will enhance the enjoyment hopefully)!
Prologue

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

A private airfield outside Melbourne, Australia.

A sudden rush of wind flung some stinging debris against the angle of his cheekbone causing his eyes to smart. Senior Detective Inspector Jack Robinson grimaced wryly, as his hand instinctively swept up to the brief point of pain on his face that could barely compete with the ache threatening to erupt from deep inside. His eyes were already slightly watery as he refused to remove from the spot where she had just stood so briefly in his arms. The very spot where he finally dared finally to visibly demonstrate his true feelings for her before she vanished into the skies above him.

Come after me, Jack Robinson, the wind continued to taunt him with her voice. He briefly covered his ears before allowing his strong hands to grip his face as though he could shield himself from the familiar, intensive longing that had coexisted as naturally as his breathing for longer than he could recall.

He glanced up again one final time at the clouds that seemed to mock his bereft expression and plunged his hands deep inside his coat pockets. His fingers brushed against a slip of card reminding him of the hastily read telegram he had stashed there in the rush of the past few days. He’d nearly forgotten about it in the middle of rescuing Phryne’s father, catching the maniacal Eugene Fisher, and assisting Hugh and Dot with their fast-forwarded wedding.

Finally, his efforts were focused on stealing as many final moments as possible with one unpredictable lady detective before she launched out on her latest hare-brained scheme to fly to the other side of the world to save her family.

Glancing down, he pulled the message out from his pocket and re-read it now more slowly:

HOPE FISHER CASE INFO HELPED (STOP) YOU OWE ME NOW (STOP) SENT YOU POSY CASE FILE FOR ADVICE (STOP) ALWAYS WELCOMED IN UK (STOP) AF

His lips quirked to one corner in the way that he knew somehow utterly amused Phryne as he contemplated the message and invitation by his good friend, Alec Fletcher. A former RAF pilot, Alec had met Jack during the war and they had kept in touch afterwards, especially due to how much the two men had in common. Alec had returned to his job as Chief Detective Inspector at Scotland Yard, and like Jack, refused to advance further due to his love of being in the field. Alec had eventually met his match in the form of the Honourable Daisy Dalrymple, a viscount’s daughter who regularly scandalised society by working as a journalist. From Alec’s accounts, Daisy also had an uncanny knack for stumbling upon and solving murder mysteries.

Jack chuckled ruefully to himself as he wondered what his friend would say when he learned about the Honourable Phryne Fisher. In fact, he resolved not to say a thing until Alec could meet her for himself. After all, with Phryne, it was always easier to show than tell.

At this pleasant thought, he mulled over this mysterious case Alec had briefly mentioned about the International Criminal Police Commission, also known as the ICPC. Through his connections with Alec and others following the war, Jack had heard about the organisation’s efforts in 1923 to establish a formal network of police cooperation around the globe to help combat organised crime across borders. In fact, the United Kingdom had only just recently joined officially in 1928.
Following the aftermath of the trafficking case against George Sanderson and Sidney Fletcher (thankfully, no relation to Alec!), the Australian Federal Police had been inviting Inspector Robinson specifically to take part in ongoing discussions with this newly-formed global network of police. Now, it would seem that Scotland Yard was also interested in consulting with him for similar reasons about one of their current cases. Jack had not had the opportunity to pay further attention to these invitations in favour of focusing on more local cases with the aid of his civilian partner and sometimes “special constable.” Now, however, much more than his curiosity motivated him to learn what the ICPC wanted.

On that final thought, the brutal wind stopped stinging him and almost began to caress him instead. Either the forces of nature were in agreement with him, or he really was threatening to cave in uncharacteristically to sentimental mush. To be perfectly honest, the unrelenting forces of one beguiling Phryne Fisher was mostly responsible for that he admitted to himself.

Carefully depositing Alec’s telegram back deep inside his pocket, Jack shook his head a little before marching determinedly with a lighter heart towards his motorcar.

He had several important telegrams to send.

Chapter End Notes

I was inspired to start this story from the following information I found on INTERPOL’s origins (courtesy of Wikipedia):

The International Criminal Police Organization (French: *Organisation internationale de police criminelle*) ICPO or INTERPOL, is an intergovernmental organization facilitating international police cooperation. It was established as the International Criminal Police Commission (ICPC) in 1923 and adopted its telegraphic address as its common name in 1956.

In 1923, a new initiative was taken at the International Criminal Police Congress in Vienna, where the International Criminal Police Commission (ICPC) was successfully founded as the direct forerunner of Interpol. Founding members included police officials from Austria, Germany, Belgium, Poland, China, Egypt, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Romania, Sweden, Switzerland, and Yugoslavia. The United Kingdom joined in 1928. The United States did not join Interpol until 1938, although a US police officer unofficially attended the 1923 congress.

I haven’t been able to find out if or when Australia joined yet...but hope to eventually!
Chapter 2

Three and a half weeks later at RAF Duxford base, Cambridgeshire, England.

Jack stretched opened his eyes and let out a heavy puff of the breath he didn’t realise he’d been holding. From behind, he felt his travelling companion, Flight Lieutenant Smith spring up and winced slightly as the young pilot thumped a gloved hand down onto Jack’s shoulder.

“We’ve landed, sir! Welcome to England!”

“Thank you, Flight Lieutenant Smith,” Jack managed to turn his head and lift up his goggles to grimace gratefully at the wiry fellow.

*Thank, God!* He thought to himself. *Now, I definitely know why I didn’t choose the flying corps during the war*, he soothed himself.

Despite his thoughts, Jack wedged himself up out of his seat smoothly, and slid swiftly down the side of the plane after the pilot. He was definitely grateful for all the hours he spent on his bicycle, and at the police gymnasium when he could, especially, after surviving this hell-bent trip.

He followed Smith into the hangar where an older gentleman who sported an old-fashioned handlebar moustache met them with his hand outstretched towards Jack.

“Welcome to England and to RAF Duxford, Senior Detective Inspector Robinson! Group Captain James Staunton at your service. Always pleased to meet a friend of Alec Fletcher’s!” he barked in a pleased tone.

Jack shook his hand firmly. “Thank you so much for all of your assistance, Group Captain, I’m in your debt,” he responded.

“Nonsense, Inspector! From what I hear, it’s Fletcher who’s in your debt! Now, here’s a telegram for you from the bloke himself. Then, I’ll show you to your accommodation for the night as it’s gone past midnight. Reckon Fletcher will contact you by morning to brief you with further details about your assignment.”

“Thank you, Captain, that would be greatly appreciated.” Jack glanced down at the telegram as he turned to follow Staunton.

JR, WELCOME TO ENGLAND (STOP) NEED YOU TO GO UNDERCOVER ASAP FOR POSY CASE (STOP) WILL MESSAGE ABOUT YOUR CONTACT AT 0800 (STOP) MORE TO FOLLOW (STOP) AF

Noting the telegram’s time stamp was from earlier that evening, Jack wondered what the undercover assignment would entail, and how soon he could get a hold of Phryne. He tucked the communiqué into his pocket as his steps matched the jump in his pulse at the thought of her. Perhaps he should send her a telegram in the morning after he was briefed about his contact.

Suddenly, a loud shout rang out followed by the sound of running footfalls from outside the door of the hangar not too far to their right.
“Please, madam! Stop! You cannot enter there! Madam!”

“I’ll be perfectly fine, Lieutenant, don’t mind me,” responded a flippant voice that never failed to skyrocket his senses into hyper vigilant mode. As though conjured by his thoughts, the melodic tone reverberated like an electric shock through his poor heart.

Before either Jack or Captain Staunton could react, a colourful tornado vibrated through the door of their intended destination before touching down with a magnificent gust of familiar French perfume.

“JACK!” she shrieked with utter joy before launching herself towards him at resumed full velocity.

On reflex, Jack had subconsciously braced himself for impact when he first heard her voice. This was the first time, however, when her arrival resulted in his entire face being smothered in a flurry of kisses. Instinctively, his arms tightened around the unpredictable yet ever delectable form of one Phryne Fisher.

“Phrrryne…” he managed to rumble out between her avid ministrations, still wondering if this was a fatigue-induced fantasy. He’d never admit to her the alarmingly growing number of these he’d had recently, especially with only clouds and wind to occupy his attention.

“Ahem, Inspector, and, ah, Madam?” Captain Staunton cleared his throat loudly. “As much as I hate to disturb this, er, ardent reunion of yours, I must ask you to accompany me away from this high security area as soon as possible.”

Phryne grudgingly released her hold on Jack’s neck and shoulders slightly, and allowed Jack to unwrap her legs from around his torso and lower her boot-clad feet back to the ground.

“Captain, may I have the pleasure of introducing you to the Honourable Phryne Fisher? Miss Fisher, this is Group Captain James Staunton,” Jack nodded towards the gentleman after unconsciously reaching for the customary tie that he only just realised he wasn’t wearing.

“Enchanted, Miss Fisher,” Captain Staunton growled, but winked at her good-naturedly just as Phryne extended her hand with her usual poise. “May I ask how you came to be here? As far as I recall, the RAF’s flight schedules and passenger lists weren’t public knowledge.”

“Oh, I have my ways, Captain,” Phryne responded mischievously just as Jack added by way of explanation:

“Miss Fisher is an accomplished pilot, private detective and colleague of mine back home in Melbourne, sir. She has the remarkable ability to unearth hidden information very effectively.”

“So, I see,” drawled Captain Staunton in a combined confused and amused tone as they approached what looked to be the air base’s main hangar and base of command. “I was just about to show the inspector to his accommodation for the evening. Unfortunately, since the Women’s RAF disbanded after the war, Miss Fisher, we no longer have accommodation for females here at the base.”

“Oh, please don’t trouble yourself on my account, Captain,” Phryne waved her hand nonchalantly. “In fact, I’m here to escort the inspector on the next leg of his journey…tonight,” she added, almost as an afterthought, although Jack knew better.

“It’s certainly up to you, Inspector,” the captain replied. “Although, do keep I mind that London is a good few hours journey by motor vehicle, and all the trains will have stopped running long before now.”
“We won’t have to worry about all that,” Phryne reassured them while tucking a proprietary hand into Jack’s elbow before he could reply. “We won’t be using any road-worthy manner of transport.”

That was when Jack only just factored in the fact that Phryne was dressed very similarly to how he had last seen her in the airfield back home in Australia, in what he assumed must be her flying attire. His heart skipped a beat at the sight of the tiny, blue swallow pin still securely pinned to her flying scarf. Jack furtively drank in the sight, sound and scent of her as she gave forwarding instructions to his brief hosts to ensure that Chief Inspector Alec Fletcher would know how to reach Inspector Robinson from this point onward.

Then, for what seemed like the thousandth time in the span of a few weeks, Jack found himself in the passenger cockpit of yet another aeroplane.

Only this time, he was no longer chasing the desire of his heart because she was actually behind him for once.

Chapter End Notes

During my research for this chapter, I was thrilled to discover that the Women’s Royal Air Force (WRAF) was formed in 1918 following WWI in order to prevent a loss of the Royal Air Force (RAF)’s specialised female workforce. Though it was disbanded in 1920, over 32,000 women had joined during that time and “paved the way for all future air service women” as the article I found at this link states (http://www.rafmuseum.org.uk/research/online-exhibitions/women-of-the-air-force/womens-royal-air-force-wraf-1918-1920.aspx).

Also, as many MFMM fic writers may have already discovered, 1929 was the year when aviation records stated that several civilian pilots had successfully done the England to Australia and Australia to America routes under 30 days. Since the record holder seemed to be 9 days and 22 hours, I thought placing Jack’s arrival from Australia to England via the assistance of the RAF within 3.5 weeks was possible.
Jack braced against the winds of what he dearly hoped would be his final flight for a good long while. Not that he was complaining since he would forever be grateful to this modern mode of transportation, especially at this precise moment in time.

Despite the wind, he couldn’t help glancing back over his shoulder to make sure he wasn’t just dreaming of the sight of Phryne behind him in her rickety aeroplane. He grinned at the saucy wink she gave him through the lenses of her flight goggles. She then quickly blew him a kiss before jerking the plane suddenly for their swift descent back to solid ground.

Gripping the sides of his compartment, Jack’s heart began a series of familiar flip flops that had nothing to do with the fast approach of an airstrip right in front of him. Despite her enthusiastic welcome earlier, the all too familiar doubts and anxieties he had mostly managed to keep at bay since the day she had flown away from him began their attempts to trespass into his current feelings of happiness and relief.

The intruding thoughts didn’t stand any chance, however, against the very real and reassuring tug of Miss Fisher’s arms that embraced him from behind after she had smoothly landed and lunged herself across the gap between them.

“Miss Fisher,” his greeted her hoarsely, yet affectionately as she nuzzled his neck. He savoured the warmth of sensations drowning him as her arms tightened around him.

“Jack,” her muffled response came through against his RAF acquired scarf.

“I wasn’t expecting to contact you until tomorrow when I had been due to arrive…which was in fact highly classified information. Although I know better now than to ask.” He fought to tamper down his grin.

She responded with a playful nip to his jaw before pulling back just far enough to look into his amused eyes with a knowing smirk of her own.

“Like I just told the captain, I have my ways, as you well know, Inspector,” she teased. “But time
enough for detecting and exchanging what we know later. We have a lot of other confidential things to catch up on first,” she smouldered and winked again at him mischievously before springing up and sliding down the side of the plane in one smooth move.

“Lead on, Miss Fisher,” he replied, keenly feeling her sudden absence. He swiftly followed and just as his feet hit the blessed solid ground, she pivoted back quickly to weave her fingers securely into his pulling him towards the direction of an approaching airfield attendant.

*_*

Something tickling his neck startled Jack awake after he had dozed off slightly. His quick mind began assessing his unfamiliar whereabouts just as the combined sensations of silky soft hair nestled against his shoulder. This was followed by the tantalising scent that had haunted his dreams and waking moments for nearly longer than he could recall. His muddled thoughts wondered briefly if this was only another Phryne-saturated dream.

The familiar clench of disappointment fled soon as he felt the very real and addictive pressure of her arms wrapped around his waist. He cracked opened his eyelids and rumbled her name contentedly.

“Welcome to England, Jack,” she whispered softly. “I can’t believe you’re finally here.” She paused momentarily to trail her fingers softly along the side of his jaw the way she had always longed to do. “You actually came after me.”

“Of course, Miss Fisher,” he responded with the half smile that she usually inspired. “I was told that I needed to improve my romantic overtures.” Phryne’s eyes suddenly sparkled in that impish way that his instincts had learned to grow wary of.

“Although, I do not want to necessarily start demonstrating more of these aforementioned overtures right at this very moment…ahem.” His voice cracked slightly as his body involuntarily tensed when she had started to replace the path across his jawline with her lips.

“Of course, Jack.” Her eyes blinked in deceptive innocence when he quickly grasped her hand just as her nimble fingers began to flutter dangerously towards another sensitive area admittedly lower than that. “Or should I say, Archie?”

He cleared his throat again and tried to ignore the curious glance that their driver briefly flashed their way. She quickly laid a finger against his escaping question with a swift kiss to his cheek as she leaned forward to address the driver.

Jack took the opportunity to sit up and attempt to make sense of their dark surroundings through the car’s window. He could make out the odd hedgerow and fields.

*This sure doesn’t look like London*, he thought to himself, just as the car turned off the main road and headed down a narrow, dirt laneway.

“Um, just where are we headed, Miss Fisher?”

“Don’t you trust me, Inspector?” She leaned back to cuddle up against his side again.

“Do you really want me to answer that?” he replied in a mock indignant tone, as the car slowed. He
could just glimpse a quaint little sign hanging off an ornate iron post announcing that they had just arrived at “Primrose Cottage.”

“Here are your keys to the cottage, Mr and Mrs Jones. I’ll just take your luggage to the door now.” The driver slipped out before Jack could respond.

“Welcome to our holiday home, darling.” she announced cheerfully with a quick peck to his open-mouthed jaw. “Come along now!”

As usual, Jack simply shook his head to himself as he scrambled out of the car after her and hurried to keep up.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

After everything, our two favourite detectives are together again and alone...at last!
And in the kitchen!

Chapter Notes

Due to popular demand, I realised I couldn't leave you all hanging after the previous teaser chapters. So...here you go!

*Primrose Cottage, just outside Aston Clinton, Buckinghamshire, England*

Clamping down on the sudden rush of alarm and elation overwhelming his travel-fatigued brain, Jack attempted to mask the conflicting emotions as Phryne again tucked her hand around his arm and pulled him down a cobbled-stone pathway. The bright moonlight revealed myriads of roses dotting bushes and crawling up a trellis covering the front of a quaint house that one could easily imagine Jane Austen herself visiting.

Phryne quickly unlocked the wooden door and pushed it open eagerly. Jack stepped aside to allow the driver to carry in their bags.

“The missus has just stoked all the fires and left you some supper in the kitchen. She will be by tomorrow to cook your breakfast if you’d like. In the meantime, don’t hesitate to telephone us if you require anything else, ma’am. And, sir,” he nodded over to Jack.

“Thank you so much, Mr Northfield, we so appreciate everything,” Phryne smiled at the older man. “Although, I think we can manage breakfast on our own tomorrow morning.”

“Yes, thank you very much,” Jack shook the older gentleman’s hand who doffed his hat courteously before turning and closing the door swiftly behind him.

Jack then turned to return his attention to the cozy room and its crackling fire. After shedding the flying jacket he had also inherited from the air force, he went in search of his newly acquired “wife,” who had disappeared into what he presumed to be the aforementioned kitchen.

The inspector paused momentarily to drink in the charming, yet foreign sight before him that also felt oddly familiar. It both tugged and tore at his heart in a way that he wasn’t ready to examine quite just yet.

Phryne had flung an apron over herself without bothering to tie it up as she buzzed about the quaint little kitchen. At the moment, she was busying herself with the kettle as well as examining the contents inside a pretty little teapot. Jack’s stomach rumbled in response to the tempting aromas enticing him from the table where Phryne had already managed to arrange some of their supper.
“Would you mind laying the table for supper, dear?” she asked without looking up, exaggerating the final endearment in her playful tone.

“Of course,” he stepped up closely behind her. “But first, allow me to adjust this.” Using the excuse of the apron’s strings to trace his hands along the circumference of her waist as he tied it up gently behind her back.

“Why, thank you, darling,” she hummed approvingly tilting her head back against his shoulder to bat her eyelashes up at him. “As much as I’d rather utilise those marvellous hands of yours for more than just a few chores, I know the rest of you will require some sustenance first.”

Her remark crashed over him along with a wave of unexpected emotion, momentarily dousing his bravado and causing him to step away and clear his throat quietly as he scanned a nearby cupboard for some crockery. As he methodically laid out the plates and cups on the wooden table, he mentally waded through the current ripples of his current thoughts and feelings.

It was little wonder that he was feeling slightly off kilter, he reasoned to himself. After all, he had gone from years of enforced solitude, and countless hours of penitence resisting and enduring the charms of this exasperating lady detective. Then, she had flown away, and he found that he couldn’t bear to face being exiled alone. So he had risked heart, life, and limb to come on this pilgrimage after her.

Now like a starving man suddenly encountering a feast beyond measure, he felt overwhelmed by the overabundance of it all. Here they were all alone in an idyllic little cottage that was the epitome of another time…and of another life. It faintly reminded him of a version of one that he had tasted for decades in terms of a traditional marriage, a family house, and all that should have entailed. And although the dynamics of that life had withered away, he still often missed having the haven of sharing a life and home with someone else. And not just anyone, but someone with whom he could be completely himself. Actually, someone with whom he could be an even better version of himself.

Now, finally being here with the very person with whom he wanted to share this ideal had also started to unsettle him.

The feel of her soft fingers caressing his face brought him out of his musings.

“Come back to me, Jack,” she entreated, gently tugging him down into the chair. “Looks like it’s more than high time for me to get some food into you.”

His lips twitched slightly to the right as he squeezed her hand in reassurance after she had seated herself across from him. He gratefully picked up the dainty tea cup with his other hand after she had poured him a steaming amount and stirred in a few sugar cubes. After watching him drain the brew, she held out a forkful of something that smelled absolutely heavenly.

“Try this shepherd’s pie, Jack,” she grinned mischievously. “Nothing like some good old British lamb to warm the cockles of your belly!”

Smirking at that shared memory, he obediently leaned forward whilst opening his mouth. He was then rewarded with a melting mouthful of the promised delight. Phryne watched on in fond amusement as he then devoted himself happily to inhaling the rest of his plate.

“Steady on, Inspector, or you’ll not have any room for dessert,” she teased him as her eyes darkened perceptibly over the rim of her wine glass. He wiped his mouth a tad sheepishly in acknowledgement all the same.
“Perhaps a little after-dinner port and turn about the parlour will aid in digestion, Mrs Jones?”

“Splendid idea. You go survey the drinks cabinet whilst I tidy up a little.”

“No, you go on ahead. I’ll clear up and follow shortly.” He quickly cleared the remains of their meal and piled what he could next to the sink whilst trying to steady his racing heart. Why was it that she could still render him tongue-tied like a young school boy?

After tidying up as best as he could, Jack joined Phryne in the little parlour where she was pouring out two glasses filled with the sweet red wine.

“So, Mrs Jones, to what are we celebrating?” he enquired with a tiny smile whilst clinking his glass against hers after they had moved to stand in their customary spots by the cottage’s still unfamiliar fireplace.

“Why, have you forgotten our anniversary, darling?” she looked up at him innocently through her eyelashes while taking a large sip.

“Can I blame it on the multiple time zones muddling my brain?”

“Perhaps,” her wicked gaze trailed down to his lips and then swept down lower before she mischievously took another step closer to him. “Although I think you’ll just have to work extra hard to make it up to me.”

Jack quickly gulped down his current mouthful of wine and put down his glass before he embarrassed himself.

“Undoubtedly, Miss Fisher.” He reached out to trace his fingers across the smooth skin of her beautiful face, hardly believing she was really there with him.

He then slid his forefinger back down towards those red lips that had taunted and teased him for far too long. Like a lifelong devotee finally standing before the shrine housing the focus of his adoration, Jack leaned down and allowed himself to finally surrender. In that moment, he decided to let it all go and allowed his heart to finally feast on the glorious harvest before him without fear of the possible famine that always seemed to loom not far behind.

As though sensing this shift within her dear inspector, Phryne also eagerly indulged herself in the moment for which she had been longing for far too long. With no one and nothing to stop them at last, she began to unwrap this long denied treasure of a man, and pulled him down with her to the rug in front of the blazing fire.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Jack reacts to their ardent reunion...

Chapter Notes

I seem to be garnering quite the reputation for myself it seems (with regards to being the "Queen of Cliffhangers/Dangling Ends")! I'm touched!

Hope you enjoy this next one! ;)

Despite the disturbing dream that tore his eyes open, Jack instantly applied over a decade and a half’s worth of experience spent honing the finer art of waking up perfectly still. Far better to assess versus overreact, and risk taking a sniper’s or criminal element’s bullet to the skull. Or as in his current state, better than cracking open his own skull when he registered the fact that he was lying on the floor, albeit cushioned slightly by a rug beneath him.

Gingerly, he fluttered his fingers and felt a soft cover of some sort that reminded him of the quilts his mum used to enjoy crafting. His other hand closed over something else draped across his chest that had substantial weight to it. His fuzzy thoughts instantly cleared when he felt that the object was both soft and warm…and smelled evocatively familiar. It had been far too long since the Jack Robinson had awoken with a woman in his arms.

And not just any woman.

Willing himself to not spring upright in alarm, Jack implemented the tried and true deep breathing techniques he had long ago learned to adapt when he sensed a panic trigger. Even long after he had learned to master them, Jack couldn’t help recalling how Rosie had still preferred their by then established arrangement of sleeping separately. It hadn’t mattered that his techniques had eventually improved things nocturnally compared to the relentless, sleep-deprived nights of panicked shell shock after he had first returned after the war. Like pushing at a dull tooth ache, Jack knew that this was one of many early death blows to their marriage. Though he had never mentioned it to her, his former wife’s decision to abandon him at nighttime had stung so much more than when she had eventually left him to move in with her sister.

As though sensing his turmoil, Phryne only burrowed herself deeper against him, tucking her face close into the crook of his neck and shoulder as though it had always been carved out for her head. Instinctively, the inspector anchored his arm around her sprawled perch practically on top of him, and brought up his other to cradle her head securely against him. It was a poignant moment, and he committed it to his heart, mind and body’s memory. It felt right being there holding his sleeping Miss Fisher whose uncharacteristic stillness bolstered the protective streak that he usually managed to keep in check when she was awake. Right there on a rug of a tiny “Austenesque” cottage in the middle of the back and beyond of a very unfamiliar isle, Jack knew that he was home.
Memories sprang back unbidden to another time when he had thought he’d found someone to share a lifetime of dreams, and with whom he could build a home. Back then, he had no reason to doubt that it wouldn’t be forever, despite his naiveté that was sometimes a gift to the young. He would always love Rosie, not just because she had been his first love, but because that was simply who he was. The horrors of war and of his chosen occupation had taught him how fleeting life was. These experiences alongside maturity and his ongoing thirst for knowledge had also taught him, however that love, beauty, poetry and music…these were what made life worth living for. He had already begun to rediscover these in the past decade as he had learned how to heal from what happened to him on the Western Front. But, it still hadn’t been enough to rebuild what he now knew was a fundamental rift in values and personality between him and the first woman he had chosen to love.

Now, he realised more than ever that this unquestionable bond between him and this indescribable woman lying in his arms was unlike anything he had ever personally encountered before. Oh, he had read about it as only the Bard and all his favourite (and even non-favourite, he thought with bemusement at Phryne’s choice in literature) writers had sought to articulate throughout the ages.

Yes, he had loved Rosie deeply, had cared for Concetta strongly…but what he shared with Phryne, this was something that interlocked them in a powerful combination of every plane of profound human desire, connection and completion. And, quite possibly, even beyond, he acknowledged grudgingly and with some amusement as thoughts of Mrs “Bolwhatsit’s” premonitions returned at that moment to flicker across his mind.

As though sensing his cosmic thoughts, Phryne stirred and tried to nuzzle even closer into him, her cold limbs quickly bringing him back to the frosty air of their cottage’s little parlour. Jack managed to extricate himself from under her carefully as he quickly threw on some of his clothing to keep his own teeth from chattering.

Tenderly, he crouched back down to slide his arms under Miss Fisher’s slender frame that had curled up into a fetal position as she unconsciously coped from the withdrawal of his warm presence. He picked her up smoothly and carefully found his way up the tiny staircase to the cottage’s cozy bedroom. After tucking Phryne into the comfortable-looking bed, he lingered there holding her hand and stroking her face until she had settled back into a deep slumber.

Wide awake, the inspector’s thoughts crystallised in the night air to match the tiny ones gathered in the window’s edges. Now that he and Phryne were reunited again, he knew beyond a doubt that he couldn’t bear to ever have their connection severed.

Despite all the years of finding his footing again following the war and following the end of his marriage, Jack once again felt overwhelmed by all the strong forces of the potent emotions assaulting him.

Bending down to press his lips against her temple, his heart melted when she audibly sighed in contentment at his touch, and then promptly turned onto her side, cuddling one of the pillows against her. He then made his way back downstairs to find his flight jacket before slipping out of the door.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Phryne wakes up alone and goes searching for her inspector. And discovers a little more about the case he's working on as well.

With a graceful stretch, Phryne stirred herself awake and was slightly disoriented at finding herself in the unfamiliar room. Sunlight streamed through the mullioned glass of the window intermingling with delicious memories of the evening before. Allowing them to flood her with warmth and delight, the lady detective shifted in her cocoon of quilts, frowning slightly to find herself alone in the charming wrought-iron bed. Suddenly worried, she pulled herself upright wondering where Jack had gone.

She noticed the fireplace had been lit and was still emitting warmth and saw that their luggage was at the foot of the bed. Pouncing out of bed, she dug out a robe from her suitcase, and wrapped it around herself securely before going in search of her inspector.

Tracing her way down the simple staircase that Jack had obviously carried her up at some point, Phryne glanced about the empty parlour briefly with a big grin at the rug before the fireplace. Maybe she should consider purchasing it for her boudoir as a souvenir. Then, shaking her head slightly over her school girl-like sentimentality, she paused at the kitchen door momentarily to drink in the sight of Jack Robinson before her.

Her casually-dressed partner was sitting at the kitchen table with a spread out newspaper and a nearly emptied cup of tea. Slightly to the side of the table sat a plate of buttered, half-eaten toast. Phryne’s eyes immediately honed in on the delightful hollow of Jack’s throat usually held hostage by one of his securely fastened ties. He was studying something that looked like a telegram with focused concentration and scribbling notes in his familiar notebook. Sensing her gaze before he heard her happy sigh, he glanced up with that look of combined amusement and fondness that she liked to think belonged only to her.

She quickly closed the distance between them before launching herself into his lap, and giving him an enthusiastic kiss in greeting.

“Good morning, Mr Jones!”

She then swivelled towards the table and swiftly snatched up the remainder of his breakfast, munching away soundly, as she peered at his notes.

“Good morning, Mrs Jones,” he greeted her in response keeping up the charade. His lips twitched at the sides as he tightened his hold on her to keep her from toppling over as she reached for the telegram next. “I was going to wait until you were awake before cooking us some breakfast. You seemed to have slept well.”

“Indeed, darling,” she returned her attention to him, wrapping her arms around his neck. “I’m wide awake in spite of the fact you managed to keep me up for most of the night.”

“I seem to recall keeping you occupied in several positions for most of the night, in fact.”
“Jack Robinson!” She thumped him in the shoulder in mock protest. She had made no secret at how thrilled she was at the passionate and playful depths to her normally buttoned-up inspector that she knew she was only at the start of plumbing. The thought sent delicious tingles straight down through her spine.

Finishing the bread, she turned her attention to the telegram that she had snatched from Jack’s hand.

“‘Pockets full of posies…’” she began to read out loud in a curious tone. “What is this, Jack? Who is telegramming you with nursery rhymes?”

“It’s from Alec Fletcher, my friend and contact from the Met,” Jack began.

“Ah yes!” Phryne’s eyes lit up suddenly. “Daisy is such a dear!”

“Er, do you know Daisy then?”

“Of course, Jack, we were at boarding school together. Although, I finished earlier and then made for the ambulance brigade in France. Daisy remained here working at a hospital during the war.”

She slid off his lap and went in search of a cup of the kettle. Topping up his cup, she then filled one up for herself. Cradling it with both her hands, she leaned against the stove to regard him with a mischievous glint in her eyes that Jack knew would inevitably give him grief one way or another.

“In fact, it was when I met with Daisy for tea the other day when I learned that you’d be landing in Duxford when you did.” She nonchalantly added as though she were simply commenting on the weather instead of how she had uncovered the classified scheduling of one of the RAF’s largest air bases.

Shaking his head fondly, he tugged at the sash of her robe, pulling her back over towards him. He slipped his arm beneath its slight opening to wind his arm around her waist, marvelling again at the silk-like texture of her skin.

“Well, Miss Fisher, it looks like I could use your investigative skills to see if I’ve successfully managed to decipher Alec’s message. From my knowledge, we are to wait to hear from a local contact who is to brief me about my assignment.”

“How intriguing, Inspector! Do you have any idea who that will be? Or, how they’ll be contacting us?” She didn’t need to mention her excitement over the fact that he was automatically including her in the case.

“I’m not completely certain, but somehow or other, it’s meant to involve flowers and a peacock. For now though, I think it would be best if we kept close to the cottage for now until he or she does make contact.”

“Why, I think that’s a fine idea, darling,” she smouldered down at him before allowing her robe to slip off completely. “Why don’t we go and get reacquainted with that wonderful rug in the parlour again?”

With a sudden gleam in his eyes, Jack pocketed the telegram and his notes before pushing aside the newspaper and the crockery to the other side of the table.

“I think we should start getting reacquainted with this table right here. I find myself still rather hungry after my toast was stolen.”
“I once told you I do like a man with a plan, Jack.”

It would be quite a while before the inspector thought about his toast or stomach again.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Jack brings Phryne up to date on their mysterious case...

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all of your continually delightful feedback! Since there's been a few too many chapters filled with fluff, here's one with a bit more about the case!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eventually, the chill and hunger lured the two partners back to their favourite rug where they again found themselves under the quilt cover enjoying a picnic of the mouth-watering breads, cold meats and cheeses that Mrs Northfield had also left for them the evening before.

Chewing on the latest morsel that Phryne had fed him, Jack had begun to brief her on what he knew about their mysterious case. Given the fact Alec Fletcher could certainly empathise with his old war mate on account of being married to someone who was always stumbling across murder mysteries, the former Chief Inspector was using his very recent promotion to Superintendent to authorise Jack to continue with his assignment as Jack saw fit. This included the addendum that Inspector Robinson be permitted to investigate with his civilian consulting partner.

Also, since Scotland Yard had been planning for Jack to go undercover for this particular case, it didn’t take long for them to alter the cover story to adapt to his current whereabouts. Those who needed to know acknowledged that the update actually enhanced their Australian counterpart’s cover story. It would certainly seem less suspicious for Senior Detective Inspector Robinson to remain indefinitely in the countryside keeping tabs on the situation if he was posing as a holiday-maker with his wife. Thus, Phryne’s surprise of whisking the inspector off to Primrose Cottage actually dovetailed rather conveniently with the assignment.

“Imagine that,” Jack attempted to add more inflection to his exaggerated tone of resignation. “I am slightly tempted to give you credit for engineering all this, Miss Fisher. But, considering the highly classified details of this case, I must admit that it’s extremely coincidental that you’ve chosen a holiday cottage here in the English countryside where I was originally meant to go undercover anyway.”

She only continued to wear that particular beatific expression in keeping with the Renaissance masters’ attempts to portray the Madonna…and other saints and Greek figures.

“I can’t possibly imagine what you are inferring, Inspector,” she patted him fondly on the side of his face as a sign for him to continue.

“But, I do feel I need to apologise, Phryne.” He took her hand in his gently. “Your intended holiday plans for us have now become hijacked by this international case.”
“No apology necessary, Inspector,” she replied demurely with the intentionally maximised version of her best aristocratic hauteur. “I feel it is my utmost privilege to bestow my civic responsibility to such an upstanding member of the international policing community.”

Jack simply responded by mockingly lifting his eyebrows that prompted Phryne to instantly shed her faux finishing school poise. With a gleeful twinkle in her eyes, she nudged him down to the rug so she could tuck her head inside her now favourite nook between his head and neck. She then wound her arms as tightly as she could around him as he pulled the cover back up to retain their warmth. At her pointed nod, Jack took his cue to paint more of their case’s background for her:

“Operation Posy,” as the case had been code-named, currently focused on a Mrs Simone Wright, a French, former cryptographer and widow of a Captain Arthur Wright, a British-Australian military intelligence officer who had been killed during the war. Following the armistice, Mrs Wright had decided to rebuild her life in the quiet village of Aston Clinton, Buckinghamshire in England’s idyllic countryside. Approximately 30 miles outside London, the village was not too far from their current holiday cottage in the surrounding picturesque Chiltern Hills.

Apparently, Simone had been teaching mathematics at the local primary school all these years, enjoying an uneventful lifestyle. That was until she had started recently receiving a series of encrypted messages that seemed to indicate her husband might somehow be alive. Using her various war and military intelligence contacts, the former cryptographer tried to search for more concrete news about Arthur Wright. Then, using her codebreaking skills, Simone also managed to tap into a plot where there was evidence that post-war French and German women were disappearing, especially ones of Jewish descent. Just like herself.

“So, a few weeks ago, Alec had telegraphed me again in Melbourne requesting my particular assistance for the case. I hadn’t mentioned it since we were on working on the case at the observatory, and then the one concerning your family.” He stroked her back soothingly when she tensed up at the mention of that case with the former and current Barons of Richmond.

“So, a few weeks ago, Alec had telegraphed me again in Melbourne requesting my particular assistance for the case. I hadn’t mentioned it since we were on working on the case at the observatory, and then the one concerning your family.” He stroked her back soothingly when she tensed up at the mention of that case with the former and current Barons of Richmond.

“Unfortunately, Simone has now also gone missing. In fact, both the British Home Office and Scotland Yard have reason to suspect that the incidents are related. The mastermind is believed to be a Nazi sympathiser who knew both Simone and Arthur, and is now in hiding somewhere here in England.”

The Home Office and the Metropolitan Police also now had reason to believe that the German spy was well aware of the fact that the British were onto him or her, and trying to flush out the interceptor. Thus, it didn’t take much to point out to his intrepid partner that Simone’s life was in grave danger. They both agreed that the information Mrs Wright possessed, and her ability to access and decode it, was even more paramount to her well-being (as well as those of the women caught in the smuggling ring).

“Well, that’s all very well and good, Jack, and I’m delighted to be on the case with you,” Phryne interjected as she continued to mull over the new puzzles in her head. “But, that doesn’t explain why they need you in particular…and undercover?”

“Actually, since Arthur Wright is actually half Australian on his mother’s side, Alec had been planning for me to pose as his cousin who has just recently arrived on a long overdue visit. They thought that Archie’s cover story worked out well for him to be able to visit his cousin’s wife and reminisce about the ‘good ol’ days.’”

“That makes sense if you, or we, rather are to search Simone’s home, observe the school where she works, and to talk to her neighbours and friends. Someone is bound to know something that will help us turn over a rock or two!”
At that moment, a knock sounded on the door with Mr Northfield’s lilt announcing from the other side that he had brought their fresh milk and other supplies.

Jack quickly jumped up and escaped to the kitchen to get re-dressed. He ducked back through the door quickly to pass Phryne her discarded, which she deftly caught and wound around herself as she went to open the front door.

Phryne smiled as Mr Northfield passed her the milk and other food supplies. She instantly snapped to attention, however, when the affable farmer mentioned that he had also been given a flower delivery to pass onto them. Miss Fisher eagerly accepted it and took a quick whiff of the beautiful array of daisies and other wild flowers when her hand brushed against something stiff against the stems. Tucked just under the twined rope holding the large bouquet together was a crisp, beige envelope with the words, “Mr and Mrs Archibald Jones, Care of Primrose Cottage” simply typed across the front.

“Look at this, Jack!” After their host had left, Phryne hurriedly carried the bouquet into the kitchen and laid it down on the table. She turned to rummage through one of the drawers for a pair of scissors, and was just about to cut through the string.

“Wait, Phryne,” Jack called out in a tone that had her stop mid-action to look at him. He had immediately sat upright from the task of tying his shoelaces when she had rushed into the room. “There! In amongst the flowers.”

The lady detective paused with the scissors to look more meticulously through the top of the bouquet. Towards the middle, hovering several inches above the rest was one lone peacock’s feather.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, it’s another history lesson from yours truly! I’m always anxious about ensuring all the dialogue and speech is relevant to the time so made sure to look up the origins of the word “hijack” before posting.

And here are some fascinating answers from The Guardian that I was able to find (link can be found at https://www.theguardian.com/notesandqueries/query/0,-1420,00.html)!

[The term “hijack”] originates from the prohibition era in America. Supposedly a member of one gang would approach the driver of a rival gang’s bootlegging truck with a smile and a disarming ‘Hi, Jack!’ before sticking the muzzle of a gat in the face of the poor unfortunate, and relieving him of both truck and its alcoholic cargo.

-Tim Wood, Cardiff.

And here’s another:

I've been researching the 1920s lately, and the first newspaper reference to "hijacking" I've seen is from around 1923. The original hyphen shows that it's a compound word. I assume it's from "highway jackrolling," meaning a theft by a show of force. My news editor in the 1960s said the term should be used only for a liquor theft.
-Wayne Klatt, Chicago USA
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Fern and Archie go to meet with their mysterious contact.

Chapter Notes

Here’s the next installment of Fern and Archie’s adventures in Buckinghamshire!

I really am chuffed by all your enthusiasm for this case...and all the speculation over that mysterious peacock’s feather!

Jack re-examined the note inside the envelope, which was also neatly typed and had been dated for that day. The short message was a cordial invitation for them to join a Miss Madeleine Belanger at the Bell Inn pub in the nearby village of Aston Clinton for afternoon tea at 3 o’clock. No response was necessary.

“Seems like this Miss Belanger must be our mystery contact then, Jack.”

“I concur, Miss Fisher. The flowers and the peacock’s feather are all there. And a public house seems like a reasonable place to rendezvous for a first meeting.”

“It all seems rather ‘cloak and dagger,’ especially with the feather!”

“Alec did say to keep an eye out for something regarding peacocks. And from my understanding, their feathers can symbolise guidance, protection, or watchfulness.”

“Very apt then for a secret contact! Why don’t I go make myself more presentable to the public then, Inspector,” she fiddled with his open collar. “Whilst you go study that map of the local area that’s hanging on the wall by the bottom of the stairwell?”

“Always two steps ahead, Miss Fisher?”

She leaned in to place a quick kiss on the tip of his nose before whirling away towards the stairs.

“I’ve also already telephoned Mr Northfield and asked him to pick us up on the hour.”

“Is that so? I had rather been hoping that we could put the two finely-maintained bicycles that I discovered earlier this morning to some good use.”

Her voice floated down to him. “That does sound promising, darling!” There was a slight pause, followed by the sound of heavier items being thrown about the floor. Jack smiled slightly to himself as he estimated the numerous pairs of shoes Miss Fisher had packed for their little holiday based on every thump of the floor.

He had moved to the bottom of the staircase to study the map she had mentioned as well as to
continue listening to her steady stream of conversation.

“But, why don’t we test the bicycles at some other point, Jack? After all, I’d rather not give Miss Belanger the impression that we had rushed over in disarray for our first meeting.”

“Didn’t pack enough hat pins then?”

“Would you rather I meet our contact with my flight goggles on?” Another thump or two sounded from above.

“As charming as that would be, I suppose that wouldn’t do for this particular meeting.”

“What is my cover’s occupation supposed to be, by the by? And Archie’s this time around?”

“Well, Mrs Jones, your career is unfortunately not in aviation. I believe you are now a librarian. And, that I am now an expert in the fascinating field of botany.”

“Hmmmm, well, in that case, perhaps I shouldn’t go with my first choice in outfit then…” Her saucy tone invited Jack to rush up the stairs to witness this aforementioned outfit.

But, being the perfect gentleman (who also knew they couldn’t risk arriving late to meet with the contact), however, the inspector stood his ground and counted the tiles on the floor instead as he willed his pulse to slow down.

*-*-*

The Bell Inn’s charming red-bricked façade welcomed the handsome couple as they ambled arm-in-arm along its matching brick pathway. A few leaves from the ivy trailing down the right side of the front door waved at them in the warm afternoon breeze as they stepped under the little portico surrounded by posts the colour of bronzed egg shells.

She was dazzling in a rich emerald green suit and jaunty matching cloche with feathers that tickled her companion’s face. Judging from the way she hung on his arm and every word he whispered into her ear, it was evident he was someone with whom she seemed quite enamoured. He was striking in a dark blue, well-tailored suit that his outer coat revealed occasionally as it swayed against his languid stride. In contrast to her deep laughter, the attractive man’s eyes sparkled even when the rest of his expression fought to remain still.

This was the impression that Mr and Mrs Jones gave to any passing onlooker, including the woman they were scheduled to meet as she sat waiting by the window inside one of the pub’s rustic parlours that faced out towards the front of the establishment.

Madeleine Belanger rose self-consciously to her feet whilst adjusting her hat over her tightly pinned dark brown curls to ensure the angle of its one peacock feather was more prominent. She brushed her hands down the sides of her own, rather faded navy suit, and stepped forward with a practiced smile as she approached the entryway just as the couple she had been observing arrived.

“Mr and Mrs Archibald Jones?”

“Yes,” the beautiful dark-haired woman smiled at her, releasing her husband’s arm to stretch out a gloved hand in greeting. “And you must be Mademoiselle Belanger?”
“Please, call me ‘Maddie.’”

“Delighted, Maddie. You must call me ‘Fern,’” the lovely Mrs Jones invited her in an engagingly warm tone. “And this is my darling husband, Archibald, although I personally prefer ‘Archie.’” She patted his arm fondly as he rolled his eyes at her slightly before stepping forward to greet Madeleine as well.

“I took the liberty of reserving us a table here in this parlour, and have ordered afternoon tea to be brought to us shortly. Unless there is anything else you would prefer?”

“Afternoon tea would be wonderful, Miss Belanger,” Archibald confirmed as he moved his hand to his wife’s back to gently guide her across the parlour’s uneven stone floor to the table Maddie had indicated.

Fern balanced her way over without any mishaps on her gorgeous towering heels, cheerfully thanking her husband when he pushed her chair in once she was securely sitting. He then paused and patiently glanced at Madeleine and then her chair until Maddie realised he was waiting for her to take her seat again. She scrambled a little less elegantly than Mrs Jones had and regained her composure as the handsome gentleman pushed her chair in before taking a seat adjacent to his wife at the end of the table.

Maddie tried not to fiddle with the cutlery on the table as she noted the quick, unspoken conversation between the couple. In fact, to any other person, it might not have even happened. But, Madeleine Belanger had not spent most of her forty-odd years honing her skills for studying minute patterns and details for nothing.

“So, do tell me, Maddie, what brings someone such as yourself to this quiet pocket of the country? Surely there must be many more exciting pursuits and people to discover, in London, for instance?” Fern propped her elbow onto the table and leaned in across the table conspiratorially.

“I agree, Fern. And, I do wish that I could be there enjoying the sights. Only, how could I without my dear friend?” Mrs Jones’ stance immediately changed to one of concern as she moved her gloved hand to pat Maddie’s on the table. Mr Jones had whipped out a clean handkerchief that he solemnly passed to her.

“Why don’t you tell us everything that you know about what happened to Simone?” His deep voice reassured her it would be safe to reveal her secrets.

Maddie sniffed back tears and gratefully accepted the offered cloth that she balled into her hands as she slowly shared her story to the couple before her.

Madeleine Belanger had first met Simone when the two of them had been studying at the University of Strasbourg in France. Even then, the two women showed a remarkable love that they were later proved through various achievements in mathematics. Their work quickly spread through their field resulting in the two of them being invited to conduct some early cryptography research during the war.

“After the War, Simone was still grieving the loss of her husband who died behind enemy lines, as you already know. So, she decided to move here to England where she has family.”

“That makes a lot of sense, as we are so far away,” Fern nodded in thought patting her husband’s hand in consolation at the mention of his dear and departed cousin. “Does her family still live in the area then?”
“Of course,” Maddie conceded with some surprise. “Were you not aware? She was ‘Simone de Rothschild’ before she married Arthur.” She watched in silent fascination as the two again exchanged a quick conversation using only their eyes. Apparently, they had heard of the Rothschilds’ well-known, Jewish family banking empire that spanned most of Europe and beyond.

“Sadly, we were unable to attend their wedding due to the war. And we never did learn Simone’s maiden name or much about her family. Until now,” Archibald explained.

“Well, Simone had visited her cousins before the war, and she stayed often at Aston Clinton House here in the village as well as several of the other Rothschilds estates in the surrounding area. But the one here in Aston Clinton was always her favourite. In fact, I remember that she visited once during the war in an official capacity after her older cousins had moved out several years before. Her family had lent the mansion to one of the Royal Air Force’s divisions to use.”

“What brought you here then, Miss Belanger?”

Maddie paused to glance at Archibald’s gentle, yet inquisitive gaze, before looking down. She seemed to garner her emotions before continuing.

“I recently lost my mother, actually, to illness. She was all I had left since most of my family had been killed during the war. So, I didn’t know what to do. Where to go.

“That was when I thought about taking up Simone on her longstanding invitation to come visit her. She sounded content again in her letters since the war. So, I came here to see where and how she had rebuilt her life. I had hoped to do the same.”

“Only now, Simone has gone missing,” Fern concluded gently as she passed her own handkerchief across the table.

“Yes,” Maddie managed to whisper as the tears she struggled to hold kept escaping instead. “I finally arrived only to find that Simone had disappeared. Instead, I found some of Simone’s cryptography notes and managed to piece enough of the story together about her husband possibly contacting her. I was so scared, and didn’t know where she had gone. So, I contacted the police.”

“You did the right thing, Miss Belanger,” Archibald confirmed with a warm glint in his eyes. “We will do all that we can to assist you in finding out what has happened to your friend and my cousin’s wife.”

“Thank you, Mr Jones. It means so much to me know that I am no longer alone. That you are here to help me find Simone. I will do whatever I can to help you both.”

“For now, let’s try to enjoy this delicious food that has arrived,” Fern smiled with a playfully secretive glance at her husband.

As the three indulged in the delicious selection of cucumber sandwiches and delightful finger cakes, Maddie continued to provide more information on who she thought the Nazi sympathiser could be. She asked them to pass the coded information on to Scotland Yard. The Frenchwoman also suggested that the Joneses should pay a visit to Sir Lionel Walter Rothschild and another cousin named Miriam Louise Rothschild who lived nearby in Tring Park Manor.

Just before they parted and the Joneses had insisted on paying for the bill, Fern insisted that Maddie promise to contact them again soon for another rendezvous, especially once either of them had more pertinent news.

Maddie had then pressed a handful of coded messages to Archibald with a quirk of her eyebrow.
He simply nodded and tucked them into the inside pocket of his suit jacket before Fern leaned in to give the other woman a warm farewell kiss on the cheek, exclaiming how she couldn’t wait until they met up again.

Madeleine watched the two walk back down the path towards a waiting car that had arrived not too long ago to pick them up. She was slightly envious of the couple’s obviously strong and close connection to one another as evidenced by the way Fern leaned her head close against her husband’s shoulder that prompted him to wrap his arm securely around her waist.

“Is she still watching us?”

“Yes, I believe so, Miss Fisher. At least, I can still feel her rather unnerving stare, at any rate.”

“You feel it too?”

“Undoubtedly.”

Fern stood up on tiptoe to plant a kiss onto her husband’s cheek before whispering into his ear.

“Let’s wait until we’re back at the cottage to exchange notes, Inspector.”

He rumbled his agreement as he held the car door open for Phryne to slip into with a final glance of farewell over his shoulder to their contact. Madeleine waved in return before turning to walk away down the street.

The two detectives settled back into their seats, their hands automatically seeking the other out as they silently mulled over their shared instincts.

There was certainly more to Mademoiselle Belanger than met the eye.
Mrs and Mrs Jones return to the cottage for a quick debriefing (and a brief derobing) as they decide the next steps in their ongoing investigation.

It hadn’t taken any effort at all for the detectives to portray the image of being a happily married couple who were enjoying some time away in the countryside from the realities of their lives. All the same, the two of them breathed out a collective sigh of relief once Mr Northfield had dropped them off, and they were able to escape back to the sanctuary of their cheery little cottage.

Phryne had kicked off her shoes and plunked her hat onto a side table before falling onto the overstuffed and well-cushioned Chesterfield sofa beneath the window.

Jack had methodically removed his fedora and coat before hanging them up on the nearby coat stand. With an amused glance at his partner, he slipped off his suit jacket and began loosening his tie as well, before strolling towards the doorway to the kitchen and his makeshift desk at the table.

“Don’t tell me you are still hungry after that immense spread you just tucked away, Jack Robinson?” Phryne couldn’t help teasing as she heard him bustling about in the other room.

“Just putting the kettle on, Miss Fisher. Sort of a force of habit whenever I first arrive back home.”

Her ears perked up at his use of the word, and she sat up straighter slightly as her interest was piqued.

“Why is that that I still haven’t had the pleasure of ever visiting your home, Jack?”

More rustling and then the sound of a tin being opened. Phryne rolled her eyes slightly as she imagined his response was delayed due to his tasting whatever the tin had revealed.

_Honestly, the man is insatiable._ Her eyes then narrowed wickedly at that thought.

Still not hearing any response, the lady detective rose to her feet and quickly unbuttoned and shed her own suit jacket, letting it drop to the floor. Pulling out her blouse from the skirt’s slim waistband, she sauntered over to the kitchen doorway to find out what was distracting Jack. She found him leaning over the table staring down at a wad of slightly crinkled papers, a half-eaten biscuit dangling from his mouth as he scribbled furiously into his notepad. He glanced up at her with a slightly guilty look pausing momentarily to take in her current state of dishabille.

Clearing his throat, he quickly popped the rest of the biscuit into his mouth and was chewing away with a sheepish half grin as she slipped up beside him and wrapped her arms around his waist.

“Biscuit?” He picked up the tin and held it out to her still wearing his slightly sideways smirk as he returned his attention to his scribbling.

She leaned in to lick off a few crumbs from the side of his mouth before running her tongue along her own lips deliberately. He had obviously just polished off a chocolate covered biscuit.
“Hmm, no thank you. I think I quite fancy something else at the moment.”

Jack suddenly snapping his pencil in half, however, was not quite the response she was expecting.

“How’s that?”

“Sorry, Phryne,” he ran a hand through his hair before slipping his arm around her shoulders reassuringly. “It’s just that, I’ve just reviewed one of the decoded messages that Madeleine gave to me. And, just as I suspected, there’s something not quite right with it.”

Sensing his distress, Phryne tugged him down gently into the chair, but remained standing just behind him with her arms around his neck as she looked over at his notes. She rested her chin on the top of his head and waited for him to continue when he felt ready.

“All I can say at this point is that the British government has been using a particular series of patterns involving snippets of nursery rhymes in its code to pass some ongoing intelligence about. Somehow, Simone managed to receive and intercept some of the information coming back out of Germany and France, revealing information about the human smuggling ring. And that there was information being sent from England as well. If these are indeed her notes, then someone has tampered with them because the pattern is off.”

“Someone with the skills of a cryptographer, you mean.”

“Someone with the skills of a German cryptographer, in fact.”

Phryne allowed this momentous information to sink in further as she absent-mindedly wound her fingers through her partner’s now un-pomaded curls.

“I didn’t think much of it at the time, and it still might not matter. But, I did wonder why the stockings Madeleine wore were not French as is in keeping with the times. In fact, hers were woven with this certain lace that I’ve only seen on the border of Germany and Belgium years ago. It was much more favoured by women of that region even if it’s rather out of style now.”

“Hmmmm, well-observed, Miss Fisher. We also still need to learn more clues about what has happened to Simone. And was the woman we just met really Madeleine Belanger? Either way, it would seem we both suspect she is hiding more than she is letting on.”

“Whatsoever it is, I think we will only learn more by discovering what we can about Simone’s rich banking relatives who are still in the area.”

“Excellent idea, Miss Fisher. Good thing that the current head of the local branch, pardon my pun, is not only living in the next town over, but also happens to be a celebrated zoologist. I’m sure I can find some connection to Archibald’s current botanical research.”

“Marvellous. Why don’t you go arrange for a visit, for tomorrow if possible, whilst I go freshen up and change before we decide on our dinner plans?”

“Perhaps, we should stay in for the evening considering we don’t have any more leads for today, Miss Fisher?”

“I quite agree, darling,” she paused from unbuttoning her blouse to give him a quick peck on the cheek. She then reached out to tug his tie completely loose and flung it around her own neck before sashaying out the door towards the stairs. “Why don’t you join me upstairs when you’re ready? I’m going to go try out that charming bath tub I spotted earlier.”
Picking up the telephone that sat on an old-fashioned table beneath the map he had been studying earlier, Jack waited to be connected to Tring Park, home of Baron Lionel Walter Rothschild, willing someone to pick up quickly. On the second ring, the butler picked up requesting the caller to identify him or herself please.

Jack was about to respond when something delicate and silky fluttered onto his head from the top of the stairs. Grateful for the fact that the butler couldn’t see his deep blush, the inspector stumbled through the rest of the call trying his hardest not to think about the knickers he was now clutching furtively in his other hand.
Nighttime reveals more secrets to the two detectives...and Phryne discovers why Jack keeps trying to sneak away.

An external sense of unease pulled Phryne awake from her deep sleep, causing her to instinctively tuck her chin against her chest and keep still as her eyes blinked open. Glancing about without moving the rest of her body, she then registered that her body was only shaking due to the fact she was pressed up against the back of a shivering Jack Robinson.

He was still struggling against an unknown foe and had pushed the covers off himself. She instantly brought her hand up towards his face and began to stroke his tensely gripped jaw in a gentle downward motion making gentle soothing sounds into his ear. Gradually, he stopped his thrashing movements and turned over to face her, his arms enveloping her tightly against him.

She moved her head closer against his chest and was grateful to hear his heart rate slowing back down to a steadier pace. Pulling the covers on his side back up, she continued her soothing noises as she tucked them back around him. Glancing up, she saw in the faint moonlight that he had woken up and was watching her with a slightly apprehensive air in his expression.

“It’s all right, Jack, you’re safe now. And here with me.” She whispered soothingly before kissing him gently and tilting her head back with a questioning look at his unchanged air.

“Jack?”

He rasped a slight response, stopped to swallow, before attempting it again as he skimmed a knuckle tentatively across her cheek.

“I’m sorry for disturbing you, Phryne. Would you like me to go sleep downstairs?”

“What do you mean? No, of course not!” She was genuinely baffled at his response.

“Well, it’s only that…erm, well, Rosie used to ask me to leave the room, back in the early days after I had first returned. When the memories were too strong.”

Phryne huffed out loud as she grew indignant at this new piece of information into her inspector’s past. Jack misinterpreted her reaction, however, and tried to sit up and look about for his robe.

“You are going nowhere, Jack Robinson, except straight back to sleep! Here! With me!” She pulled him back down and clamped herself back against him tightly so he couldn’t move.

“Point taken, Miss Fisher,” he rumbled sleepily, but with a bit more of his regular amused tone that he used when commenting on one of her antics. “But, please do let me know if it ever becomes too much for you.”

“Likewise, Inspector. I’m not exactly a stranger to fending off disturbing dreams either, I’ll have you know.”
“The war?”

She nodded against his chest. “Yes. And, Janey. And not so often any longer, but sometimes, him.”

His grip tightened around her in instant understanding. It didn’t matter whether she was referring to that Dubois bastard or Foyle, he was glad that neither could hurt her any longer, at least not physically.

“Sometimes, I can still hear the screams of those I was unable to save. Other times, I see Janey wandering around in No Man’s Land, and I can’t get to her no matter how hard I try to scream or how fast I try to drive my ambulance towards her.”

“I’m so sorry, Phryne,” she felt both comforted yet worried at the distress in his tone as he held her head tightly against him. She nuzzled against him, relaxing in the reassurance he offered her. It was so like him to support her even when he was in need of encouragement himself.

“Do you want to tell me about yours?” She pressed even closer to him, as though she could reach inside to single-handedly remove anything that was terrorising his subconscious. He smiled slightly in the dark at the realisation that she probably would if she could.

“In the beginning, it was more of the usual flashbacks. Images from the trenches that would bring it all back again in an instant.”

“Yes, all the smells. And the noises.” The screaming, she didn’t have to add again.

“Then, a little later, after I had managed to learn some of the coping mechanisms, like breathing techniques, it would be certain cases that would trigger the memories from my other experiences towards the end of the war.”

“You mean the intelligence missions,” she stated matter-of-factly.

“Yes,” he responded simply. “Some of those higher up took notice of my German language skills at first. I began to do a few translations of messages here or there. That gradually grew into more as I developed my decoding abilities. Then, someone recognised my investigating skills as well, and they took me out of the trenches.”

“And placed you on missions behind enemy lines.”

He was so grateful that she understood, and he suspected, knew firsthand what that had all entailed.

“I will never forget some of the things I witnessed behind enemy lines, Phryne. Especially, when there wasn’t anything I could do to help save someone I came across over there.”

“Shhh, I know. You couldn’t risk breaking your cover or losing the information you were sent to retrieve.”

Jack tried to keep back some of the tears threatening to seep out as the screams of men being tortured never quite faded, even after all this time.

“You must know, Jack, that your intelligence work helped to save so many more lives. Thousands, even more.”

“I know that theoretically. And logically, of course.”
“But it won’t always erase the other memories completely. But, hopefully, they will fade eventually.”

“They have been, Phryne. It’s only during certain moments, like a case such as this, or when I’m feeling especially overwhelmed…” He tried to prevent the shudder that crept through him unexpectedly.

“Shhhh, I’m here now. I know. And I will never send you away if you happen to wake me up with you. In fact, I would rather you did so that you don’t have to sweat it out alone. Whether it’s once, twice, or a hundred times in a night. Do you understand me, Jack Robinson?” Her tone certainly brooked no arguments.

Hope enveloped the inspector’s heart just as Phryne’s arms held his body tightly to her. Jack didn’t bother to wonder what else her statement meant since he was in no current state to worry over the implications of her words and what they meant for the future.

For now, she was here fighting nighttime foes with him, just as she fought adversaries during the daylight by his side. That was all the reassurance he needed.

Unable to express himself verbally, he simply nodded against her head before replying in another way with his lips. She responded eagerly in this age-old language that they spoke so well despite only recently learning it together.

Before they realised it, the partners had slipped back into a peaceful, dreamless sleep holding onto one another tightly.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

A change in their plans has Phryne and Jack going on a cycling adventure that leads them down an unintended path.

Looking up at the second great sigh issuing from behind his companion’s book, Jack couldn’t help smiling briefly whilst placing a bookmarker into his own tome. He playfully tweaked her stocking-clad toes that had somehow crept up onto his lap.

“Either the writer of your novel is failing greatly to keep the plot going, Miss Fisher, or there must be some other reason for your great huffing and puffing over there?”

Unamused blue eyes pierced him from over the edge of her book. “I’m just beginning to feel a tad restless is all, Jack.”

“Yes, it’s unfortunate that Baron Rothschild has had to leave the country suddenly. At least his niece is willing to re-arrange her schedule to meet with us tomorrow.”

“I know, Jack, it’s not your fault our plans had to change. I’ve just never been very good at keeping still in one place for very long, as you well know.”

The inspector tickled her toes in retaliation as her foot attempted to start nudging him in a rather sensitive area. “Indeed, Miss Fisher,” he growled at her. “Perhaps we should channel your energy elsewhere for a while to give me some time to, er, recover from our morning’s rather strenuous exercises.”

She stilled only long enough as her desire battled with her ever-present curiosity.

“What did you have in mind, Inspector?”

“Well, it would be a real shame to waste any more of this gorgeous sunshine. I’m sure it wouldn’t hurt if we were to go air out our lungs and do a little more reconnaissance of the surrounding area?”

Phryne sat up with interest, her forgotten book sliding down with a thump to the floor.

“That sounds like a splendid idea, Jack!”

“Will you still think so if we attempt it via our two-wheeled modes of transport?” He had noticed her earlier hesitation towards the bicycles, and wanted to see if she would reveal why.

“Oh, er, of course, Jack! Just let me go find an appropriate outfit…”

“I think you will do nicely just the way you are, Miss Fisher,” he wasn’t about to let her wriggle her way out of it again that easily.

“Well, if you insist, Jack, allow me to at least go retrieve an extra hat pin whilst you go sort the bicycles out.”
“Don’t forget that daylight is burning. Plus, I think I’ve worked out the route so that we can get a glimpse of the former Rothschild manor near here. Maybe you can work out an excuse for us to visit on the way there!”

True to her word, Phryne emerged not too long after Jack had wheeled the bicycles out towards the front from the cottage’s little garden shed to the side. She instantly claimed the shiny red one with its darling, dark brown panier attached securely to the front. Jack held it for her as she perched gingerly onto the seat and saw that she could just touch the ground.

“Do you feel secure on it, Phryne? Or would you like me to see if I can adjust the seat for you a little?”

“This will be absolutely fine, Jack, you don’t have to fuss.”

With a slight nod, Jack walked over to the other black bicycle with its extended back shelf and suspending carrying bags. Phryne watched as he secured the satchels after checking on the flask of tea and a few other assorted things he had packed from their late breakfast. She also couldn’t help grinning as she noticed the snug way his casual trousers outlined his fine back profile when he bent over. Feeling her stare, he gave her a lopsided grin before jumping onto his bike and began to pedal away down the laneway.

Not one to be left behind, Phryne pedalled furiously and ignored the slight wobble of the wheels as she gathered momentum. Building up speed, she caught up to the inspector and tried to hide her nervousness as he glanced over at her with a challenging glint in his eye. She responded by playfully sticking her tongue out at him before she leaned forward slightly and pushed her bicycle ahead of his.

Just up ahead, the two riders had reached the crest of Aston Clinton Hill over which the road sharply began to turn. With a great whoop, Phryne steered her bicycle over the top and plunged down ahead, the wind whipping at her hat and clothes. She could hear Jack’s shout and turned to glance over her shoulder at him before she realised what was happening. Her handlebars began to wobble uncontrollably as she neared the bottom of the hill. Suddenly, her body felt suspended in air as she catapulted forward over them.

Lights exploded behind her eyes as she blinked frantically and pain burned its way through her arms and knees and other body parts. She then felt familiar, gentle hands grasping her and Jack’s voice laced with concern as he helped her into a sitting position in the slight ditch where she had landed.

“Phryne! Are you all right? Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine, Jack, it’s just a few scrapes and bruises.”

“Are you sure? It looks like more than a few scrapes to me!”

She tried to focus on his eyes that were flooded with anxiousness as he peered into hers, most likely trying to assess if she were concussed.

“Honestly, Jack, I really am fine. Oh, ouch!”

He had removed his handkerchief that he had moistened with some of the tea from the flask he had packed. Offering some to her, he began to methodically touch the moistened cloth to the scratches across her face, applying very soft kisses after the fact whenever she winced. She tried to smile and sip at the water as he checked her arms that had been mostly protected by her coat. Even so, one of
her elbows looked badly grazed, which he attempted to soothe with the cloth. She then watched and bit her lip against the smarting pain on her leg and knees where most of the blood was still slightly oozing against her torn stockings.

“I’ll buy you new ones,” he promised as he rinsed the handkerchief and re-applied it against her knee. “I wish I had something to bandage this with, at least until I can get you back home.”

“Here, why don’t you try with this,” she reached into her coat pocket with her own handkerchief and passed it to him. He carefully wrapped it around her knee, tenderly placing a kiss onto it as well after he had securely tied it and checked that it would hold.

He then stood up and leaned down to grasp her hands.

“Can you stand?”

“Yes, of course.”

She gritted her teeth slightly and allowed him to help pull her back up to a standing position. She looked down to assess the damage, trying to brush away some of the dirt and leafy souvenirs from the hedgerow.

Glancing back up, her heart melted slightly at Jack’s forlorn expression. She leaned against him before reaching up to pull his head down so she could kiss him soothingly.

“I’m so sorry, Phryne,” he murmured, wrapping his arms around her in a comforting gesture. “I should have realised you couldn’t ride, and not goaded you into taking the bicycles.”

“Nonsense, Jack! I certainly know how to ride!” She swatted him lightly at the quirk of his eyebrow. “I just never really had the chance to perfect my cycling skills as much as I would have liked, that’s all! Especially after I discovered how much faster a motorcar, ambulance, and aeroplane could be in comparison”

“All the same, I should have known you would never turn down a challenge!”

The inspector then glanced at her mangled bicycle in consternation. “I’ll have to return later to retrieve this one. For now, will you be all right to hop up behind mine?”

“Yes, of course, Jack. Like I said, it’s just some scrapes and bruises. Thankfully, I don’t think anything is broken.”

“That’s good. From what I can tell, we’re not too far from Aston Clinton House now. I’m sure we can see if the school’s nurse could look you over. Then, we can also telephone for Mr Northfield from there.”

“Excellent plan, Inspector! See, you did ask me to come up with a reason for us to visit.”

“Somehow, Miss Fisher, this wasn’t exactly what I had in mind!”

Jack steadied his bicycle so she could climb on behind him. Satisfied that she wouldn’t slip as he felt her arms wind tightly around him, he pedalled as quickly as he could towards the mansion with his precious cargo.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Fern and Archie arrive at the Aston Clinton House Preparatory School where they encounter several of its unique staff members, including a very overly-solicitous matron.

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for all of your ongoing enthusiasm for this story! Your comments have been so lovely and fun since I wanted to explore more of our fave duo's character development over the past few chapters. But, don't worry, the plot will also soon start to thicken!

With his hands in his pockets, Archie Jones rocked back and forth on his heels a tad impatiently whilst trying to focus on the slightly droning voice of his current conversation partner.

He had found himself shepherded to the luxurious study of Dr Albert Crawford, an affable gentleman in his sixties, who was the current owner of the former stately home. Retired from his profession in law, Dr Crawford was now headmaster of the boys’ preparatory school that he had founded after purchasing Aston Clinton House from the Rothschilds family several years after the war ended.

Jack and the headmaster listened politely to Professor Alistair Sinclair, the school’s teacher of English literature and poetry. The teacher had happened to be passing the front hall when he had heard the frantic knocking at the entrance. Due to his quick action, the school matron had been called for immediately soon after he had admitted their bedraggled-looking visitors.

Matron Fiona Quincy arrived within minutes, which wasn’t much of a surprise, since she regularly needed to utilise swiftness when tending to injured and wayward adolescent boys. Contrary to her stuffy title and name, however, Matron Quincy was an extremely attractive young woman who flirtatiously flipped the end of her golden blonde bob as soon as her eyes clamped onto the handsome visitor in the entry way. She immediately began to fuss over the blood on the gentleman’s jacket and sleeves before he pointedly shifted her attention towards the woman next to him whom he had introduced as his wife. Nonplussed, Matron Quincy ignored the other woman’s icy glare whilst she glanced at her torn and blood-soaked stockings.

“Tsk, tsk, Mrs Jones, best that I take you back to the surgery with me, although I’m much more used to seeing this type of injury on many a teenaged lad around here!”

“No doubt,” Mrs Jones enunciated in a clipped tone.

“Then, I insist on taking a look at your husband afterwards to make sure his injuries are tended to as well. Never can tell with these men who pretend they’re right as rain when they could be experiencing internal bleeding or some such,” she added with a rather high-pitched giggle. “Be
“Ah, excellent, thank you very much, Matron Quincy. In the meantime, I will escort Mr Jones to wait in Dr Crawford’s study. Perhaps we will meet him halfway,” Prof Sinclair had added as he began to lead the way down the wide corridor.

Reluctantly, the two detectives let go of one another to follow their respective hosts down opposite ends of the great hall. Jack hurried to catch up to the other man who was the epitome of the intellectual, especially the sort who seemed to love the sound of his own voice. The man continued to lecture on about his current literary research even after arriving at the headmaster’s study and making the appropriate introductions. Mercifully, he was interrupted by yet another knock on the study door.

“Dr Crawford, your next appointment has just arrived.”

“Ah, yes, of course! Thank you, Mr Hagen, please ask Mrs Fletcher to wait for me in the Yellow Room. You’re more than welcome to join us. I shall be there shortly.”

“Apologies for intruding on your busy schedule, Dr Crawford,” Jack began whilst adopting what he hoped was the reticent air of a holiday-making botanist. In reality, he had immediately honed in on the name of the new visitor, and didn’t want to waste this opportunity in the interlude from Prof Sinclair’s propensity for never-ending speech.

“Not at all, Mr Jones! I’m so very glad that you were able to bring your poor injured wife to us during your time of need. In fact, you must stay and join us for afternoon tea. But, only if Mrs Jones is well enough, of course.”

“We’d be delighted to accept, Dr Crawford, you’re very kind.”

“It’s my pleasure to offer you some hospitality for your visit to our little corner of England. In fact, why don’t you take part of the grand tour I’m about to give to my other visitor?”

“That would also be very wonderful as we had been planning to cycle past and get a glimpse of the manor house that we had been hearing so much about.”

“Then, it’s settled! How about yourself, Sinclair? Care to join me as we showcase our grand school to our esteemed guests?”

“Oh, perhaps, I will need to sit this one out, Dr Crawford, seeing how my next lecture is due to start shortly.”

“Of course, of course. Well then, let’s not delay Mrs Fletcher any longer, Mr Jones. Let us go join her in the Yellow Room.”

“That reminds me, sir, Matron asked to examine Mr Jones as well, now that I recall,” the English teacher stood. “Why don’t I escort him to the surgery and then ask Matron to show them to the Yellow Room after she’s finished with them?”

“Excellent idea, Prof Sinclair, I ought to go meet with Mrs Fletcher straight away so she can start her interview. Isn’t it rather exciting? She’s a journalist who is well-known for covering the history of our country’s stately homes for a wide American readership!”

“You don’t happen to be referring to Mrs Daisy Dalrymple Fletcher, by any chance, Dr Crawford?” Jack asked with the right mixture of polite interest and nonchalance.
“Why, the very same! Are you acquainted with her then? Now, how providential would that be?”

“I actually have not had the pleasure yet of meeting her myself. But, my wife, who is a librarian, has come across some of Mrs Fletcher’s writings, I believe.”

“All the more reason for you both to come meet her once Matron has finished with you,” Dr Crawford bellowed good-naturedly as he rushed out of the study leaving Jack no choice, but to follow his guide to the surgery.

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“There you are!” Matron Quincy scolded the two men as they approached the nurse’s clinical room, known as the surgery. “I was beginning to get worried!”

“I will leave our esteemed guest to your more than capable hands then, Matron Quincy,” Prof Sinclair smirked at her as she batted him playfully on the arm before pulling their guest forcibly by the elbow into the room.

Archie extricated his arm as politely as he could whilst glancing around quickly. His mouth turned downward in the sternest of expressions when he realised the absence of a certain patient.

“What have you done with my wife, Matron Quincy?”

“Why, nothing at all, Mr Jones!” She batted her eyelashes at him innocently. “After I had determined her grazes didn’t need any stitches, she insisted on cleaning them and bandaging them herself! So, I left her to it, and went to check on a few things. Then, she had disappeared by the time I returned.”

He neatly stepped away when the nurse tried to pull him down onto one of the cots.

“Now, why don’t you let me take a look at those nasty-looking cuts on your own hands?”

“I assure you that I do not require any medical assistance, Matron. I appreciate your concern, but would really like to go in search of my wife.”

“At least let me help wash some of that nasty blood off your cuffs, Mr Jones,” she all but cooed at him. “I can do wonders removing the stains it causes.”

“That won’t be necessary,” a silky voice interlaced with edges of steel cut through the air. At the sound, Jack was grateful for the months of practice he had had for masking his grins whenever he heard it. “You can leave anything involving the state of my husband’s clothing to me!”

“Why, of course, Mrs Jones,” the nurse conceded with a smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “I was only trying to see to his best interests.”

“Ahem,” Mr Jones responded whilst reaching for his wife’s hand that she had just wrapped around his arm a tad possessively. “I think it would be in all of our best interests to not take up more of your time, Matron Quincy. Thank you for your assistance.”

“Excellent idea, darling,” his wife gave a little dismissive nod and wave over her shoulder as the two of them quickly exited the overly sterilised room.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Mr and Mrs Jones finally meet up with a certain investigative journalist...and start the grand tour of this particular former stately home together.

Chapter Notes

Hello, my darling readers, apologies for the delay in posting, but I've been travelling again and battling with the inevitable time difference and jet lag. But, I'm now safely in Canada, and trying to stay warm.

Thanks so much as ever for your wonderful feedback and comments on here and/or Tumblr, I so adore hearing from you! So pleased you're still enjoying this story!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Ah, just in time! Please, do come in, come in!”

The headmaster sprang to his feet and gestured for the couple to come into the room where he and his other guest were chatting happily. Upon entering, it wasn’t difficult to imagine why the room had been christened with its name. Everything from the walls and the carpet to the furniture and even the cushions and throws invariably radiated in some startling shade of yellow.

The two detectives approached the centre of the room where their host eagerly gestured towards the woman sitting on a dainty-looking button-back wing chair that nearly engulfed her. Dressed in a fashionable blue suit with matching cloche that hid most of her blonde bob, she turned towards them with a bright smile that accentuated the little twinkle in her eyes as she stood to greet them.

“Mrs Fletcher, may I have the introducing my other guests who have come to join us for the tour as well. This is Mr Archibald Jones, and this is…” he hesitated slightly realising he still had not actually met Archie’s wife yet himself.

“Mrs Fern Jones,” Phryne quickly stepped closer and stretched out her hand, first to Dr Crawford who bowed over it before bringing it up to his lips for a perfunctory kiss.

“Marvellous! And this is Mrs Daisy Fletcher, who has come here today to interview me and tour the school for a feature article she will be writing.” Dr Crawford explained as the two women grasped and shook one another’s hands warmly.

“It’s a real pleasure to meet you both!” Daisy beamed as she turned to shake Jack’s hand before sending a very quick quirk of her eyebrows in Miss Fisher’s direction. The lady detective didn’t hide her smug grin as she basked in her friend’s silent approval of her detective inspector.

“And are you quite all right now then, Mrs Jones? I hope that Matron Quincy was able to be of adequate service to you.” Dr Crawford enquired with genuine concern as he indicated for the
couple to be seated in a buttery-looking leather loveseat just opposite.

Jack immediately took his partner’s hand to help her balance herself down onto the sofa’s edge before joining her. He instantly brightened when an unobtrusive maid appeared suddenly with a tea trolley, and passed them both a yellow tea cup nestled into a saucer. She then placed another triple-tiered serving stand onto the table right in front of the hungry-looking gentleman. Jack could feel himself salivating at the sight of the stacked sandwiches that looked like they contained cucumbers and others with ham. The top tiers bore a mouth-watering array of scones, petit fours and other little cakes.

“Oh, what has happened, Mrs Jones?” Daisy had resumed her seat and looked over at the other woman with instant concern. Phryne patted Jack’s knee affectionately as he tucked in, more than content to let her carry on the conversation. After all, his little packed morsels paled in comparison to this feast before him.

“Well, Archie and I were just out enjoying a bicycle journey to see more of this gorgeous countryside when I happened to take a little tumble,” Fern explained with a little wave towards the bandage wrapped around her knee. “Thankfully, the school was nearby so he didn’t have far to take us to find such excellent aid and hospitality.”

“And I must say I am so glad that we could be here to offer you our assistance, Mrs Jones,” Dr Crawford stated. “And that you are well enough to stay for a bit of a visit.”

“Yes, I am so pleased that you were not more seriously hurt,” Daisy agreed. “And that you can join me in learning more about this fine home. Where were we, Dr Crawford? I’m sure Mr and Mrs Jones would be fascinated by a brief summary of what you’ve just told me about the place.”

“It would be my utmost pleasure, Mrs Fletcher!” The headmaster then regaled them with the following details about the house.

Aston Clinton House’s history could be tracked back to its first owner in 1760. It eventually became the country residence of Sir Anthony de Rothschild and his family in 1853 and remained in the family until recently in 1923. It had been built as a classical mansion, and by the time Dr Crawford had purchased it, the property boasted seven reception rooms, a billiard room, a ball room, 13 principal bed and dressing rooms, 17 secondary and servants’ bedrooms, four bath rooms and complete domestic offices. The estate also had extensive stables with room for 32 horses, and two lodges that the Rothschilds had added to the estate.

“Apparently, the late Lady de Rothschild felt the house had been too small when her family lived here, so she added many of the extra rooms during their time here,” their host explained.

After the death of Lady de Rothschild in 1910, her daughters, Constance and Annie continued to use the mansion as a holiday home and kept the estate going until the war.

“That was when the family agreed to allow His Majesty’s government use it as one of the military headquarters throughout the war. In fact, the Commanding Officer of the Twenty-first Yorkshire Division ruled the roost with his men encamped on the nearby RAF Halton estate.”

In 1923, Dr Crawford purchased the house and grounds and converted it into the current preparatory school for upper class families to send their mischievous sons.

“But, enough of my rambling for now. I think it would be much more beneficial for you to see the house for yourself instead of just listening to my ramblings!”
His guests eagerly agreed and followed the headmaster out of the room to begin their tour of the mansion. Fern Jones briefly excused herself when they neared the surgery saying she needed to find some fresh bandages after she noticed the wound on her knee had begun to seep again. The others continued on down the dimly lit corridor.

“How has the school been faring, Dr Crawford,” Archibald enquired after they had arrived at the former ball room that was mostly used for the pupil’s physical education classes nowadays when they couldn’t go outdoors.

“Well, Mr Jones, we have been doing our best to carry on despite the slight scandal that occurred a few years ago.”

“Oh, I do hope you don’t think we are intruding to ask what it was about?” Mrs Jones asked with interested concern having just caught up with the tour again.

“Yes, please don’t worry,” Mrs Fletcher added with reassurance. “I wouldn’t presume to include anything of that nature in my article.”

“Sadly, it this type of incident that can bring the wrong type of fame to one when one does not seek it. Unfortunately, we had to let one of our school teachers go a couple of years ago, a Mr Evelyn Waugh, who was more focused on his writing career than that of teaching. I believe he may have just published a book finally last year.”

“Waugh? Yes, I believe I have heard of him,” Fern nodded for Dr Crawford to continue.

“Yes, well, we had to dismiss Mr Waugh regretfully because…er, well, he had made some inappropriate advances towards our former school matron. She ended up leaving shortly after that too, and then Matron Quincy eventually joined us.”

“Despite the scandal, I am pleased to know that you are a man of honour, Dr Crawford,” Mrs Jones declared with feeling.

“Yes, the young men fortunate enough to attend your school have an excellent example of what it means to respect and protect others rights and dignities, especially when they become breached,” her husband added.

“I’m flattered by your high estimation of my virtues, Mr and Mrs Jones,” Dr Crawford acknowledged. “I simply knew it was the right thing to do at the time.”

“Have you had any other problems, sir?” Archibald enquired. “As I believe you had mentioned that your pupils tend to be ‘wayward’ ones from upper class families?”

“Oh, nothing as drastic as the incident I’ve just mentioned, thankfully. Thus far, our boys have been more likely to play pranks on each other and tell ghosts stories about the supposed tunnels under the school, just like the one that leads from the Rothschilds’ mansion in Tring. Nothing but the usual instigations that lads tend to fall into.”

He paused at a great carved mahogany door wearing an expression much like a child before a sweet shop.

“And now, this is the library, which I must say is one of my favourite rooms in the entire house.”

The others followed him inside the large room that was lined from top to bottom with an impressive array of filled book shelves that reached all the way to the ceiling. A wooden ladder built with wheels so it could be pushed along the shelves was resting in the far corner. Mr and Mrs
Jones both seemed drawn towards it, flagging Mrs Fletcher’s attention as she listened to Dr Crawford’s litany about the collections and volumes the room contained. She noticed Fern bending down to pick a book from off the floor, which also distracted the headmaster from his speech.

“Oh, yes, that looks like a volume from our German literature section there, Mrs Jones. One of the pupils must have dropped it.”

“Faust,” Archibald glanced at the cover before watching as his wife flipped it open to reveal its German text. “Looks like it’s an original edition of Goethe’s play.”

“Very good, Mr Jones! Always good to meet someone who can appreciate an excellent German classic!”

Archibald was about to comment just as the sound of frantic screaming reached them from outside of the room.

Chapter End Notes

When I first moved to England nearly 13 years ago from Canada, the very first place I lived was actually this village of Aston Clinton. I was always fascinated by the local history and kept it the back of my mind to write something about it some day. So now, you get to enjoy exploring it through the eyes of Phryne and Jack!

All the historical facts (and some images of the former mansion) about Aston Clinton House in this chapter, including brief information about Dr Crawford’s school where the English writer, Evelyn Waugh, actually did teach before being dismissed, can be viewed at: https://www.rothschildarchive.org/materials/ar2003_aston_clinton.pdf

I found all the details about the local Rothschilds family members (except for Simone, who is my own original character) at https://family.rothschildarchive.org/estates/41-aston-clinton.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Fern, Archie, and Daisy race to the source of the screams only to discover...you got it...a body!

As the sounds of shouting voices echoed towards them following the screams, Dr Crawford and his guests quickly rushed from the library into the corridor. Glancing about, the three seasoned investigators pinpointed the source of the commotion and moved as one towards it with the headmaster in tow.

They were just approaching the wing that both Jack and Phryne recognised as the one housing the surgery, when Professor Sinclair suddenly rounded a corner with a look of deep consternation marring his features.

“Oh, thank God, you’re here now, Dr Crawford! I’m afraid a great tragedy has befallen us, sir!”

“What do you mean, Professor Sinclair? What has happened?” The headmaster began to mop his brow with a handkerchief, leaning against the wall briefly. Daisy quickly took his arm in concern.

“It’s Matron Quincy, sir. She’s...she’s dead!”

“What do you mean dead?” Dr Crawford paled visibly and began to tremble. “How? Where is she?”

Perhaps we should take Dr Crawford somewhere he can sit down first,” Phryne suggested. “The surgery is nearby, if I recall?”

“I’m afraid that might not be wise at the moment,” the professor admonished as all eyes swept towards him. “That’s where her body was found.”

“No! Take me there this instant!”

Finding a surge of energy, the headmaster straightened himself and began marching towards the medical room. The others quickly followed suit.

They arrived to see the maid, who had served them tea earlier, seated on a chair just outside the surgery’s door sobbing into her apron. Another staff member was standing by her side awkwardly patting the maid’s shoulder. He glanced up with a look of relief as Dr Crawford and his entourage appeared.

“She’s in there, sir,” he nodded towards the surgery. “I’ve already telephoned for the police.”

“Thank you, Mr Hagen,” the headmaster replied gratefully as he continued in. “Please go and notify the rest of the faculty and ensure that none of the students approach this wing.” The other gentleman nodded before hurrying off to carry out the headmaster’s request.

“Perhaps you ladies would like to wait outside with Jenny here,” Professor Sinclair suggested
glancing at the distraught maid. “It’s not something you should probably witness.”

Glancing at the two detectives, Daisy quickly nodded her agreement as she crouched down next to the weeping girl and took her hand. Despite all the murder cases she had come across and helped Scotland Yard investigate, she still preferred to deal with the bodies as little as possible.

Phryne, however, knew that she needed to maintain her cover. But, unlike her friend, she preferred to be right in the thick of things. Plus, she also wanted to ensure that the matron, as annoying as she had been, wasn’t just injured and might require some assistance. They only had the word of the others at this point concerning her death.

As though he could read the conclusions brimming from his partner’s narrowed eyes, Jack gave her hand an encouraging squeeze. After all, the inspector knew better than anyone that no one could stop her from doing anything once she was determined.

“I was part of an ambulance brigade during the Great War, Professor” she informed the teacher in her calm, yet determined manner, not worrying whether this was part of Fern’s cover story or not. “Therefore, I think it would be best if I could quickly examine Matron Quincy myself.”

“Indeed, as a scientist, perhaps I might also spot something that could assist the police with their pending investigation,” Jack added.

The gentleman simply bowed and gestured for them to continue with a questioning lift of his eyebrow towards Jack. The inspector simply nodded, and followed his partner back into the familiar room.

The two detectives entered and made their way over to where Dr Crawford was standing with his face in his hands. Before them, Matron Quincy was lying on her side on the examination cot facing the wall. Phryne hurried over and crouched down close to the edge of the bed, raising her fingers to the other woman’s neck to feel for her pulse. Glancing up at Jack, she shook her head at him, as the two detectives continued their cursory examination of the body without being too obvious.

“Is she really…” the headmaster asked her hesitantly, despite Phryne’s decisive nod affirming the truth. “Gone…”

“I’m sorry to confirm that there is no pulse. Matron Quincy is indeed deceased, Dr Crawford,” Phryne confirmed as she stood up to approach the distraught man. “There’s nothing more that we can do for her.”

“Should we, er, move her at all?”

“No, we should wait for the police to arrive and not disturb anything,” Jack stated from where he remained standing at the foot of the cot.

The inspector was glad that the matron’s body was shielding her employer from the pool of blood that was still seeping through the front of her clothing and soaking the blankets and sheets on the cot. He also knew that Phryne had also seen enough to come to the same come conclusion judging from what they had both witnessed. Fiona Quincy had certainly not died from any natural causes. Not wanting to draw any further attention to himself despite the fact he wanted to go into full investigative mode, Jack stepped away. He joined Miss Fisher as she had begun to lead the headmaster away from the body and out of the room.

“Sir,” Mr Hagen suddenly burst his way in, halting just in front of them. “The police have just arrived and would like to speak with you.”
“Thank you, Mister…” a portly, middle-aged man spoke from behind the teacher.

“Hagen, sir, George Hagen,” the teacher responded. “Teacher of classical music.”

“Right-o,” the other man continued as he approached the others inside the room with a uniformed constable following him. “So, which one of you gents would be Dr Crawford then?”

“That would be me,” the headmaster stepped forward with his hand outstretched. “And these are several of my guests who have been visiting us this afternoon, Mr and Mrs Jones.”

“Sergeant John Matheson, at your service,” the officer responded, giving them all a hearty handshake. “And this here’s Constable Joseph Woodhouse. We’re from the local police house just up the road on the outskirts just before you reach Aylesbury.” The constable also approached and silently shook everyone’s hands.

“Now, what is this I hear about someone dying here at this establishment?”

“I’m afraid it’s true, though I can still hardly believe it myself, Sergeant,” Dr Crawford began. “But, we’ve only just discovered that our school matron has…has died unexpectedly. Mrs Jones here has only just verified it. She has medical experience.”

Sergeant Matheson looked over at the dark-haired woman who was watching him calmly as she stood close to her husband’s side holding his arm.

“I see,” he responded with a nod towards his constable who began to furiously scribble into a notebook, reminding the two detectives of their own bumbling constable back home. “I trust that you did not disturb anything once you arrived then?” He then moved passed them towards the body.

“No, of course not. Other than Mrs Jones attempting to detect Matron Quincy’s pulse, Mr Jones advised us to not move her or touch anything until you had arrived.”

“I see,” the sergeant repeated himself as he and his constable crouched down to examine the body briefly. He then stood up abruptly, whirling to face the others.

“Dr Crawford, could you and your guests please wait somewhere suitable until Constable Woodhouse and I can secure this area, and are ready to interview you and take down your statements? We will also need to speak to every faculty member and pupil as well, especially anyone who has been to or near this part of the house today.”

“Yes, of course, Sergeant,” the headmaster agreed. “I will first accompany my guests to the library. Then, I will go speak to Professors Sinclair and Hagen to request their assistance in notifying the rest of the school.”

The two detectives then followed him out of the room, trying to ignore the sergeant’s intensive glare boring into their backs.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Archibald unravels a mysterious puzzle, Fern and Daisy have a quick catch up, and the case takes an unexpected turn.

Chapter Notes

Because it's Friday and I can breathe again, here's an earlier posting!

His three guests were doing their best to reassure the agitated headmaster that they would be more than comfortable waiting without him after he had accompanied them back to the library.

“Please carry on, Dr Crawford,” Mrs Fletcher had assured him. “We will be more than content to remain here until the local police call on us to take our individual statements.”

“Indeed, please go see to your pupils and staff members who are relying on you for your stalwart direction at this time,” Mrs Jones had tried to bolster him.

“The ladies will be perfectly safe to remain here with me until we are free to leave,” Mr Jones had confirmed so that there was nothing left for the older gentleman to feel any qualms about.

“Very well,” the headmaster said in a resigned tone. “I must still offer my utmost apologies for abandoning you here, however, and can only hope that the police can sort everything out soon as possible so you can leave.”

“I’m sure they will do everything within their power to hasten their investigation,” Archibald agreed. “We will certainly do what we can as well.”

“Thank you, Mr Jones, I deeply appreciate it. Now, please, make yourselves comfortable in the meantime, and pull that bell cord over by the desk should you require anything. Jenny is out of commission as you know, but Cook should be able to hear it from the kitchen downstairs.”

After he had bustled off, the three of them had quickly moved towards the far corner of the room where Phryne had discovered the fallen book. Picking it up again from where she had laid it on one of the side tables, Miss Fisher skimmed through it again until she located the intricately folded object she had noticed earlier more than halfway through the volume.

“What is that?” Daisy asked. “It looks like a paper bird of some sort?”

“It’s ‘origami,’” Phryne replied, holding it up for closer examination. “Which is an ancient Japanese creative art of folding paper.”

“One that can also be used as a mathematical puzzle,” Jack added with a knowing glance and lift of his eyebrows at Miss Fisher. “Such as with a code, perhaps.”
“Then, by all means, darling,” Phryne smiled at the way the inspector’s eyes lit up at the prospect of this mental challenge. It was one that she recognised within herself all too well. “Please illuminate us with the infinite possibilities you can unravel.”

Accepting the tiny paper puzzle that she placed into the palm of his hand, Jack made his way over to the desk to tackle this latest mystery.

The two ladies moved over to several, welcoming-looking chairs that faced each other in front of a large marble fireplace. A well-lit fire was cheerily crackling away. By any accounts, it might have just been any ordinary scene of two dear friends settling down for a “good coze” just as they were prone to back in their school girl days. Then again, with these two particular women, being able to carry on with any semblance of normality just as a murder had taken place was indeed not such an unusual part of their regular lives.

“Oh, Phryne,” Daisy breathed excitedly as she leaned forward conspiratorially. “Inspector Robinson is simply splendid! Everything that both you and Alec have told me about him can’t possibly do him justice. I’m ever so pleased to have met him finally. And for both of you!”

“He is certainly marvellous!” Phryne readily agreed. “But, whatever do you mean about being pleased for both of us?”

“Well, anyone with eyes can tell that you’re both simply smitten with one another!”

Phryne couldn’t help the happiness that stretched her red lips into a brilliant smile. “Is it that obvious then? Why, you make us sound like a pair of sappy newlyweds!”

“For all intents and purposes, darling, you basically are,” Daisy smiled knowingly at her friend. “At least, to all the locals around here anyway. And if I didn’t know the full story, I’m pretty sure you could have fooled me!”

“Is that so?” Phryne replied smugly. “Well, I must admit that instead of chafing at or being horrifying to me, the idea of domesticity for any extended length of time has actually started to become rather appealing.”

“Never say so! The Honourable Phryne Fisher actually describing ‘settling down’ as something that could be appealing to her?”

“Oh poppycock, Daisy, you make it sound like I’m wearing an engagement ring already!”

Daisy eyed the Scotland Yard-issued gold band that her friend was wearing with a pointed expression on her lovely face.

“You’re incorrigible,” Phryne huffed, her blue eyes twinkling.

“As another titled young woman who has found herself happily in the state of blissful matrimony with a ‘common police officer’ for years now, I can’t do anything less than only highly recommend it.”

“Well, good thing you haven’t found the only handsome and civilised detective inspector that’s available then, have you?” Phryne fluttered her eyelashes mockingly just as Jack approached with a slightly quizzical, yet mostly amused expression on his face.

“Jack! Have you cracked it then?”

“I have, Miss Fisher, and I’m happy to share my deductions with you both if I’m not interrupting
“Not at all, Inspector Robinson,” Daisy quickly reassured him. “Please enlighten us!”

Jack moved over to claim his seat on an over-cushioned foot stool that was closest to Phryne before presenting one unravelled length of parchment paper.

“Other than the fact that we discovered this hidden inside a well-known German literary work here, there is strong evidence based on what I could discover in this message that leads me to believe that the Nazi informant must either reside here or exchanges messages here frequently.”

“Bravo, Jack, that is excellent work!”

“Indeed, Inspector, we should alert Alec about this immediately.”

At that moment, a steady knock reverberated against the library’s door and it opened to reveal Constable Woodhouse.

“Good afternoon again, ladies, and sir,” he nodded at them in turn. “Who would like to issue their statement first?”

“Why don’t you come on in and take all of our statements together, Constable, since we have been together for most of our duration here?” Phryne suggested.

“I must report that I have been instructed by Sergeant Matheson to take everyone’s statements individually, madam. Although, I’m certain he wouldn’t object if you were to request your husband to be present when he questions you.”

“Very well, Constable,” Phryne replied with a hinted attempt at how she thought a demure librarian would respond. “I’m happy to give my statement first, provided my husband can accompany me.”

“Why don’t I go wait in the hallway to make things simpler?” Daisy rose to her feet gracefully and approached the door just as Sergeant Matheson appeared at the library’s entrance.

Daisy later returned to the library to join her friends after giving her statement to the police in one of the empty classrooms next door. Having been part of countless police interviews through her own investigations with Alec, she couldn’t help feeling a sense of foreboding following this one. She had just resumed her former seat across from Phryne when the two police officers again returned to the room with fierce expressions marking their faces.

“Whatever is the matter, Sergeant?” Daisy asked immediately rising to her feet again just as Phryne and Jack did.

“Are we free to leave now, Sergeant?” Jack enquired. “Or is there anything else you needed to follow-up with any of us?”

“Yes, we told you our whereabouts for the duration of our visit here, for which we’ve been together for the most part.”

“I’m afraid that’s just it, Mrs Jones,” the sergeant began in a gruff tone. “You and your husband actually haven’t been together the entire time, nor have you been with Mrs Fletcher or any of the other members of staff for the entire time of your visit.”
The two detectives quickly searched one another’s eyes without uttering a word.

“What exactly are you trying to imply, sir?” Jack then demanded in his deadly calm tone that he normally reserved when conducting his own interviews with formidable suspects.

“Mrs Jones, can you verify whether you were indeed in the company of your husband, Mrs Fletcher or another member of staff of this establishment for the entire duration of your visit here today?”

Suddenly, Phryne understood the point of the police officer’s pointed query.

“I was certainly with everyone you have mentioned at all times. Except for a brief moment before Dr Crawford was about to begin his tour when I needed to return to the surgery for some fresh bandages. Since Matron Quincy was not present at the time, I helped myself to what I needed, and then quickly rejoined the others once I did.”

Jack stood up at that point and moved over to Phryne’s side. She instantly reached up to slip a hand through his without breaking eye contact with the police officer who was staring down at her with a grizzled expression.

“Thank you, Mrs Jones,” Sergeant Matheson looked over to his constable who confirmed that he had just recorded her recent words. “Based on your recent and other’s statements, and our examination of existing and newly discovered evidence, I’m afraid I have no other choice.

“Mrs Fern Jones, I am arresting you on suspicion of the murder of Matron Fiona Quincy….”
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Jack and Phryne struggle to maintain their covers during their mandatory excursion to the rural police station.

Chapter Notes

I couldn't leave you to wonder about Phryne's fate for too long...so here you go, a slightly longer than usual chapter!

The only sound offsetting the tense silence in the dingy room was that of the sloshing liquid, that was a miserable excuse for tea, swirling around the chipped china cup that Archibald Jones kept rotating back and forth in his large hand. His other hand tightly gripped the folded ones of his wife who kept fidgeting against the restraints binding her arms together in front of her. Following Mrs Jones’ arrest, they had been waiting in the interview room for nearly half an hour after being escorted to the rural police station on the outskirts of the nearby market town of Aylesbury.

“I’m sure Mrs Fletcher will have reached her husband at the Yard by now,” Archibald tried to reassure Fern in a quiet tone, mindful of the constable who had just returned to his post at the door. “Although, it would certainly help if someone could explain why we are even here in the first place.”

“Sergeant Matheson is trying to get hold of our Chief Constable before he can return to brief you fully,” Constable Woodhouse tried to explain.

“But surely, you could tell us what this is all about, Constable?” Mrs Jones entreated in a distressed tone, blinking her worried eyes at him rapidly as though to keep back tears.

“Well, I, er, really should wait for my superiors to be here first,” he stumbled, shifting back and forth uncertainly.

“Please, Constable Woodhouse. We have been waiting here for quite an extensive amount of time. Can’t you see that my wife, whose injuries are still rather fresh, is becoming quite fatigued? This is appalling treatment, especially to visitors from afar.”

“That’s just it, sir;” the constable blurted out unexpectedly. “The ‘sarge’ is concerned because you two are ‘ferriners’ and all, who have just shown up here in our parts rather conveniently. He reckons it’s all too dodgy really since you just showed up at the school uninvited…no offense.”

He blanched visibly at the quelling glare that Mr Jones had just directed at him, little realising that it was one used to unnerved the toughest of criminals.

“Erm, well, you were also some of the last people to have seen the matron whilst she was still alive. And you’d been in the surgery for a while and all. Then, Jenny, the maid, I mean, told us that
she had overheard Mrs Jones using strong tones when speaking to Matron Quincy. You know, when Jenny had gone to fetch more refreshments on account of you being there.”

“Why, that is absurd,” Mrs Jones responded indignantly. Her husband only gripped her hands more tightly as he continued to narrow his eyes at the police officer.

“Jenny also told us that she had stopped by the surgery on the way back from the kitchen to offer Matron Quincy some tea. Said that the nurse had told her you was being mean to her when she were only trying to help you out. Jenny said the matron had said something that sounded like ‘if looks could kill’….”

“That is utter rubbish,” Mr Jones grounded out. “It’s all speculation and hearsay! That’s completely circumstantial and certainly not enough evidence to take my wife into custody!”

Realising he had revealed more than he probably should have, the constable’s eyes widened at the other gentleman’s vehement outburst. He then snapped back to attention at his post by the door just as loud footsteps approached and the door swung open quickly.

“Ah, thank you, Constable Woodhouse,” Sergeant Matheson’s bulky form appeared on the threshold. “And how are our visitors faring?”

“None too well, Sergeant,” Archibald responded in a steely voice. “I demand that you explain the reasons for detaining my wife and I here for as long as you have. You must give us a valid explanation or release us.”

“My apologies, Mr Jones,” the sergeant responded without an ounce of sympathy in his tone as he took a seat opposite the couple. “I have been trying to reach our Chief Constable as we require his presence in order to place Mrs Jones into full custody here. But, alas, he has been unreachable due to an emergency elsewhere.”

“Then, surely, you should let us go back to our holiday home until you can reach him,” Fern stated matter-of-factly. “Especially if you do not have any reason to keep me here.”

“That is where you are incorrect, I’m afraid, Mrs Jones.”

“Then, by all means, please, enlighten us,” her husband invited in an icy tone.

The sergeant looked up at his constable then with a nod, which the younger man replied to with one of his own before slipping out of the room.

“Constable Woodhouse will return momentarily with something to show you. In the meantime, can you confirm whether or not you did, in fact, serve as a nurse during the Great War, Mrs Jones?”

“Why yes, Sergeant, as part of an ambulance brigade. That’s what I told Dr Crawford so he would allow me to examine Matron Quincy after we had been notified of her death.”

“Yes, that is what you have both confirmed in your individual statements.”

“Then, why are you asking about this information again now,” Mr Jones enquired “If you wanted to follow-up with anything, you could have done so at the school. Or contacted us at Primrose Cottage.”

Constable Woodhouse then returned carrying a small package that the two detectives recognised as an evidence pouch.
“The reason I wanted to confirm that information again, Mr and Mr Jones, is because of this.” He gestured for the constable to demonstrate.

The younger man placed the package on the centre of the table and pulling on some gloves, proceeded to remove a few bagged items. One was a syringe. The second was an extremely dirty handkerchief that looked like it had been soaked in blood. Without seeing the initialled monogram on the corner, the couple immediately recognised it as belonging to Phryne.

“This syringe was discovered wrapped in this handkerchief and stowed away in the satchel of your bicycle. The one that the school’s staff has identified as the one that you both arrived on. And, judging from your expressions just now, am I right in believing that the handkerchief also belongs to one of you?”

Fern gasped audibly without noticing her husband shaking his head emphatically.

“Someone obviously planted it there!” She cried out just as Archibald hissed, “Don’t say another word, Fern!”

Wearing a look akin to the cat that swallowed the canary, Sergeant Jones sat back and crossed his arms in satisfaction.

“Constable, based on Mrs Jones’ acknowledgement that the evidence in question does belong to her, please take her to the cells until the Chief Constable returns. You, Mr Jones, are free to leave.”

“Like hell, I will!” Archibald sprang to his feet unexpectedly, hoisting the young constable up by the neck of his uniform and slamming him back against the door post. “Do not lay a bloody finger on her or I’ll…”

“Since you seem so intent on assaulting one of my officers, Mr Jones, we have no choice but to arrest and detain you now as well,” the sergeant had risen to his feet and grabbed Archie by his arms, roughly bringing them around behind him.

Tilting his head over to the lady, who had also risen to her feet to try to stop her husband, Constable Woodhouse gingerly placed a hand behind her back to guide her out of the room after his superior who was leading the gentleman down the corridor.

“Considering she was trouble in life, of course, she would keep on being trouble in death,” Phryne muttered under her breath.

*-*-*

Feeling like she was watching a one-sided tennis match, Phryne braced herself along the edge of the grimy cot in her tiny cell as she watched her inspector pace back and forth in agitation inside his own one next to hers. She knew that it took a lot to fluster Jack Robinson, but this visible display of his frustration was unsettling, cover story or not. She gritted her teeth against her protesting muscles and the stinging twinges that wouldn’t allow her to forget her earlier cycling mishap and stood up.

Jack halted his pacing to look at her with such heartfelt anxiousness, that she immediately smiled with as much reassurance as she could muster before making her way over closer to him. Reaching out her hands through their adjoining wall of bars, she beckoned him closer in an attempt to soothe
his agitation. Like a magnet, he was by her side at once.

“It’s not so pleasant being on this side of the divide, is it, Archie?”

“Phryne,” he whispered with a glance towards through the detention area’s door that didn’t reveal anyone immediately nearby.

Not trusting himself to be able to say much more, he grasped her chilled hands and began to stroke the angry red welts left over from the police’s irons that had been clamped there. She saw the tick flickering in his jaw indicating his great control at work to subdue to his wrath, which only darkened the fury in his eyes as he fumed over their current situation.

“How are your other injuries holding up?” He brushed his hand lightly over to caress her sleeve, and then glanced down with concern at her knees.

“Well, they may be giving me the odd twinge,” she began in a nonchalant tone. Knowing better, he pushed her coat sleeve up to examine the bandage on her elbow all the same as she lifted her skirt slightly. Crouching down, he reached through the bars to check her wounds there as well. He could tell that the bandage covering her knee was soiled, but looked dry, which thankfully indicated it wasn’t seeping.

“I’m not sure what could be holding up matters for our release, but I hope Alec can get things sorted out soon so we can leave once and for all. For now, why don’t you try to get some rest, Phryne?”

She gripped his hands tighter and looked as though she was about to protest when they both heard the distinct ring of a telephone in the distance. Jack moved over to the door of his cell, which was more directly in line with the external door and tried to stare down the little corridor. He then backed away and glanced back over at Phryne who had returned to her perch on the cot when he detected some activity happening in the distance.

Eventually, Sergeant Matheson’s large frame filled the doorway as he searched through a collection of keys.

“I have just been informed by our Chief Constable that I am to let you both go,” he unlocked Phryne’s cell door first. “You two evidently have some caring friends in high places.” The couple gave one another relieved looks as Jack’s cell door also swung open.

“Chief says he has it on good authority that you will agree to return to your cottage with no further ado. But, I only agreed to release you without his presence here if you both will agree to remain under unofficial house arrest there, at least until the morning. Constable Woodhouse will escort you now and will remain there as guard until further notice.”

The couple remained silent for the short duration of their journey back to Primrose Cottage. Constable Woodhouse assisted them out of the police vehicle and waited as Mr Jones searched for the house key when Phryne noticed an envelope had been placed just beneath the door and tucked under the welcome mat.

Gripping his arm extra tightly suddenly, Miss Fisher blinked an unspoken message with her eyes at her startled partner just as he had unlocked the front door. Without further warning, she knocked her hat off, causing it to flutter down towards a nearby rose bush. Immediately, the unsuspecting constable bounded the few front steps, and bent to retrieve it as Phryne crouched down quickly to grab their little delivery.
“Why, thank you, ever so much, Constable,” she cooed at him as he returned her cloche. “We will sleep ever so well tonight knowing that you are standing guard out here.”

She then slipped through the door like a shadow after the inspector who shut it firmly behind them after bidding the constable a good night. The two of them then leaned against the door, both breathing out quiet sighs of relief as Phryne held up the object she had been hiding behind her back.

Even in the dark, they could both see that a medium-sized peacock’s feather had been tucked through its flap.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Phryne and Jack return to the cottage with their enforced guest...and encounter an unexpected one.

Chapter Notes

Oooh, would definitely to hear your theories about what's going on, especially in light of revelations from the last chapter! I was tied up at the weekend seeing family I hadn't seen in like 10 years. So, here's a little chapter to tide you over for now...hopefully!

For the second night in a row, Miss Fisher jolted away unwillingly from her deep slumber. The detectives had literally dropped into bed together from complete exhaustion after they had managed to sponge off most of the external residue of their overly adventuresome day. There was time enough for a proper shower or bath in the morning.

There it was again, she leaned up on one elbow, detecting a rustling sound coming from below.

Trying not to disturb Jack, who was still sleeping soundly as evidenced by his snores, she was loath to disturb him knowing he had had a few tough nights since their arrival to the cottage.

Kissing him tenderly on the side of his cheek not nuzzling a pillow, she slipped quietly out of bed and slipped on her robe. Then, she quickly opened the little nightstand drawer to grab her pearl-handled revolver before she slipped out of the room to investigate.

Silently making her way down the stairs and heading towards the kitchen where she could hear paper being rustled, Phryne pounced into the doorway. Knocking over Jack’s biscuit tin, the masked intruder scattered the inspector’s previously tidy stack of papers across the kitchen table and floor before escaping out of the back door.

Sensing she was still not alone, the lady detective whirled around with her gun cocked. Only to find it aiming directly at Jack who was standing in the doorway clad only in his pyjama bottoms with his hands in the air.

“Jack!” she hissed with relief.

She then instantly lowered her weapon and made for the backdoor with Jack hot on her heels.

They quickly glanced around in the near dawn light, knowing that their twilight visitor had completely vanished.

Circling around the building, the two instantly sped up when they spotted Constable Woodhouse’s still figure stretched out across the lawn. He remained unconscious despite their attempts to call out to him, and worked together to bring him alert again.
Leaning on Jack’s arm heavily, he and Phryne managed to help the earnest young man inside to the kitchen. After stashing her gun inside the bread bin, Phryne picked up a small quilt that the intruder had knocked off the little side bench by the back door, and placed it around the officer’s shoulders.

Jack then returned after dashing up the stairs to retrieve the first bit of clothing he could reach for from his suitcase. Wearing one of Archie’s patterned jumper vests, the inspector quickly stepped up to the stove to heat up the kettle. He then turned around and uttered a huge sigh, however, at the sight of all the perfectly wasted biscuits scattered across the table and the floor.

“Never mind, darling,” his partner soothingly patted his now crossed bare arms with a fond little smile. “We can make or purchase more soon. Maybe even tomorrow?” She looked over at the constable expectantly.

“I’m afraid that’s not up to me, Mrs Jones,” Constable Woodhouse gestured helplessly. He raised an arm to gingerly feel his head and grimaced the large bump his fingers encountered. “You’re not to leave the property until further notice from the sarge. Which reminds me, I oughta report the break-in just now. Is there anything missing that you was both noticing?”

He watched Mr Jones crouch down to pick up the other scattered contents from the floor. He then quickly sorted through some of the paperwork before organising them into little piles on the table.

Jack knew that a few of his notes were missing, but nothing of real value since he had already burned the sensitive material after relaying the messages to Alec. Thankfully, he hadn’t had time since their return to add the newest code to the mix. The one that had been folded into the origami bird puzzle was tucked away in his notebook that was currently safely stowed in his bedside drawer upstairs. The inspector then glanced up at his partner who had returned from the sink with wet towel that she placed onto the police officer’s head. She quickly registered the miniscule shake of his head to indicate his findings, and that he would tell her later.

“Nothing of any major importance, Constable, so nothing to worry the sergeant about on that front. But, by all means, please go ahead and let him know about the intruder.”

Taking the proffered cup of tea and holding the towel to his head with his other hand, the constable headed into the little vestibule to call his station and report the break-in. He then returned and obligingly nibbled one of the few remaining biscuits in the tin.

Phryne was still picking up a few other items closer to the back door when she noticed several marks on the floor indicating some type of odd, wet mud. She quickly opened the back door, and using the light from the kitchen, she bent down to look at the ground directly outside the cottage.

A shadow approached behind her, skirting the marks on the floor.

“What is it, my love?”

Calming her heart at the term of endearment that she knew was more for the benefit of their constabulary guest, Miss Fisher rose slowly and pivoted back inside.

“Look at this, darling.”

As Constable Woodhouse also rose to his feet by this point to come see what they were examining, the two detectives made room for him as they all looked down again at the mark that most resembled a footprint, a small one in comparison to Jack’s nearby foot. Phryne extended her own bare one to rest it side by side with the muddy one, and glanced up into her partner’s eyes.

The one left by the intruder was approximately half an inch longer than hers.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

The detectives are woken up again, this time by some internal issues that they realise they need to try to resolve.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The pre-dawn light cast an otherworldly sheen over the bed as Jack Robinson sat up and swung his legs over the side of it. They had returned upstairs after the constable had reassured them that he felt well enough again to resume his post, insisting he would be perfectly fine and would keep extra alert on their front doorstep.

Phryne had managed to slip into what seemed like a deep slumber, as her head had nestled against the soft pillow of his woolly jumper. Jack, however, found that there was no returning to the “Land of Nod” for him even after the adrenaline had seeped out of his system. Despite what she had said about waking her if he couldn’t sleep, Jack crept from the room and paused by the window in the hallway instead.

His earlier anger over their needless detention spurred him back into pacing. A lot of his vexation was due to the fact that he had felt so helpless in light of the circumstantial murder allegations against Phryne. This was his area of expertise after all, and yet, never had he felt his hands so bound, except for during the war. Compounding his sense of helplessness was the fact that someone had had the audacity to break into their police-guarded cottage, and could have harmed them in their sleep.

In his agitation, Jack picked up a book from a nearby shelf and swept it up in his fury, just narrowly missing Phryne’s face that had materialised before him unexpectedly. She flinched instinctively, which caused him to drop the volume to the floor in mortification.

“Jack?” she whispered in concern, bringing up her hands to cup his face and tilt it gently so his eyes couldn’t hide from hers. “Please, come back to bed.”

He mutely allowed her to lead him back into the bedroom where she patiently led him to his side of the bed, and simply waited with her arms looped lightly around his shoulders. He breathed out heavily as he buried his head in his hands.

“Do you remember how you asked me the other day why I’ve never invited you to visit my house before?”

She nodded in surprise. Now she knew that he had actually heard her question, and had deliberately avoided answering. Naturally, she was extremely curious as to why he was bringing it up now.

“It’s not because I haven’t wanted to, Phryne. Because to me, it is simply a place where I just store my things and lie my head at night. There’s not anything special about it. Then again, that doesn't come as a surprise to me since I never felt that much at home in the house I shared with Rosie either.
“After you flew off with your father, my emotions have felt even more off kilter than usual. They have especially been so in the past few days since being here with you where I’ve felt so much at home. I now recognise that I’d started to have this sense a long time now even back in Melbourne. Basically, I’ve felt at home wherever you are, Phryne.”

He then wrapped his arms around her and pulled her closer, hiding his face against her so his next words were muffled slightly.

“As a result, I have also been trying not to think about what it means when I have to leave England eventually. Possibly without you.”

The agony in his voice threatened to crush what was left of the steely reserves surrounding her heart, the very ones that the man before her had already begun to whittle away before she had even realised it. Phryne Fisher had always had the great capacity to feel, both the deliriously wonderful aspects of life as well as its devastatingly horrific ones.

She had grown quite adept at masking the effects that the latter had on her, but all of her poised masks couldn’t prevent her from feeling the pain nonetheless. Especially when it was borne by someone for whom she deeply cared about...or, as she had secretly begun to distinguish in the deep recesses of her being, someone she could even dare to love.

“Then everything that happened today,” he continued. “It’s all just become too much, Phryne. When you crashed your bicycle. Then, I couldn’t bear it when that careless sergeant dared to allege that you could be responsible for something as atrocious as murder! Without any actual evidence!”

He paused to take in another deep breath before shaking his head in disgust, this time as himself.

“I knew we couldn’t blow our covers, and that we were forced to go along with it until Alec could intervene. But, I absolutely loathed feeling so powerless to ensure that the right thing...that true justice was being done.

“And then, when I woke up earlier and realised you weren’t there, and knew that something was horribly wrong. Only to find you confronting someone who could be a murderer in the kitchen. Just knowing that that bastard could have harmed you, us, right in our sleep…” he began to tremble, barely managing to keep himself together.

“I’m sorry if I’ve somehow made you feel threatened by my anger, especially tonight at the station, and just now. You know that would be the last thing I would ever intend.”

Like only moments before, Phryne slipped her hands up to gently grasp his cherished face. Leaning down to press her lips gently against his, she then climbed onto his lap, wrapping her arms around him in a consoling embrace. Then, leaning back to gaze into his eyes, she began to reply as his hands locked around her waist to hold her securely.

“Jack, I’ve always known that you are someone who has deep wells of emotions. About right and wrong, about how others should be treated…and about me,” she added with a ghost of her usual cheekiness. “This is why I once told you that I knew you were someone with great passion and a heart that’s the size of the Pacific Ocean.”

“I also know, and have greatly admired you for your incredible ability to manage all of these feelings that constantly sizzle underneath your strict decorum, especially when you are on the job.”

She began to gently stroke his cheeks similarly to the other night after he had awoken from his disturbing dreams.
“It is completely understandable that you must feel frustrated at times,” again she tried not to smirk as he arched an eyebrow. “Darling, you must try not to take it so hard when you become overwhelmed. I do know that these are the times when you can tend to become especially brooding.

“I also know that you would never act out intentionally in your anger, Jack,” she wanted to clarify with him, shifting slightly so he could see the resolve burning in her eyes. “I trust you completely, as my friend, and my partner. I know you would never become violent against me or others, which is why I’m also angry about the current murder allegations. Your sense of justice and honour is one of the things I most admire about you.”

She then tilted her head pensively, signalling to him that she was mulling over something else in that brilliant mind of hers.

“Jack, how much leave have you been granted from your post at City South?”

Attempting to quell the anxiety that wanted to flare up at her sudden question, Jack cleared his throat before responding.

“As I’m technically still on duty, albeit in an undercover capacity, the Australian Federal Police has informed Russell Street that I’m to have an additional three months as soon as we wrap up this case. Unofficially, the Commissioner told me he would hold my job for as long as I wanted it, which was very flattering, since I have at least three to six months of unused leave from City South.”

“Well, then, Inspector,” she declared, “that is more than enough time for us to sort our affairs out before we must think about returning home.”

She felt like the sun had finally burst its way out of an especially gloomy English winter when Jack looked up at her with hope in his eyes.

“Oh Jack,” she reassured him. “What you just said about feeling at home. Well, I’ve felt exactly the same. England has felt even emptier to me since I’ve returned. And I’m nearly finished helping my useless parents sort out their affairs. I was more than content to abandon them when I knew that you were actually coming after me!”

His searing kiss stopped her in the middle of her speech.

“Phryne, I can hardly explain what it means to me to hear you say that. I, er, actually attempted to express a lot of what I’ve been feeling, you know, about the war and, well, how much you’ve come to mean to me,” he added somewhat shyly. “In letters that I wrote when I had the opportunity along my journey here. Eventually, I would like to share them with you.”

Her eyes shone the full depths of her emotions for him at his admission, saying all that neither of them knew they were quite ready to verbalise. She leaned in again and was about to show him how much the thought of him writing these letters affected her, when she noticed that he had tensed slightly and gone completely still.

“Jack?” she leaned back to look up at him in concern.

“I’m sorry, Phryne,” he responded, twirling his fingers beneath her robe against her soft skin. “It’s just that I’ve just linked something from our conversation about home and letters that has prompted my memory about that message we found at the school. I’m quite certain that there’s a pattern about the word ‘home’ to it.”
“Then, let’s make sure you get some rest so you can let Alec know about it tomorrow.”

After one more kiss, she then pushed him down onto the bed, and rolled back over to her side as he pulled the quilt up to envelope them. Before long, a steady stream of rain began to beat against the rooftop, washing away the strains of the day and lulling them both to sleep with its comforting rhythm.

Chapter End Notes

Curious about Jack’s letters?

After writing this chapter, I realised that the fabulously talented @comeaftermejackrobinson had already written some gorgeous letters that totally fit into my own tale. So, I’m sooo delighted that she’s graciously agreed to let me “borrow” her glorious phic entitled, “Black holes and expectations” where Jack spends time on his trip to England writing letters to Phryne.

Here’s her summary to entice you even more (and the link http://archiveofourown.org/works/8755447):

“He spends most of his trip to London writing about his feelings for her. He misses her terribly, misses talking to her, so he plays pretend: what would he say to her if she was there and he had no other weapons than his own words, no Shakespeare quotes to borrow? What would he say to her if he had no fears?”

Go read it now!
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Fern and Archie need to find a way to meet up with their contact whilst being under house arrest.

Chapter Notes

I think Quiltingmom wins the prize for best theory submitted! Hope you enjoy this next chapter!

The weather had festered into a foul mood the next morning, matching the one that Constable Woodhouse emanated after a restless night. At least he had had the good sense to come inside when the precipitation had truly let loose. He sat at the kitchen table nursing his still sizable goose egg of a bump that made wearing his police helmet less than ideal.

Mrs Jones fussed over him like a mother hen, passing him a fresh cup of coffee that helped him to relax slightly, especially after his sergeant had telephoned to tell him that he should shortly be relieved of his shift.

“Seems some big wig ‘Super’ from the Met in ‘Lunnon’ himself is on his way here to take over this case,” he said with a measurable degree of awe and trepidation as he watched Archibald fry up some eggs and bacon. Despite the fact that the whistling man was wearing a flowery kitchen apron whilst he cooked, the constable wouldn’t soon forget Mr Jones’ sheer strength and authoritative intensity from the night before at the station.

“That’s excellent news, Constable,” Archibald confirmed as he dished up the food and placed a steaming plate in front of their mandatory guest. “Now, I suggest you keep up your strength until your shift ends.” The younger man happily complied.

In spite of the fact that he had experienced more adventure in the past day than he usually encountered as part of his duties as a rural constable, the young man had already been feeling out of his depth in the presence of this foreign couple. Something had long since been niggling at him that they probably weren’t murderers, but at the same time, he also felt wary around them for some reason that he couldn’t quite identify.

At any rate, the telephone’s ringing saved him from having to commit any more thought to the matter. So, he pushed his inklings aside and continued to savour his breakfast instead as Mrs Jones excused herself from the table to go answer it.

“Primrose Cottage, this is Fern Jones speaking.”

“Oh, darling, I’m so glad to hear your voice. How are you both doing?”

“Daisy! We’re both right as rain, with all due thanks to you. And Alec, of course!” Phryne lowered
her voice slightly so it wouldn’t carry into the kitchen.

“Listen, darling, I understand you can’t speak openly, and it’s just as well. I wanted to let you know that Alec and his partner, Tom, are on their way up from London any minute now. He wanted to come last night soon as I was able to get through to him. But, they were held up with another case unfortunately. And then, I had to take the train back home here to be with the children. I’ll try to come up again tomorrow if I can get away.”

“Only if it’s not an inconvenience, Daisy, but know that we are ever so much in your debt!”

“Stuff and nonsense, darling! Either way, sit tight and don’t worry. Alec and Tom will be there soon to help sort everything out. They’ll give you a ring soon as they check into the Bell Inn. No suspect stands a ghost of a chance with all of you on the case!”

“Well, it wouldn’t be quite as complete without your investigative powers as well, my dear. But, if you can’t return, it would be delightful to see you in Hampstead soon as things are sorted here.”

“Your guest room awaits your arrival, darling. Now, you let me know if you need anything else in the meantime. I must dash and sort out things with the nanny now, and go meet with my editor. Toodle pip!”

The lady detective returned to the kitchen table to see that the men had inhaled their food. Sitting down and picking up her slightly cold mug, she eyed the constable with one of her most beguiling expressions. Jack cleared his throat when he spotted it, rising to his feet and mumbling something about making more coffee. Whatever she was plotting, he knew that the impressionable and unsuspecting young man was about to wilt from whatever Phryne had up her sleeve.

“Well, you certainly have a hearty appetite, Constable,” she cooed over him. “Just like my Archie here. Perhaps we should go walk it off now that it sounds like the rain has finally let up?”

“I, er, don’t think that would be wise, Mrs Jones.”

“Oh, poppycock, Constable! We’ve all been cooped up in here all night and morning. I think a visit to the village would be delightful! Your shift is about to end, you really ought to join us.”

“Well…”

“Besides, I have it on good authority that the superintendent and his partner from Scotland Yard are due quite soon. I’m quite sure they would feel much more comfortable meeting us at the inn. We’d be saving them a further trip really.”

“Er, well…I suppose,” he reluctantly decided as Mrs Jones beamed at him before leaning over to refill his coffee. “Why don’t you let me go ring this idea through with the ‘sarge,’ first though? Wouldn’t want to get his gander up and all.”

“I won’t move a muscle, Constable,” she promised as the officer rose to his feet to make his way to the hallway.

“Liar,” Jack hissed into her ear when she jumped at his playful tickle to the nape of her neck. He then bent down and placed a fond kiss to the spot. “Well played, Mrs Jones, especially considering we’re due to meet Miss Belanger shortly.”

“My thoughts exactly, Archie.”

“Placing unwitting constables under your spell seems to work equally well in this hemisphere, Miss
“Fisher.”

“Really, Mr Jones? Well, your own brand of wizardry seems to be working just as well here too.”

“Is that so? Allow me to demonstrate more of it then.”

The two barely registered the vehement throat clearing that eventually issued from the kitchen door.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Fern and Archie arrive at the pub with their police escort and attempt to make contact with their, well, contact. They also finally meet up with their Met connections.

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the delay in posting, but it's been another busy weekend catching up with more of my friends and family! I hope to continue posting as much of this fic as possible (maybe even to finish it) before I'm off to Mexico for my cousin's wedding...here's hoping!

And I'm super chuffed by all the enthusiasm on Tumblr for my next case fic idea to have Phrack journey to Canada (with Jack eventually donning a Mountie's uniform)...more on that soon, but know that the concept notes have begun!

For now, hope you enjoy this next installment...and Happy Easter to you all, especially if you observe and celebrate it!

The two detectives once again found themselves back inside the police motorcar for the brief trip down the hill into the village where the inn was situated. They passed the final resting place of Phryne’s unfortunate bicycle, which their kind caretaker, Mr Northfield, had assured would be no problem for him to rescue and repair.

Once they had entered the rustic inn, Jack had led the constable to the restaurant area where he ordered them some tea whilst they waited for Alec’s arrival.

“If you’ll excuse me, gentlemen, I must go visit the powder room,” Phryne explained as she jumped back to her feet. At Jack’s nearly imperceptible nod, she sauntered out from the bar area, and quickly ducked into one of the larger ground-level public rooms to quickly check in case Madeleine had arrived earlier than scheduled. She then peeked into the more secluded one where they had first met, but it only revealed an elderly man and woman enjoying an early lunch together.

She exited the room back into the main hallway, and was about to turn into the adjacent one when the front door opened with a gush of wind to reveal a tall, dark-haired gentleman followed by a shorter, bald one who was grasping his hat with both hands. They both glanced at her in surprise, but Phryne could see the shorter man’s eyes began to twinkle belying his jovial nature.

“Well, pardon us, for nearly knocking you right over there, Miss! But, the weather does seem downright nastier here than it was when we left the city.”

“Well, pardon us, for nearly knocking you right over there, Miss! But, the weather does seem downright nastier here than it was when we left the city.”

“Yes, just on some official business, Miss,” the older gentleman responded. “Do you happen to
know where we might find the innkeeper?"

“I haven’t yet had the pleasure of making his or her acquaintance yet actually,” Miss Fisher responded. “But, I do have an idea of where we might locate who’s in charge.”

Whirling on the heel of her red Wellington boot, the lady detective marched ahead of the newcomers. She had an inkling of who they might be, but didn’t want to presume… for once. Especially when there was so much at stake.

She was rewarded for her efforts when she saw Jack’s eyes light up and his face break out into one of his uncharacteristic grins.

“Alec, old mate! It’s really good to see you again!” Inspector Robinson was on his feet and on his way over to greet his long-time friend with a strong clasp to the other man’s shoulder. “I see you’ve already met my wife, Fern.”

Jack coughed loudly and tilted his head back towards the corner where Constable Woodhouse had also just risen to his feet.

“My love, this is Superintendent Alec Fletcher from the Metropolitan Police.”

“I’m delighted to finally be able to meet you, Superintendent Fletcher!”

“Great Scott! I should have realised when we stumbled in just now that someone as sophisticated as yourself, Mrs Jones, might not normally haunt such rustic environs such as these.” He smiled at her genuinely whilst shaking her extended hand. “Please, call me ‘Alec’!” Phryne could instantly see how this charming detective had successfully won over her friend’s heart.

Turning to the side, he gestured towards his stocky partner. “And this here is Detective Sergeant Tom Tring, my right hand man. Normally, our team would also include Detective Sergeant Piper, but he is unfortunately quite ill at the moment.”

“Detective Sergeant,” Jack greeted Tom after Phryne had shaken his hand first.

“Pleasure,” the detective sergeant grinned. “Like the chief here said, we don’t stand on formalities amongst friends. Just ‘Tom’ will do!”

At that moment, everyone turned to the constable who had just joined their group.

“Ah yes, allow me to introduce you to Constable Woodhouse,” Jack stated. “He has been kind enough to accompany us here so you wouldn’t need to make the extra trip up to the cottage.”

He quickly glanced at Phryne who subtly shook her head to indicate that their contact still hadn’t arrived. Alec quickly assessed the unspoken message between the two and stepped towards the younger police officer.

“Excellent work you’ve done here, Constable,” Alec said in his friendly, yet authoritative voice.

“We’ll be down to your station later today to finish sorting things out with your chief with regards to my friends here. For now, you are free to go.”

“Why, thank you, Superintendent,” the younger man nodded with obvious awe. “That means a lot to me. I’ll just be on my way then.”

He began to walk away, before remembering his manners. “It was a real pleasure to meet you, sir,
and you too, sir,” he nodded towards his superior officers.

“Oh, and you as well, Mr and Mrs Jones. Thank you again for looking after me last night and this morning.” He doffed his helmet at that point, unwittingly revealing his head injury to the newly arrived detectives.

“Make sure you rest and put another cold compress on that bump, Constable,” Mrs Jones admonished him. With a slight grin and nod, the man left them alone.

“Well, now that that’s sorted,” Alec said as he turned towards his friends. “Why don’t we find a quieter table as it seems we are overdue a long debriefing.”

“I know just the place,” Phryne informed them as Tom excused himself to go sort out their lodgings with the innkeeper first.

She then led them to one of the emptier rooms she had noticed earlier, and they all settled down at a charming round table tucked into the corner next to a roaring fire. Soon, Tom returned, followed by a barmaid carrying a large tray with tea, a few pints, as well as a pot of soup and several loaves of freshly baked bread.

“Thought we could do with some sustenance first before we dive in,” the large man smiled, twitching his handlebar moustache. “Please help yourselves.”

“Looks like you’re not the only detective who enjoys his food, Jack,” Phryne teased affectionately as she watched her partner accept a bowlful of soup. “No one would know that you’d only just finished your breakfast.”

“Some things never change then,” Alec also grinned at his friend. “I’m surprised he didn’t just starve away during the war.”

Everyone paused when a woman entered the room and looked about before leaving again when she evidently couldn’t spot whomever she was looking for.

“I take it our peacock has flown?”

“She never landed, to be precise,” Jack informed his friend in a lowered tone. “Despite sending a note to us yesterday inviting us to meet her here. Just over half an hour ago.”

“You’re right to be concerned,” Alec replied. “We should go see if we can find her soon as we can. Then, I need to make a visit to the rural police station afterwards.”

“Thank you ever so much for intervening on our behalf,” Phryne began. “I, for one, am deeply grateful to not have to spend the night there.”

“I agree,” Jack stated as he took his partner’s hand. “It was less than pleasant. Makes City South’s cells look positively palatial in comparison.”

“I can certainly imagine,” Alec replied grimly. “I’m also hoping to read the full coroner’s report on Matron Quincy. Although, I was informed over the telephone before we headed out of the city earlier, that the post-mortem report indicated cause of death as exsanguination from several tiny punctures to the heart. Most likely from an instrument like the needle of a syringe.”

“It certainly looked that way in terms of all the blood we saw,” Phryne confirmed as she watched the food vanish nearly as quickly as it had appeared. “And based on the syringe planted in Jack’s bicycle.”
“We intend to do all we can to clear you both completely from this terrible crime, Miss Fisher.”

“Why don’t you let Miss Fisher and I head over to Simone Wright’s cottage now, and see if we can locate Miss Belanger,” Jack suggested after he finished chewing the last morsel of bread before him. “That way, you and Tom can go finish sorting things out at the station. We can reconvene here later for afternoon tea?”

“Excellent idea, Jack. We shouldn’t be long, but I do want to ensure that there is no lasting damage to you both as a result of yesterday’s allegations.”

“Which we deeply appreciate, Alec. I wish there was more that we could do to assist with that case.”

“You are doing much more than we could hope for at the moment,” his friend reassured him.

After seeing their Anglo detective friends off, the Australian detectives then made their way arm-in-arm along the street in the direction they had been given by the innkeeper.

“She’s such a sweet creature, we’re all worried sick about her,” his wife has added when they had enquired about Archie’s cousin-in-law.

“That’s exactly why we’d like to go visit her home for ourselves, to see if we can find anything out to pass onto the police when they return later.”

Approaching the quaint little cottage, that was very similar in design to theirs, the couple knocked and waited. After a few more minutes, Phryne glanced about the empty street and was about to unearth her lock pick when Jack tried the door handle. It opened effortlessly. He then put a finger to his lips, and pushed the door open slightly.

“Miss Belanger,” he called out. “Are you here? It’s Archibald and Fern.”

Still alert, the two stepped into the entry way, their concern mounting when they saw the front room in complete disarray as though there had been a struggle. Even without searching the rest of the place, however, they both instinctively knew that Miss Belanger would not reply.

The ransacked house was empty.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Fern and Archie continue their investigation to decipher the whereabouts of the two missing women. And get invited to the annual village fete.

Chapter Notes

As always, I've been so wonderfully overwhelmed and encouraged by your lovely comments and feedback! I'm also happy that I'm still keeping many of you guessing about the case(s). Here's a nice long chapter for your troubles (hope to post as much as possible the remainder of this week before I'm off to Mexico next week!)

“So what do you make of things, Jack?”

Phryne picked up a framed wedding photograph of a couple who were posed in the stiff and formal fashion of over a decade or so earlier. She noted, however, that their eyes shone with their happiness at hopes and dreams that hadn’t yet been marred by war and death. She ran a gloved hand down the side of the glass pensively, remembering another photo that she had gazed at not too long ago of another formerly happy couple.

The war had changed countless lives, some for the worst, but some for the better, she mused at the bittersweet sentiment. Despite all the pain that her own life had endured before 1914 and since, Phryne Fisher found it useful to adopt her usual stance of shaking off sombre thoughts and embracing her present instead. She especially enjoyed her modus operandi these days since it now included frequent opportunities to embrace a particularly dashing detective inspector.

“Well, Miss Fisher, judging from the scattered collection of folded paper birds about the place, I think we can safely assume that Miss Belanger is somehow connected to the one that we just discovered at the school.”

The two detectives had just finished searching the cottage’s bedroom. After confirming that their contact was indeed not on the premises, Jack had telephoned Alec at the Aylesbury police station to notify him of their discovery. Their friend had agreed that something didn’t seem right, and told them to start searching for clues whilst he notified the local police to file a missing person report.

“I’ve been wondering about that origami bird,” Phryne told him. “And whether or not it could be connected to Matron Quincy’s demise.”

Jack nodded his agreement whilst continuing to sift through another crumpled sheet of paper that had been tossed onto the floor.

“Yes, so I have I, Miss Fisher, especially now that Miss Belanger has gone missing.” Jack then crouched down to poke about several upended and emptied drawers. “Since all the drawers seem to have been searched in every room, I surmise that the mess was made by someone desperately
“Yes, everything else seems to still be in place. There’s no spilled tea or shattered glass or crockery anywhere,” Phryne concurred as she turned about the room slowly. “And, the bed is still made up, indicating she either didn’t sleep in it or she did wake up and had gone to meet us as planned. But, never made it.”

“I agree. There are also several undisturbed areas such as the wardrobe in here where it looks as though the clothing and other stored items are still neatly organised.”

“So, either Madeleine was in a hurry looking for something before she left. Or, someone else was desperately searching for something. We need to figure out what it could be, and whether that person is responsible for Maddie’s disappearance.”

“Well then, Mrs Jones,” Jack gathered what paperwork he thought worthy of further examination in one hand. He approached his partner extending the other. “As much as I do enjoy spending time in bedroom settings with you, I think our time would now be much better utilised if we were to go make the acquaintance of Simone’s hopefully friendly neighbours.”

“Marvellous plan, Archie! Lead the way.”

*_**_*_*

“Oh my, do come in, my dears!” Simone’s extremely gregarious next-door neighbour, Mrs Beryl Philpott, fussed over her two visitors after they had introduced themselves and their mission. “Go on and sit yourselves down there, and dry off from this miserable day. I’ll just go and put the kettle on as well!”

“You’re too kind, Mrs Philpott,” Fern enthused as she and her husband balanced onto a tiny couch that had seen better days. The row of brightly embroidered cushions engulfing it from top through bottom only somewhat helped to hide this fact.

“I had seen the two of you coming up the walkway, and so thought you must be friends of Maddie,” their host bustled back into the room with a tray of tea things and a very familiar-looking tin of biscuits. “I never imagined that you were kin of dear Simone’s. And to think that you came all this way only to discover that she’s gone.”

“Actually, that is part of the reason we wanted to speak with you, Mrs Philpott,” Archibald said grimly, although his eyes kept hovering back and forth between their host and the tin. “We are sad to inform you that it looks as though Madeleine has now disappeared as well.”

Their hostess’s eyes had widened in shock at Archibald’s words. He quickly stood up to relieve her of the tray whilst Fern gently took her arm and helped her ease down onto a thread-bare wing chair facing their seats. The younger woman then went to rescue the kettle shrieking for its rescue from the kitchen.

“Mrs Philpott, are you quite all right?” Archibald’s concerned, yet kind tone brought her back to the present.

“Yes, luv, don’t you mind me at all. I’m just a bit overwhelmed is all, those sweet, sweet girls! They were both the quiet types, but such gentle souls. Simone, especially, loved at the primary
school. She also did a lot of charity work with her family. They always were so good to us, the Rothschilds.”

“Could you tell us a little more about them, Mrs Philpott? We want to learn as much as we can about Simone,” Fern reappeared with a fresh pot of tea and proceeded to pour out the welcoming drinks for everyone.

“Yes, I would be so grateful to learn more about my cousin’s wife, so we can help find her,” Archibald encouraged.

“Of course, luv, now let me see,” the older woman held her teacup and saucer still as she thought back.

“As I just mentioned, Lord Anthony and Lady Louise Rothschild were always deeply connected to the community here in Aston Clinton. They took excellent care of all their staff and those of us who worked the land or were involved in any of their holdings. My own Fred used to work in their many orchards here, and only a little now and then since he returned from France. He still makes a lovely cider!

“In fact, the family had these workers’ cottages built, and then Lady Louise had the village hall built in memory of the baron when he passed away, God bless his soul. After Lady Louise also went to be with the good Lord, their two daughters inherited more than just their parents’ estate. The two of them were so devoted to different issues causes. We wouldn’t even have the local infants’ school where Simon teaches if it weren’t for Miss Constance asking her father to build it for her as a sixteenth birthday present.”

“Sounds like they were wonderful to work for,” Fern murmured in admiration, trying not to think about how indifferently her own parents treated their staff and tenants.

“All gentle as lambs, the family are, so I’ve been worried sick ever since Simone started talking about going away, back to France. She got this notion into that big brain of hers that her husband might be alive.”

“When did you noticed that she had disappeared? Had she come to say goodbye to you then?”

Mrs Philpott tilted her head in thought. “Now that I think about it, no, she didn’t. I do recall waking up one morning and going to fetch my milk from the stoop, and noticing that hers was still out on her front step. So, I took it in for her.”

She reached out to pat Fern’s hand as the younger woman moved to refill her husband’s teacup.

“I know how you young people do rush about and forget things, duckie. But when she didn’t come back and another bottle of milk had gone untouched, I told my Fred. He then gave a bell to the local chief constable the next morning to let him know. They’re good friends, you see, from way back.”

At the couple’s nods, she continued. “Then, Madeleine had arrived shortly after that. Honestly, I didn’t know what to think about her. I hate to say it, but I didn’t trust her accent and the fact she spoke German a lot.”

Archibald leaned forward with marked interest at this information. “How do you know that she spoke German, Mrs Philpott? Who did she speak with? Yourself?”

“Oh no, luv, not me!” The woman chuckled. “I can barely speak the Queen’s English, meself! No, I overheard her. She was talking to one of the teachers.”
“From the primary school?” Fern asked whilst trying not to smirk as her husband tried to sneak a quick bite from his third biscuit.

“There’s only lady teachers at the primary school, except for the headmaster. No, this was one of the gentlemen from the big house school.”

“Could you see what he looked like? Did you recognise him?”

“I’m afraid not, duckie. He would come to visit at odd hours of the night, and they kept to the apple tree orchard down the back. But, their voices would carry.”

Their hostess scrunched up her face in concentration. “I couldn’t understand it anyway, just knew it was German because I had asked my Fred. He’d been on the Western Front, you see. I asked him why they kept talking about numbers, and he told me ‘nein’ meant ‘no’ in German, not the number nine.”

“If you couldn’t see him, how did you know he was with the preparatory school,” Archibald couldn’t help wanting to clarify.

“Oh, I heard them mention the school a few times, in English, of course. Then, Maddie would slip out at night and cycle in the direction of the old mansion a few times.”

“Hmm, that does seem like rather suspicious behaviour,” Fern acknowledged.

“Yes, we don’t want too much of that happening here, duckie,” The older lady suddenly brightened visibly. “I know! You must both come to our village’s Apple Day fete tomorrow! There will be dancing, and you must try my famous apple crumble! And my Fred’s cider. Oh, I do pray that the weather will sort itself for it though.”

“We’d be delighted to come,” Fern beamed at the older woman. “That all sounds like marvellous fun!” She bounced to her feet and stepped over to grasp the older woman’s hand. “Thank you ever so much for having us to tea.”

“Yes,” Archibald confirmed as he too straightened up and unsuccessfully tried to juggle a few cushions from cascading to the floor. “We look forward to seeing you again tomorrow.”

“Here, luv, take them for the road,” Mrs Philpott patted his arm affectionately as she pushed the remainder of the biscuit tea into his hands. “I’ll bake some more soon.”

With that, the Joneses made their way back up the pathway as Fern turned to wave at their lovely new friend.

“The fete tomorrow will give us an excellent opportunity to meet and learn more about the villagers, and ask some more questions about the case,” Jack mused out loud.

“Like Mrs Philpott said, I hope the weather cooperates,” Phryne remarked. “I don’t fancy attempting to dance about whilst wearing my wellies!” She laughingly lifted her feet off the pavement, leaving a few footprints on the pathway.

The partners suddenly locked eyes as they both recalled the muddy footprint left behind by their night time intruder. Without a word, they both turned at the bottom of the Philpotts’ path and made their way back up Simone’s pathway.

“This way, Jack.”
Phryne stepped out of her boots and carried them with back towards the kitchen where she remembered seeing another pair of Wellington boots next to a set of walking shoes. The boots were considerably smaller than hers, whereas the shoes were exactly an inch bigger.

Just like the footprints they had found in the cottage's kitchen.
Later that afternoon, the two detectives found themselves making their way along a distinctly different pathway from the ones they had traversed earlier in the day.

In fact, Jack had been quite impressed by the private road leading up to the estate from the High Street, and how its overarching trees seemed to create a natural tunnel. He stood back to survey the front of the mansion after helping Phryne out of the motor car.

“You both take your time,” Mr Northfield told them. “I’ll just be picking up some supplies down the High Street, and will wait for you at the Rose and Crown at the bottom of the drive until you’re ready to head back.”

“Thank you so much, Mr Northfield!” Phryne smiled at him as he doffed his hat and climbed back into the vehicle. She then turned and looped her arm through her partner’s.

“Ready, Mr Jones?”

“If you mean, did I memorize my latest dissertation on the ‘Treatise of Interspecies Fungi’?” he enquired with a slight twitch at the corner of his mouth. “Then, perhaps.”

“Why how riveting! Now tell me, is that how you managed to win Fern’s bookish heart in the end?”

“But of course! Don’t you recall that idyllic afternoon spent picking mushrooms on the hill?” The twinkling of his eyes belied his serious tone.

“How could I forget, darling? I just love listening to you recount it to me.” She happily played
along, wondering what he would say.

“Well, we had just enjoyed a delicious picnic of gratin and my famous apple puffed pie.”

“Oh, you must make one for the Apple Day fete tomorrow! Then what happened next?”

“Well, we had just enjoyed a delicious picnic of gratin and my famous apple puffed pie.”

“Why, you fell asleep when I was reading my aforementioned treatise to you, although it could have been full meal and the heat of the day as well,” he conceded good-naturedly.

“Like I said, simply riveting! But, honestly, was that the best that you could do to win your dear wife’s heart, Archie?” She pouted teasingly at him as they turned at the end of the first wide path and began to follow the ones leading to the front steps.

“Of course not, not when she’s always inspiring me to improve my romantic overtures, Mrs Jones,” he smirked. “Since I couldn’t allow my descriptions of a fungi to fail me, I enlisted its aid to win my fair damsel’s heart.”

He couldn’t help laughing out loud then when she scrunched up her nose and arched a perfect eyebrow in disbelief. The couple climbed the front steps beneath front entrance’s wide, ornate archway, and waited after ringing the elaborate doorbell.

“Hmmm, I suppose I’ll just have to demonstrate to you again sometime how evocative the feeling of a velvety mushroom cap can be when applied to one’s skin.”

Before she could respond, the great, dark oak-panelled front door swung open to reveal a tired-looking butler.

“Mr and Mrs Archibald Jones here to see Miss Miriam Rothschild please,” Jack dutifully introduced themselves.

“Very good, sir. This way, please,” the other man replied resignedly. “Miss is taking tea on the back terrace today.”

The couple followed along obediently until Archibald nearly stumbled. He hoped the echo of their footsteps along the great corridor masked his sudden gasp when Fern’s hand reached behind to grasp him wickedly in a manner not fit for public decency. He reached back to swat playfully at her arm without changing his expression, but for a tell-tale glint in his eye that she chose to ignore. Before she could come up with another mode of torture, however, Archibald breathed a quiet sigh of relief when she suddenly looped her wandering arm through his as they approached the terrace doors.

Miriam Rothschild, immediately rose from her seat, a welcoming smile gracing her elegant features.

“Welcome to Tring Park, Mr and Mrs Jones! Please, do have a seat. Thank you, Mr Hodge,” she turned to the elderly retainer who bowed extravagantly before excusing himself.

“Oh, please do call me, ‘Fern’!” Her guest requested. “And what a delightful view you have here, Miss Rothschild,” Mrs Jones circled about to take the gardens and park in before joining her husband on the lovely rattan set.

“Thank you, Fern, it is indeed a little paradise on its own, which is why Uncle Walter loves it so. As do I. We enjoy it for its beauty as well as for its scientific merit. I do so apologise that he was called away so suddenly, he was very much looking forward to meeting you.”
“I understand he has departed for another expedition to North Africa?” Mr Jones enquired.

“Yes, he had been getting rather impatient about a few delays, so had to take the opportunity to depart when it came up so suddenly. And, you must take a stroll through the park after you finish your tea, and then you’ll understand why,” their hostess replied rather cryptically. “He’s been so good to let me come stay and conduct my own research here.”

“I certainly wish I had a zoologist for an uncle like yourself, Miss Rothschild,” Archibald agreed.

“Please, call me ‘Miriam.’ And yes, I have been extremely fortunate to have first my father and then Uncle Walter encourage me in my studies since I was a young girl. I’m especially interested in entomology as well as botany, which makes me delighted to learn is also your area of study, Mr Jones?”

“Yes, Archie is quite the expert with mushrooms,” Fern interjected suddenly with a fond pat to her husband’s hand.

“Ahem, yes, as my darling wife says, I am rather fond of fungi,” Archibald responded with a deadly serious expression, but for a slight twitch to the side of his mouth.

The couple sat back at that point to allow Mr Hodge to place a perfectly laid out tea tray before them before disappearing discreetly almost as quickly as he had appeared.

“Tell me, Miriam,” Fern asked with a swift change in topic. “Is your uncle, Lord Lionel Walter Rothschild, the same Baron Rothschild that is also known as ‘Baron de Rothschild’ from Austrian nobility?”

“That’s correct,” Miriam began. “He inherited the title when my grandfather, Nathan, the first Baron Rothschild passed away. Grandad ‘Natty’ was also the first Jewish peer in Great Britain actually. He was always adamant about reminding the family about our roots and faith, for which I’m grateful, even if I prefer science over religion. Or banking.” She smiled wryly at her own obvious distaste for her family’s wealthy banking background.

“That stands to reason since from what I’ve heard, Miss Rothschild, your skills extend beyond natural sciences to codebreaking as well?”

“Oh, you must have heard that from Simone. Yes, she and I developed our own simple code when I was younger. She has always been like an older sister or younger aunt to me, and she taught me a lot of what I know in the field of cryptography.”

Fern quickly glanced at her husband who nodded slightly indicating his encouragement for her to take over what he hoped was their surreptitious interview.

“Did Simone share her cryptography skills with anyone else in the area as well, Miriam?”

Their hostess paused briefly to think over the question, taking a slow sip of her tea.

“Why yes, Simone sometimes met with one of the teachers at the Aston Clinton House preparatory school to exchange notes. But, from my understanding, he is only a hobbyist decoder.”

“Do you know who this teacher is?”

“I’m sorry, but she never told me his name, and I’ve never met him. She only recently began to work with him. I really am sorry I don’t have any more useful information. I hope he isn’t related to her disappearance!”
Again, Miriam noted how her guests seemed to share a secret language with each other based solely on their glances. The scientist and codebreaker within was instantly intrigued.

“Not to worry,” Archibald confirmed genially. “We have been attempting to learn what we can about Simone and her connections to this area to see if there’s anything we can to help recover her.”

“Yes, being here now and having the opportunity to visit some of your family’s homes in the area has really helped us to feel more connected with her,” Fern agreed. “You have beautiful and fine tastes in architecture and décor, I must add.”

“Thank you, Fern, I’ll be sure to pass that along to my family as we certainly do like our oddities, and that definitely extends to some of our homes. In fact, it’s become a local legend that tunnel running from beneath this house somewhere and directly ends up at one of the local High Street pubs. It’s even part of local ghost tales.”

Archibald smiled at her disdain.

“We’ve heard something about this infamous tunnel. I’m curious, but how has it been maintained? I imagine it must be something that your family and now uncle must stay on top of it, at least seasonally. Especially this time of year when you might have to deal with the additional headaches of flooding.”

“Oh, certainly. That’s why the family made the decision to board the tunnel decades ago for safety reasons. But, now enough discussion, I insist you must come for a brief stroll and do some empirical research of the area yourselves!”

The two detectives stood when their hostess rose to her feet, and they waited until she led the way down the terrace stairs.

“You must return soon to see Uncle Walter’s private zoological collection, which is currently being refurbished. But, for now, you should be able to see some of his outdoor collection right here in the garden and around the mansion grounds.”

“Is it true that your uncle is quite well-known for hitching his carriage to a set of zebras and driving them to Buckingham Palace?” Archibald asked with a boyish smile at the thought.

“Yes, absolutely! He wanted to prove that they could be tamed. He still sometimes hitches zebras to his carriage even now to go for a ride around the grounds.”

“How delightful,” Fern gushed. She paused suddenly and reached out to tug on her husband’s arm quite urgently. “Look over there, darling!”

Archie turned dutifully in the direction of her pointed finger and first noticed an impossibly gigantic tortoise lumbering about.

But, even that sight was soon to be forgotten as his gaze was drawn to a group of exotic peacocks approaching them, displaying their beautiful feathers.

Chapter End Notes

Dame Miriam Rothschild really existed, and I couldn’t resist adding her to my story.
considering she would have been about the same age as Phryne at this point in time. And, yes, she really was a scientist in her own right who went to live at Tring Park so she could study with her uncle, Lord Lionel Walter Rothschild. She also worked as a codebreaker during WWII (which I found out after I had already started writing this fic!) You can find more information about her here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miriam_Rothschild

Everything I mentioned about Lord Rothschild is also historically based (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_Rothschild,_2nd_Baron_Rothschild). Having previously lived in the market town of Tring, I've often visited his museum that he willed to the zoological society’s Natural History Museum where they display photographs of him riding the giant tortoise and his carriage attached to the zebras. And yes, peacocks actually still roam several of the Rothschilds’ former mansions today (a few are now hotels)!

Also, for those who are interested, here are photos of Tring Park Mansion circa. 1913 here: http://www.hertfordshire-genealogy.co.uk/data/places/places-t/tring/tring-mansion.htm so you can picture Phrack walking up towards it :)
Chapter Summary

Mr and Mrs Jones attend the annual Aston Clinton Apple Day Fete where they make some new discoveries.

Chapter Notes

Buenas noches from Puerto Vallarta, my darlings! Tis my final night here in Mexico, and I wanted to send you all this chapter that I had already written before the trip (and am so grateful to the fabulous @comeaftermejackrobinson for taking the time to preview and review before we started our body swap trope fic project)!

I'm rather sad to be leaving this paradise behind, but also looking forward to returning home and my regular writing schedule soon.

Hope you enjoy, and will be able to let me know what you think when you have a second or more! Adios for now!

The day of the village Apple Day Fete dawned with glorious sunlight that tickled Phryne’s nose. But, it was the delicious aroma wafting up the stairs that enticed her to sit up and drew a slow, yet satisfied smile to her sleepy features. Leaping from the covers, she paused to grab the closest piece of clothing to hand, which had her sprinting down the stairs sporting Archie’s rumpled jumper.

She whirled her way into the kitchen just in time to find Jack bending over to lift a gorgeous puffed pie out of the oven.

“Just in time, Miss Fisher,” he greeted her as he turned to place the mouth-watering delight onto a towel he had already prepared on the table. “Although, this isn’t for breakfast so you’ll have to wait until the fete like everyone else.”

“Not even a tiny nibble then,” she pouted up at him after approaching from behind to wrap her arms around his waist.

“Well, perhaps, if you’d be so kind as to go check and stir the custard on the stove,” he indicated by tilting his head towards the sauce pan she just noticed. “There might be a little apple tart or two that will soon be ready.”

He couldn’t help smirking as she bounded back over to see to the pudding-like sauce that was cooling down. Instead of giving it a stir as he had asked, she stuck her index finger in with a naughty flourish instead.

“Miss Fisher!” He scolded her, coming up behind her to grasp the offensive hand and pulling it out of the sauce pan as though she were a child. Before she could protest, however, he surprised her by bringing it up to his mouth and slowly swirled his tongue around her finger to lick it all off.
“Inspector!” She gaped at him before her eyes darkened, and she pulled at the apron he had again donned again earlier to tug him towards her. They pulled apart eventually, both breathing heavily.

Jack cleared his throat. “Ahem. I think the custard’s ready…as well as the apple tarts!” He then turned to rescue the rest of his baked creations from the oven.

“But I’m not!” Phryne wailed as she glanced at the cuckoo clock hanging on the kitchen’s far wall. “And the Northfields will be here any minute!”

“More like thirty,” Jack tried not to laugh at her horrified expression. “At least have a cup of tea and your apple tart first. I’m sure it shouldn’t take you that long to prepare for a rural country fete, Miss Fisher.”

Phryne turned back around and wavered visibly when she glimpsed the scrumptious-looking pastry that Jack placed at her spot on the table along with a steaming cup of tea in her favourite dainty teacup.

“Hmm, well, perhaps a little bite or two,” she conceded as she sat down to test the morsel. “Why, Jack! Don’t tell Mr B about this or he’ll feel threatened!”

Chuckling slightly, the inspector sat down opposite his partner with his own dish. He leaned over to spoon some custard onto her portion before adding a great big dollop to his own.

“If he does, he’ll only have himself to blame,” Jack replied with an enigmatic expression.

“Oh?” Phryne waved her spoon for him to continue, her eyes shining with curiosity.

“Of course. The pastry is his own recipe,” her partner concluded as though that explained everything. She continued to eat with her eyes boring into him. “That he may or may not have shared with me…at some point.”

The lady detective finished her plate and stood up with a flourish before sauntering over to the detective inspector’s side of the table.

“My never ending source of mystery,” she leaned down and whispered into his ear, before kissing the side of his mouth. Then, she poked her finger into his custard and dabbed some onto the tip of his nose before whirling away up the stairs.

Jack simply chuckled again and shook his head whilst trying unsuccessfully to lick it off.

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The Joneses were both ready and waiting on their front step by the time Mr and Mrs Northfield arrived to accompany them to the fete. On the short drive down the hill towards the village, Mrs Northfield fussed in appreciation over Jack’s pie that she insisted on taking a peek at as she and Jack exchanged baking tips.

The village’s annual Apple Day fete was always held in the field surrounding Aston Clinton’s St Michael’s and All Angel’s Church, a 13th century grey-bricked structure that still retained much of its original Norman features.
After parking the vehicle, the two couples made their way over towards the festivities whilst Mr Northfield regaled them with stories from his orchard picking and cider making days.

“From my experience, cider usually comes in jugs,” Archibald told him.

“Of course, that’s how it’s distributed for consumption,” their cottage caretaker eagerly explained. “But on a large scale, the fermented cider must be transferred to a maturation vessel. The trick there is to use very large oak barrels where matured ciders from previous seasons are combined and blended. Otherwise, it will taste incomplete, at least to the avid connoisseur.”

They were then interrupted by the arrival of Superintendent Fletcher and his family, who had been invited to attend by Dr Crawford after Daisy had telephoned him to follow-up on a few details regarding her article. Mrs Northfield promised to deliver Jack’s pie to one of the most sought-after stalls at the fete, the one piled high with cakes, pies, and other home produce such as jams and pickles.

“Oh, darling, isn’t this exciting? Doesn’t it remind you of the fetes we used to attend?” Daisy whispered as she gave her friend air kisses, which was the current custom of society ladies. “And, you must meet Oliver and Miranda…” she trailed off after realising her twins had disappeared into the exciting crowd.

“I’m sure we’ll have the opportunity to meet them at some point today,” Fern smiled. “And yes, I certainly remember the joy of escaping our school’s walls back then. For now, I’m extremely glad you could return!”

Fern and Archie then turned to greet Dr and Mrs Crawford who introduced their two daughters.

“I’m so delighted you could join us, Mr and Mrs Jones!” The schoolmaster shook their hands in genuine relief and pleasure to know that they seemed well in spite of recent events.

“Please allow me to introduce you to our newest visitor, Mr Alfred Wren, who is a visiting landscape architect wanting to study some of his late ancestor’s work in the area. Mr Wren, this is Mr Archibald Jones and his wife, Fern, who are visiting us from the Antipodes.”

Taking in the tall and handsome stranger who turned to greet them, Fern couldn’t help detecting his slight accent and commenting on it.

“Oh, I grew up in Toronto,” he explained. “But, I’m now working in London and wanted to start tracing and learning more about some of my ancestry.”

“You’re related to the famous Christopher Wren then?” Archibald enquired in an impressed tone.

Before Mr Wren could reply, a collective cheer stole everyone’s attention towards the games stalls where Daisy and Alec spied their children happily throwing apples in a frenzy.

“Please excuse us,” Daisy muttered as she and her husband rushed over to rescue the poor stall keep from their overly eager offspring.

“Oh, a coconut shy, Archie!” Fern’s eyes lit up when she spotted the row of apples being balanced on a post after the Fletchers had been dragged off by their twins to the next games stall. She began tugging on his arm towards that area of the field.

“Why don’t you try your hand at winning your missus a prize, sir”

“Of course,” Archie agreed, searching for the right amount of change to purchase three apples.
The first one sailed too high over the row. On his second attempt, he managed to knock one off earning Fern’s delightful applause. The third one bounced off the post and ricocheted. Both detectives whipped their heads to follow its trajectory before it landed on Alec’s head causing both Fern and Daisy to erupt in laughter.

The stall keeper handed Archibald an apple after he recovered from his own guffawing.

“Methinks he deserves a consolation prize for that show,” he winked at Fern as she accepted the apple from her husband with an exaggerated wink and overly executed curtsy. He grinned back knowingly in response to her silent message that she would have had loved the chance to win the prize herself if she wasn’t obligated to be a bookish librarian at the moment.

At that moment a fiddler started playing a lively tune signalling for the villagers to gather for their traditional Morris dancing. Handing her apple over to her husband, Fern quickly ran over to join them and before long was whirling about with glee. Just as the first song ended, she went in search of Archie. She then spotted him talking to Mr Hagen from the school.

“Why aren’t you showcasing your skills today, Mr Hagen,” she enquired conversationally as she reached out to hold her husband’s arm.

“Oh, well, I believe my musical skills are more fitting for other settings, Mr Jones, such as the symphony.”

“Completely understandable,” she nodded, inwardly cringing at his undisguised snobbery. “And now, if you wouldn’t mind, I’d like to claim a dance with my husband!”

“Of course, Mrs Jones, do enjoy!”

“I do believe my dancing skills are more fitting for other settings, Mrs Jones,” Archie mimicked his last conversation partner’s words as he allowed his wife to drag him into the milling crowd despite his mumbling.

“Well, darling, I know this isn’t quite a waltz, but I’m sure even Archie can manage a country jig or two!”

They were about to turn in the direction of the dancing area, when another bout of happy shouting came from the direction of an emptier part of the field. A large group of people were unravelling a rope into a straight line on the ground.

“Ladies and gentleman!” A loud voice boomed out across the throng. “Everyone is invited to make up teams for the annual Apply Day Fete tug-of-war!”

“Looks like I’ve been saved by the rope,” Archie quirked his lips into his partner’s favourite sideways smile. He then found himself being jostled into a team with Alec and Alfred along with some of the teachers and villagers of their age group. Another team made up of younger men and students from the school quickly formed at the other end of the rope. Both sides formed a queue on either side of the rope and then the crowd hushed as everyone anticipated the blow of the whistle signalling the start of the game.

Suddenly, the air hummed with excitement as the whistle pierced everyone’s ears. The tug-of-war teams immediately grabbed the rope as the crowd eagerly shouted its encouragement at each side’s show of strength. Fern and Daisy fought to contain their glee as they watched the manly display of muscle against muscle, and shouted their own encouragement towards their partners’ side of the rope. The barely dried ground quickly turned back into mud as each group struggled to gain
traction.

Gradually, favour seemed to smile on the young people’s side and it began to look like they were winning, until an extra tug from the older men’s side proved to be their downfall, quite literally. A few lads slipped in the mud and flew back against the stalls close to the refreshments table, causing it to wobble. Before anyone could steady it, the table crashed against one of the unopened cider barrels creating a domino effect that eventually tipped the last one in the row onto its side.

Some of the other students shouted out with glee as the barrel began to roll and gathered momentum down the hill towards the church’s cemetery. Mesmerised, everyone stopped to watch as it crashed against a big oak tree and shattered open. The loud explosion of cider and wood splintering the air echoed amongst the hills before revealing the unmistakable shape of someone’s body that the large barrel had been concealing.

Amongst the instant uproar of screams and shouts, no one noticed a solitary figure at the edge of the crowd slink away.
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

As the four detectives try to restore order, the body is identified...and Phryne has a hunch.

Chapter Notes

Now that I'm back home (and finished writing the body swap trope with @comeaftermejackrobinson), I'm hoping to start wrapping up this latest adventure! Thanks again for all of your wonderful comments and your patience with my absence. Hope you enjoy this next chapter as well!

Chaos ensued amidst the cacophony of screams and various shouting. Mrs Philpott and a few other villagers, including one or two men, fainted, whilst parents scrambled to find their children. Everywhere, the crowd became frantic until Alec climbed up onto one of the wooden stalls and cupped his hands over his mouth to ensure he would be heard.

“Great Scott! Everyone, please keep calm! I’m from Scotland Yard, and I really need for all of you to quiet down now!”

Slowly, the uproar slowed to a slight buzz as the villagers realised that someone who seemed to know what he was doing was taking charge.

“Thank you for staying calm,” Alec continued when all eyes remained focused on him.

“Now, despite the fact that I am with the Met, I still need someone to go telephone for the local police as well.”

“I’ll go straight away,” Vicar Morley called out as he turned to run towards the vicarage next to the church.

“Excellent. Now, I need some volunteers to help me secure the area, and assist the rest of you to make your way into the church to wait until the other police officers and I can take your statements.”

Jumping back down to the ground, Alec gestured for Archibald to follow him. He, in turn, motioned towards Mr Northfield just as Dr Crawford approached with several other men from the school and village. They all dispersed to various corners of the field on Alec’s direction just as a few older lads began shouting from the direction of the cemetery.

Fern and Daisy had begun to quickly assist those closest to them to make their way towards the church just as the distant sounds of shouting could be heard coming up the hill. Fern stopped to look over her shoulder and gave her husband a little wave before continuing into the church with her arm wrapped around the shoulders of one of the ladies next to her who had just burst into
hysterical tears.

Archie had nodded to acknowledge his wife before following Superintendent Fletcher towards the sounds. They quickly made their way towards the two students from the preparatory school who had just climbed up the hill from the direction of the cemetery.

“Dr Crawford! Come quickly!”

“Sir! You must come at once!”

“What is it?” Their headmaster approached when he heard his name being called.

“Sir, you must come and see! It’s the body, sir!”

“Now, lads,” Alec and Archibald had just reached the headmaster and the boys. "Why don’t you slow down and start at the beginning?”

“Yes, sir!” The shorter one halted and took some deep breathes as his taller and more gangly companion did the same. The fact they were covered in mud indicated that they had encountered a recent adventure or two.

“We were part of the tug-of-war, sir,” the first one resumed. “Chaz here was the one who flew against the table that started everything crashing down.” He quickly wiped away his grin, smearing a bit more mud across his face in the process, at the stern glares coming from the men in front of him.

“Wills rescued me, and then dared me to go down to take a look,” Chaz admitted sheepishly. “So, of course, I had to then.”

“Did you touch anything?” Alec asked immediately with a brief glance at Archibald whose expression grew slightly grimmer.

“Good lads,” he praised them when the boys shook their heads. “I take it that you were able to identify the body then?”

“Y-yes, sir,” they both stammered.

“Well?” Dr Crawford queried in his sternest headmaster’s tone.

Chaz looked straight into his teacher’s eyes. “It’s Professor Sinclair, sir.”

Jack moved to grab the older gentleman’s arm when the headmaster began to tremble, similarly to when they had received the tragic news about Matron Quincy.

“No, not Alistair, good God!” Jack and Mr Wren steered the headmaster towards an abandoned chair by a nearby stall just as the sounds of sirens reached them.

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Fern flitted amongst the villagers to help them get settled just as several members of the local police entered to begin taking statements from everyone. Daisy and her children remained with Mrs Crawford and her daughters, who were both trembling slightly from the pew they had claimed.
“It has been all a bit too much,” Mrs Crawford explained to the ladies. “Especially as we are still recovering from the upheaval and terrible loss of Matron Quincy.”

“Of course,” Fern reached out a comforting hand. “That is completely understandable.”

“Bless you, dear,” the older woman responded, crumpling her lace handkerchief. “I’m ever so glad that you seem recovered from the whole terrible ordeal. I told Albert that he simply had to speak to the Chief Constable. We felt so horrified after the police took you and your poor husband away!”

“They were only trying to do their jobs,” Fern replied graciously. “It wasn’t pleasant, to be sure, but my Archie was with me the entire time. And, things eventually got sorted in the end.”

Outwardly, Mrs Jones appeared every inch the poised botanist’s wife, but inwardly, her sharp mind was trying to work out who could be responsible for this latest body and why, and whether this murder was related to Matron Quincy’s. Daisy gave her friend a secretive smile because she was also attempting to do the same thing.

“As am I, my dear,” Mrs Crawford continued. “We were so looking forward to the fete today, to help take our minds off of things. Plus, we had an excellent bumper crop from the orchards this year, and were hoping to sell most of our cider today. Now, I’m not sure anyone will want to drink it ever again.” She sniffed loudly into her handkerchief.

“It’s extremely unfortunate that the fete has become ruined for you all,” Fern tried to console the older lady. “Is this an event that the entire school participates in then?”

“Oh yes, all of the staff members and students try to contribute in some way, whether it’s with organising the stalls, helping with the apple harvesting and cider making…all of us look forward to it so much since we began the school.

“I imagine the sale of the cider has been able to provide you with some extra revenue then?”

“Yes, I’m afraid that with the previous scandal involving our last matron and one of the school teachers, we have lost a few students and fewer families are wanting to send their children to us,” Mrs Crawford confided before she suddenly stood to her feet.

“Thomas Price! Please do not touch the organ! Lord knows we wouldn’t be able to afford to have it fixed if he broke anything,” she fretted in a lower tone when she returned to her seat after Master Price had dutifully backed away from the large instrument.

As a constable approached their direction, Fern glanced about the church at the various pockets of villagers, school faculty and pupils awaiting their turn to give statements. She then turned to Daisy and tilted her heads towards the church’s main door. Understanding her friend’s signal, Daisy distracted the Crawford ladies by explaining what to expect when giving their accounts of events to the police.

Slipping to the side aisle, no one noticed the lady detective make her way towards the church’s door. Pausing on the pathway, she drew her features into one of helpless bewilderment as soon as she drew the attention of several villagers and officers standing nearby.

“Is everything all right, ma’am,” one of the constables approached her with a look of concern.

“Yes, I believe so, constable,” she began tentatively. “Although, you wouldn’t happen to know where my husband has disappeared to? He was volunteering to help secure the area with Superintendent Fletcher earlier.”
“Ah, yes, he and the Super just accompanied the headmaster, Dr Crawford, to identify the body before we prepare to take it to the morgue.”

“Oh, is it someone from the preparatory school then?”

“Some lads have just claimed that it might be one of their professors. But, don’t trouble yourself over any of that, we’ll make sure to get to the bottom of it all. Probably best to wait inside, ma’am, until they return.”

“But, I’d really like to speak to my husband, you see,” she insisted. “I promise to not disturb anything if I could just go find him.”

“I really don’t think that’s a good idea,” the man advised, just as Constable Woodhouse noticed them and made his way over.

“Hullo again, Mrs Jones, is there anything I can help you with?”

“Ah, hello there, Constable Woodhouse! I was just telling your fine colleague here that I’m in search of Mr Jones and Superintendent Fletcher.”

“Of course, let me take you to them.” Given his previous experience with the woman, the constable knew it was probably best for everyone to simply comply with her wishes. Besides, she was also friends with the Met superintendent.

“I’ll accompany, Mrs Jones, Salford.”

Constable Salford looked like he was about to protest again when Fern took the constable’s arm as they headed in the direction of the cemetery. She couldn’t help smiling a tad triumphantly over her shoulder towards the baffled man they left behind. Focusing back on where they were walking, the constable and undercover lady detective approached the crest of the hill just as Alec and Archibald were about to reach the top with an out of breathe Dr Crawford in tow.

“What is it, my love?” Archibald immediately spotted his wife and hurried over towards her with visible concern.

“Oh, Archie!” Her voice rose dramatically as though she were suddenly overcome with emotion. She flung her arms around his neck just as her husband wrapped a comforting arm around her waist and pulled her against his side. The others politely looked or stepped away to give the couple some privacy as Archibald saw to his wife’s well-being. No one noticed her peeking through the veil of her bob before she turned to tuck her face against Archibald’s neck.

“There, there,” he consoled her in a calming tone as she tilted her head up to murmur close to his ear.

“Jack, has the body from the cider barrel been identified as someone from Dr Crawford’s school?”

“Yes, love, it’s all very overwhelming,” he responded for the benefit of any audience who might also overhear them. “I’m sure the police will sort it all soon enough.” He pulled her in more closely with his other hand, patting her back in a soothing manner before lowering his tone. “It’s Professor Alistair Sinclair. Crawford and I just positively identified him.”

“Oh dear,” Fern suddenly exclaimed, giving Archibald leeway to pull her a bit closer. She leaned back just enough so that their hats slightly nudged the other’s and she could look into his eyes.

“We must get to the school as soon as possible, Jack,” she whispered urgently. “I have a hunch that
we need to search all the areas where the cider production takes place, as well as one particular teacher’s rooms”.

“Which teacher, Miss Fisher?”

“All the ones belonging to the one who has conveniently disappeared since Professor Sinclair’s body was discovered. Especially the ones where he teaches and practices music.”

The inspector’s eyes widened in instant comprehension just as he turned and called out for Alec’s attention before leaning forward to steal a quick kiss before reluctantly letting her go.

“Looks like it’s back to school for us, Mrs Jones.”
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

The detectives head back to the school to search for more clues and continue their investigations.

"Can you tell us more about Mr Hagen?" Superintendent Alec Fletcher asked his passenger after following Dr Crawford’s directions towards the Aston Clinton House school.

In the back seat, Fern and Archibald Jones held onto their hats as they were jostled about when Alec took the next corner at a speed that would normally have Archie’s alter ego cursing. In fact, the speed-loving lady detective gave her partner a sly look indicating as much to which he responded with a customary eye roll and glare. Suddenly, Alec veered around another bend that knocked Archie’s jaunty cap straight off adding to Jack’s mock chagrin and Phryne’s glee.

“Well, he came to us with the highest of references,” the headmaster replied, gripping his seat. “He’d studied in Vienna, and was performing worldwide until the war. Oh, turn left at the bend up ahead, if you please.

“Afterwards, Mr Hagen returned here to England and began teaching music. In fact, I believe he grew up here in Buckinghamshire, but also spent extensive time in Berlin, as well visiting family from his father’s side of the family.”

“Interesting,” Alec mulled out loud, just as Fern leaned forward to join the conversation.

“Did you ever meet Simone Wright, Dr Crawford? Or her friend, Madeleine Belanger?”

“Actually, yes, I have, Mrs Jones. Miss Miriam Rothschild initially introduced us to Mrs Wright, in fact. And, more recently, Mrs Wright has brought her friend, Miss Belanger, along.”

“You mean, they have all visited the school?” Archibald, too, leaned forward with his own query.

“Oh, yes! We often invited Mrs Wright to come lecture about coding and algorithms used by military intelligence for the older boys to learn and aspire to, especially with the RAF so close by.” The headmaster didn’t notice the significant looks being exchanged by their backseat passengers as he continued on.

“And an excellent career course it could be for one of them,” Alec agreed heartily as he patted his customary air force tie with gusto before returning his focus to the road. Coming from a more middle-class background, the former RAF pilot had found the tie lent him some extra credibility when his cases increasingly dealt with the upper crust world from which his wife hailed.

“Of course, Superintendent! We have been so fortunate to maintain such close ties to the RAF considering we both share a history of occupying the very same building for our distinct purposes. Did I mention to you already that Aston Clinton House had been used as one the air force’s bases during the war?”
Before the headmaster could regale them all on the topic, Alec drove through the estate’s large gates and cut the engine after stopping the car outside the main entrance. He quickly hopped out and opened the door to Phryne’s side gallantly before turning to the older gentleman who had just descended from the vehicle as well and turned to lead the way into the building.

“Could you be so kind as to allow me to make use of your telephone, Dr Crawford?” Alec enquired immediately. “I need to telephone for my partner, Detective Sergeant Tring.”

“Of course, please follow me to my study where you’ll be able to place your telephone call, Superintendent Fletcher.”

Given their recent and overly dramatic exit from the premises, Mr and Mr Jones opted to follow their friend and the headmaster at a discreet distance. For the second time, the both detectives felt the weight of being restrained by the ambiguity of their cover stories. The two lingered outside the study as they waited for Alec to place his call.

“We really need to be able to talk to Alec alone,” Jack lowered his voice to a tone he hoped wouldn’t carry.

“I agree, Jack. Hopefully we’ll be able to do so once Tom arrives. Maybe we’ll have the opportunity once we’re searching the school.”

“We need to do something before anyone else either goes missing or…” Jack began.

“Or ends up dead,” Phryne finished. Even without the opportunity, yet, to work through their clues, she could tell by the expression in Jack’s eyes that he suspected all of the mysterious events were all somehow uncannily linked. She told him as much with a significant lift of her perfectly arched eyebrow when they heard Alec and Dr Crawford stepping back into the corridor.

Once Alec was satisfied that his sergeant was being dispatched to the school as soon as possible (for Tom had been attempting to chase more loose ends regarding the matron’s case that day), the three guests followed Dr Crawford to the music wing of the school.

After the detectives sifted through what they could, it became obvious that the classrooms didn’t reveal any significant clues other than that Hagen had a real penchant for German composers alone. When questioned about this, the headmaster scratched his head in thought.

“Well, come to think of it, I suppose I never really gave the matter much thought since the composers he’s focused on are most of the great ones: Bach, Beethoven, and the like. I never stopped to consider if he ever varied the curriculum, and none of the students or their parents have mentioned anything either.”

“Would you be so kind as to take us to Mr Hagen’s suite or rooms please,” Alec requested politely, yet with just that right edge to his tone that usually had others agreeing with him.

“Of course, right this way,” Dr Crawford agreed before turning out of the room. “All of the faculty have their rooms in the former guest wing of the mansion. My family naturally occupies the former family’s wing.”

As they followed the older man down the hallway and towards the main flight of stairs, Mr and Mrs Jones were both doing their best to hide their growing agitation. With a quick glance at one another, Archibald spoke towards the headmaster’s back.

“Dr Crawford, I remember you had mentioned the possibility of their being tunnels beneath the house? We recently visited Miss Miriam Rothschild at Tring Park mansion who also mentioned
that there was a tunnel below that estate that the family had to close up for safety reasons. Do you think there could be any truth to the ones here as well?”

The headmaster paused briefly as the group began to ascend the staircase. He turned slightly with a quizzical expression on his face.

“There wasn’t anything like that on the updated blueprints or house designs I was given when we purchased the property a few years ago,” he informed them. “But, that’s not to say that older ones wouldn’t reveal the possibility. A lot of paperwork became shifted after the war when the Misses Rothschilds had lent the estate to the RAF and then ultimately sold it off. Given our current circumstance, however, you are all more than welcome to search wherever you would like, especially as no one else is here at the moment. I wouldn’t want for any of the pupils to discover there was any truth to their rumours!”

“Thank you, Dr Crawford,” Alec interjected at this point with a significant look at the Joneses. "I agree, and given the urgency of our timeframe, I recommend that we split up to continue our search for clues. I will continue on to Hagen’s rooms. Dr Crawford, could you then please return to the lower floor and wait for Sergeant Tring to arrive and direct him to me?"

“We can certainly go search below stairs,” Mr Jones volunteered as his wife nodded her agreement. “Perhaps you could also explain where we might find the area or outbuildings for your cider production, Sir?”

“Yes, of course, Mr Jones,” the headmaster quickly agreed. “Just go back down this staircase towards my study. At the end of that hallway, you will find the servants’ stairway. Naturally, if you follow them downward, that will lead you to the housekeeper’s room, the kitchens, as well as our in-house wine and cider cellars. From there, there will be a door that will lead to the cider fermentation area.”

“Excellent,” Alec thanked their host. “Why don’t we regroup on the hour in the main hall and debrief then,” the former chief inspector instructed as he glanced at his wristwatch.

He then continued to follow Dr Crawford up the stairs whilst Mr and Mrs Jones hurried back down the way that they had come.
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

The detectives make some surprising discoveries during their search below stairs...

Chapter Notes

I’d hoped to post this sooner, but seems the flu has chased me down (boo, hiss, boo)!
As always, thanks for all of your lovely comments and feedback...hope you like this next one!

Phryne couldn’t help clutching at Jack’s arm and crowding in a bit closer as the detectives reached the bottom of the servants’ stairwell. Her ability to see well in the dark also gave her the disadvantage of catching the glint of cobwebs as well. Given what she now knew of the school’s financial straits, she wasn’t as surprised to spot the rather dusty passageway that the two of them were moving along as quickly as they could.

“Afraid we’ll encounter a ghost or two, Miss Fisher?” he teased gently even as he moved his other hand to give hers a reassuring squeeze.

“Of course not,” she huffed haughtily. “Are you?”

“I believe I once told you that I’m only afraid...” He couldn’t help flashing her a quick lopsided smirk. “Of you!”

“Wise man,” she conceded as they passed the housekeeper’s room. In unspoken agreement, they continued onward after a cursory glance about until they approached a short archway through which they could feel the air cool suddenly. Phryne ducked her head through and caught a glimpse of a few rows of barrels. They had found the storage cellar.

As they entered the tightly-packed, stone room, Jack switched the electric light switch that revealed neatly stacked rows of various barrels. The smaller ones on their sides were labelled with different wine names. The majority of the larger wooden containers, however, were obviously for cider given the neatly painted letters stating as much beneath the school’s name and crest. There were about three rows lined along the right edge of the room.

Phryne instantly let go of Jack’s elbow and approached one particular row that had caught her eye.

“Jack, this one is slightly out of order.” He quickly stepped over to where she was standing and crouched down to look at the row’s alignment.

“You’re right, Miss Fisher.”

Phryne managed to inch her way through the row, stopping at one particular barrel that seemed slightly off balance in the far corner of the room. Kneeling down, she cocked her head to the side
suddenly towards the bottom of it.

“Jack! I can hear something! It’s beneath this barrel!’’

Again, he stopped what he was looking at and hastened over to his partner and helped tip it over slightly so she could continue examining the area. Sliding up her skirt, Phryne removed her dagger and stuck it beneath the barrel to reveal a hidden wooden door that had been painted a similar greyish hue to blend in with the flagstones. Jack quickly rolled the barrel over off the wood so that Phryne could pull it open. They both glanced down a narrow set of stone steps leading into unknown darkness below before glancing up at each other.

“Ladies first,” Jack quipped as he took over balancing the heavy wooden door, and watched as Miss Fisher blew him a quick kiss before manoeuvring her agile body through the narrow gap.

A sudden gust of air blew against her as she found her footing, causing her to pause and shield her eyes slightly as she heard Jack slip through the opening and then reach out to grasp her arms to balance them both on the cramped platform they both found themselves standing on. They both then cautiously began descending deeper into the unknown stairwell.

“I would have brought my larger hat pin if I knew we’d be encountering blustery winds today,” she commented with an extra tug on her cloche.

“I’m surprised you don’t have a spare one on your person somewhere,” the inspector’s voice rumbled through the narrow space behind her.

“That’s because my darling husband,” she purposefully enunciated, “was rushing me to get ready this morning.”

“Well, if I recall correctly, my love,” he countered. “You certainly weren’t rushing before the Northfields showed up to give us a lift. Especially after you invited me to join you in the bath.”

She turned to swat at him playfully. “Good thing then that Mrs Northfield had to wait an extra few minutes for her own pie to brown to perfection, wasn’t it?”

“Indeed,” Jack replied in his deadpan voice, just as he stumbled into his partner’s back when Phryne had halted suddenly. “Oof, a little warning would suffice next time, Miss Fisher! Have we reached the end of the steps then?”

“Do you hear that, Jack?” She knew he was pausing to listen when he didn’t respond.

“Is that the sound of water running? There must be some type of drainage system down here due to this being a floodplain area.” He found himself speaking to thin air when he realised Miss Fisher had already begun to sprint away from him.

“Keep up, Jack,” her voice echoed back at him in the confined tunnel that they had inevitably discovered.

“As always, Miss Fisher!” Jack slipped off Archie’s country cap and sped off after his partner.

*_* _*
The couple continued following the dark and dank tunnel until it led to another set of steps similar
to the ones they had descended, only these led upward. The unmistakable sound of running water
still surrounded them, however, even louder than before.

Jack touched Phryne’s shoulder and made a motion for them to follow the stairs upward. Instead of
continuing, however, she stopped again to tilt her head sideways and listened intently, prompting
Jack to do the same. Glancing about the tunnel quickly, the inspector suddenly noticed an odd
indentation in the wall to their right. Phryne obviously had as well when she immediately stepped
over towards it and pressed her fingers into the groove, which released some sort of clasp and
revealed a hidden door.

Swinging it open, she slipped through the gap with Jack on her heels as they both stepped under
another short archway similar to the one above. After a few steps, the two of them eventually found
themselves at the entrance to a large undercroft room from which the sound of rushing water
echoed loudly through the chamber’s darkness. As their eyes gradually adjusted to the gloom, Jack
reached out to grasp Phryne’s arms and placed his lips against her ear.

“What did you say?”

Baffled, Phryne turned to whisper back into his. “Nothing, Jack!”

“But, I thought I heard you say something.”

They both stared at one another enquiringly and swivelled their heads towards the far side of the
chamber when they could both hear a distinct, female-sounding voice calling out to them.

“Who is it? Who’s there?” It demanded in a raspy tone.

Whirling about, they stepped slowly further into the room only to realise the ground had begun to
slope downward, and that their shoes had become nearly submerged by water.

“Be careful,” Jack warned Phryne. “This is obviously where one of the estate’s old drainage system
has been built. And this floor seems to be getting steeper the further into the room that we go.”

“Please, help me, whoever you are!” The voice grew more plaintive.

His partner nodded before peering again into the distance. “Jack, there’s someone there! In the far
corner! Can you see?”

“Who are you?” He immediately bellowed out towards where Miss Fisher was still staring intently.
“Identify yourself please!” Phryne secretly thrilled at the authoritative edge to his deep tone that
she didn’t often get to hear.

“Simone,” the voice called back more strongly now. “My name is Simone Wright! Please, help
me! I’ve been trapped down here for weeks!”

“Oh my god, Jack!” Phryne immediately rushed forward into the water before Jack could react.
“We’ve got to get to her!”

He had no choice but to follow, immediately understanding the urgency involved at their
discovery, but not liking the unknown factors of the situation. “I wish we had a torch at least,” he
mumbled mainly to himself at this point.

“Keep calm, Simone,” Phryne spoke loudly and rapidly as she closed the gap to the other side of
the room, ignoring the rising water. “We’re working with Scotland Yard, and are here to help you.
Are you able to come towards us?"

“Oh, thank god!” Simone cried out in reply. “And no, I’ve been chained to one of the pipes.

Be careful, Phryne!” Jack couldn't help cautioning her again as he sloshed his way behind her.
“The water must have risen a lot more from the recent rainfall.”

In fact, the water had reached Phryne’s chest by this point, and swirled against Jack’s waist as they both pushed against the water’s pressure, and fought to get closer.

Eventually, they could both saw a woman huddled on top of a wooden barrel with her knees drawn up and both her hands bound by irons above her to a pipe in the wall. Phryne reached her first and lifted a hand to feel the woman’s hand on instinct. Thankfully, she didn’t seem to feel feverish. Miss Fisher’s dormant medical training suddenly flared up again, reminding her that the greyish pallor of the Frenchwoman’s skin combined with the bruising and bleeding at her wrists from where the irons had cut into her as she had tried to free herself meant she wasn’t out of danger.

“I’m Phryne Fisher, lady detective,” she quickly introduced herself loudly over the water’s noise. “This is my partner, Detective Inspector Jack Robinson.”

Jack greeted their newly discovered kidnapping victim before asking permission to examine the bonds at her wrists as best as he could see. “These are military grade, which means they’ll be a lot more difficult to undo without the exact key.”

“Perhaps,” Phryne quipped as she quickly gripped the side of the barrel as Simone shifted over. “Quick, give me a boost, Jack! I’ll need you to help steady me so I can reach her wrists better.”

“Glad to know you at least had time to bring along your lock pick, Miss Fisher,” Jack couldn’t help teasing as he moved over to hoist her up by the waist until she could find a foothold on the edge of the barrel’s top. “Apologies for crowding your space, Mrs Wright,” he added gallantly.

“Not at all, Inspector,” Simone managed a small smile despite her relief that someone had finally come to her aid. Despite her long-term confinement, she knew she never could have dreamed up such a fascinating pair of rescuers, so they had to be real. “Do forgive my inquisitiveness, but you both sound like you hail from Australia, if I’m not mistaken?”

“Yes, very good, Mrs Wright. Could you please move your arms towards me?” Phryne requested. “I may have the eyes of a fox, but our current environs and this noise are not helping!”

Simone tried to kneel so she could drag her arms along the pipe closer to where Phryne was balanced. Jack held onto the barrel to help stabilise the two women.

“We are from Melbourne,” Jack informed Simone. “And, we’re very relieved to have found you!”

“Got it!” Phryne shouted triumphantly as she liberated Simone’s left hand. “Hang on, I think I’ve figured it out so I can get the second one off more quickly.”

Before she could even work the lock pick into the complicated fastenings, however, the unmistakable sound of a bullet whizzed past her head and ricocheted off the pipe.

“Get down!” Jack shouted.

The inspector lunged to the side, grabbing hold of Miss Fisher by the waist before the two of them plunged sideways, and straight into the water with a loud splash.
The last thing either heard before they went under was Simone Wright screaming loudly.
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

After emerging from their plunge into the freezing water, Phryne and Jack discover a lot more than just the mysterious shooter's identity...

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all of your warm-hearted thoughts and messages for my full recovery! I am back and at it again, but still taking it slightly easy, and excited to bring you this chapter that I worked extra hard on. Let me know what you think since I have been trying to hone my ability to portray action-packed scenes!

Despite the shock to their systems as a result of the water’s icy temperatures, both detectives easily found their footing and emerged from their unexpectedly enforced baptism. The inspector was still gripping Phryne tightly in his arms, whilst she was still gripping her lock pick, and rapidly brushing the hair out of her eyes as she briefly lamented the loss of her cloche.

Both gasped heavily for air as Jack immediately stepped out in front of Phryne and Simone, trying to shield them whilst wincing against the glare of the intruder’s torch light. Phryne quickly skimmed her eyes to check on Simone’s well-being. She knew better than to attempt any sudden moves at the moment as she slowly turned towards the other woman.

Thankfully, the cryptographer was undoubtedly still alive since she was gesticulating wildly with her one freed arm. In fact, the Frenchwoman’s angry tones pierced through the rumble of overflowing water towards a figure standing in the archway.

“You’ll never get away with this!” She adamantly declared. “We’ve already found too much information against you and your insidious plot!”

“Shut up, you vermin bitch,” Phryne and Jack locked gazes as they instantly recognised the voice that belonged to the missing music teacher, Mr Hagen. “The plan will still continue despite all of your blasted meddling!” He let out another string of foul curses at them.

“Tsk tsk, I recommend you keep to expressing yourself through the medium of music, Mr Hagen,” Phryne taunted him despite Jack’s attempt to shake his head to dissuade her.

“And, that goes for the two of you as well,” Hagen retorted as he then pointed his light and gun towards the detectives. “Poking your noses around where you don’t belong! And since I couldn’t pin you for Fiona Quincy’s murder, I’ll simply have to ship you off to my smuggling contacts… and enjoy making more of a tidy profit whilst doing so!”

“Mrs Wright is correct,” Jack interrupted waringly in the tone that had quaked the knees of many a criminal, both petty and mastermind. “Scotland Yard has more than enough evidence to put you away for good, including now your own admission to being involved in the smuggling ring and
Matron Quincy’s murder. There’s no way out, so put the gun down…now!”

Whilst her partner faced off the Nazi sympathiser, Miss Fisher had begun to edge over towards Simone. Slowly, she reached up to again attempt to free the poor woman from the remaining bond.

“I beg to differ,” Hagen argued defiantly. “Seeing how I’m the one holding the gun. And, my patience has had quite enough of your meddling!” The man swivelled his gun towards Phryne, who refused to stop freeing Simone.

“Nooo!” Jack shouted as he dove again towards Miss Fisher soon as he realised Hagen’s intent. The bullet whizzed past Phryne's ear as the two detectives once again crashed into the frigid waters. Again, Simone shouted for Hagen to stop.

“Shut up, bitch!” The teacher bellowed releasing a warning shot close to the woman’s head that instantly ceased her cries. “Unfortunately, I need to ensure you're not marked in order to guarantee me the best price from my contacts. I highly doubt being riddled with holes would suffice. But, don’t tempt me!”

After issuing the threat, the crazed man continued to train his weapon towards the last spot where the detectives had disappeared into the water.

“These two are still liabilities, however. Although, the skirt should still fetch a nice price regardless. I think we can dispense with the gentleman, however.” He prepared to squeeze the trigger whilst aiming the weapon into the murky depths.

“Stop it, Hagen!” Simone cried out just as Phryne and Jack once again surfaced through the swirling water.

Suddenly, a blur of motion exploded from the archway behind Hagen, slamming into him at full force and knocking him face first into the shallower water at their feet. Given their speedy momentum, the other person toppled over onto Hagen’s back.

“Maddie!” Simone and Phryne called out when the figure pulled herself upright.

Without hesitation, Jack began to make his way over towards their former contact and the fallen madman as Phryne resumed her frantic attempts to free Simone from her final bond.


“I had to, Simone,” Madeleine quickly explained as she accepted the inspector’s assistance gratefully as he quickly helped the woman back to her feet. “Thank you, Mr Jones, although I’ve long suspected that’s not your real name!”

Jack nodded and held out his hand again. “Detective Inspector Robinson from the Victorian Police Force, Miss Belanger. And, you’ve already met my partner, Miss Phryne Fisher.” The lady detective gave a little wave before returning to her task. “As you already know, we’re here assisting the Yard on this case.”

Jack then crouched down to lift Hagen’s upper torso out of the water. The man had obviously banged his face hard against the stone floor given the amount of blood pouring from his nose and a deep cut in his forehead. Maddie quickly helped the inspector drag the man away from the water’s edge, and propped him up against the nearest wall. Jack retrieved his soggy handkerchief to attempt to staunch the teacher’s bleeding. Madeleine watched Jack briefly before taking over with her own dry one, allowing the inspector to then return quickly to the place where Hagen had fallen to search
for his missing gun.

Maddie then responded to her friend's query as as she continued to mop up Hagen’s wounds.

“I left France as soon as you stopped responding to my messages, Simone,” she explained. “But, how could you ask why, ma chère? Don’t you know the truth yet? I found out when those Nazi bastards captured and tortured me into working for them! They tried to sell me to the smuggling ring’s highest bidder until I told them I’d work as a double agent for them.”

“Oh, Maddie!” Simone cried out to her friend just as Phryne managed to free her at last. “I’m so, so sorry!” With the lady detective’s support, the cryptographer climbed off of her wooden prison and began to wade on wobbly limbs towards her friend.

“But, you know I wouldn’t have turned on you, or what we stood for during the war!” Madeleine exclaimed as she began making her way through the flooded room. “Especially not after I discovered that we’re sisters!”

“Mon Dieu, what did you say?” Simone stopped and gasped suddenly. Phryne paused as well since she was supporting the other woman with an arm about her waist.

“Well, half-sister, actually! Oh, Simone, didn’t you know? It’s all true!” The other woman had reached Simone and Miss Fisher, and she exuberantly threw her arms around the other Frenchwoman. Even in her weakened state, Simone clung onto her friend and newly-discovered sister like an anchor.

“After I arrived and couldn’t find you, I went to Tring Park. And, that was when I saw Lord Rothschild’s peacocks roaming his estate. Simone, I knew it was a sign of confirmation then, ma soeur, for my own maman used to have a love for peacocks from her days of assisting my grandparents at the zoo in Lyons.”

“Which is why you chose it as your personal calling card, so to speak,” Phryne couldn’t help interjecting. “I have it on very good authority that peacock feathers are the symbol for guidance, protection, or watchfulness,” she added knowingly as she continued to make her way alongside the other women towards Jack.

The inspector gave her an enquiring look just as he successfully fished out the missing weapon. Phryne smiled and nodded in response to his unspoken question that she was all right despite being dunked twice in freezing waters.

“You did confirm that these were military grade, correct, Inspector?”

He rewarded her with one of his rare outright grins as Phryne dangled the metal manacles before him from the outstretched tip of her index finger. Accepting them with a grateful nod, Jack turned to quickly secure their still unconscious criminal suspect’s arms behind him. The inspector then stood up and kept the revolver trained on the still unconscious criminal

“When I was captured, the Nazis showed me their meticulous records indicating Maman’s connection to your family,” Madeleine continued to explain as she helped Simone lean against the wall momentarily to catch her breathe. She then quickly removed her coat and draped it around her sister's shivering frame trying to help restore some warmth.

“She was a Rothschild, albeit an illegitimate one. But that was enough for them to condemn me as well, for this connection to a Jewish bloodline.” She stopped with a grim expression that told the others all they needed to know about what she had endured to be there with them that moment.
“I know that the Nazis are especially threatened by my, I mean, our rich, Jewish relatives and their noble connections in Austria,” Simone nodded. “I know that’s why they enlisted Hagen, for his supremacist leanings and connections to the so-called ‘Fatherland.’ I only befriended him and made connections with the faculty here so I could try to gather more intelligence on the German’s stronghold here in England.”

“As did I,” Maddie concurred. “Whilst I tried to find you. But, I was nearly too late!” Tears brimmed from her eyes as both women again turned into one another’s embrace and allowed the anxiety from their ordeal to overflow now that they had been reunited.

“I'm loathe to rush your reunion, ladies,” Phryne began, “but I highly recommend that we all adjourn to a much warmer climate, and get out of our wet things as soon as possible!” She quickly sent Jack a quick yet seductive wink with her comment, earning one of his affectionate, exasperated eye rolls in return.

Everyone agreed just as loud shouts echoed from the tunnel passage outside of the undercroft.

“Jack! Miss Fisher! Are you down here?” Alec’s voice echoed loudly through the passage.

“Yes, Alec!” Jack replied firmly in reply. “We’re both in here! And, we’ve found Simone! And Madeleine!”

“Great Scott! Good work!”

Suddenly, several torchlight beams cut through the gloom, momentarily blinding its current occupants. Within seconds, Alec and Tom’s welcomed figures rushed through the archway and stopped to size up the situation.

“Well, it was actually Miss Belanger who saved the day,” Jack gestured for the other policemen to come assist him with the traitorous teacher as he quickly briefed them on Hagen’s threats and claims. Tom pulled out his own gun as Alec and Jack bent down to hoist the suspect up between them.

Phryne and Madeleine began to assist Simone to her feet again and were turning towards the archway’s entrance.

Suddenly, the unmistakable sounds of another set of heavy footsteps rushed down the tunnel towards the undercroft.

“Simone!” The frantic shout reverberated throughout the already noisy chamber.

Then, Alfred Wren materialised before them as he lowered his torch, and was instantly caught in the beams of Alec’s and Tom’s torchlights as everyone’s eyes whipped towards the source of the commotion.

“Mon Dieu!” Simone gasped sharply, her eyes widening again in utter disbelief. “It can't be!”

“It's me, Simone!”

“Arthur ?!”

The architect quickly rushed forward to catch his shocked wife before she could topple over.
Chapter Summary

More of the mysterious happenings unravel and the puzzle pieces slowly begin to come together following Simone's dramatic rescue...

Madeleine Belanger carefully passed the cup of tea over to her sister (it still felt so gloriously strange to use that term!) as her brother-in-law (even stranger still to use that term for the very first time!) supported Simone into a better position on the pale chaise to drink the hot liquid. She watched in concern until she saw her severely dehydrated sister easily manage to drain the little china cup, and eagerly complied when Simone lifted the empty cup and asked for more.

“Excellent, Mrs Wright!” came Mrs Jones’ crisp voice, or actually, Miss Fisher’s, Maddie quickly corrected herself. “Now let’s see if you can manage a little biscuit.” She was standing slightly to the side of the little group with her hands planted on her hips.

Currently, the lady detective was exuding an elegant authority in spite of her mismatched outfit consisting of one of the infirmary’s gowns hidden beneath one of the matron’s spare nursing aprons. Miss Fisher had discovered the lot and changed into them to escape the chill of her other soaking outfit following a brief foray to the infirmary after they and the rest of the rescuers had emerged from the school’s tunnels. Whilst the rest of the men had hurried off with their suspect with a promise to send back assistance as soon as possible, Miss Fisher had insisted that Alfred (Arthur!) take Simone and Madeleine to the Yellow Room so she could hunt for supplies and a change of clothing. Upon her return, the detective had pounced on her sister with a flurry of medical supplies after insisting that both Frenchwomen change into the spare gowns she had also brought along.

“I know these gowns are far from being a la mode, ladies,” she had pointed out earlier as she prepared to wrap Simone’s second wrist with several bandages. “However, they are much more desirable than coming down with pneumonia later.”

She had then regaled them all with a few stories from her experiences driving an ambulance during the war how she’d seen one too many soldiers or other nurses go down due to cold or wet conditions. Even Arthur then chimed in with a few similar stories of his own from his few forays to the frontlines as he and Maddie helped Miss Fisher tend to Simone.

Madeleine would always be indescribably grateful to this remarkable woman and her equally impressive partner for being the ones to finally figure out where to find and free her sister. But what would always really stay with her would be these moments immediately after when Phryne Fisher tenderly tended her patient whilst clothed in a murdered woman’s uniform and still managing to make them all feel perfectly at ease in someone else’s borrowed parlour room. It was as though they were simply visiting with her at any ordinary afternoon tea rendezvous, instead of recovering from the aftermath of having escaped the toxic plottings of an evil, Nazi sympathizer.

Even so, Madeleine noted the slight tension in the other woman’s bearing and what Maddie could only describe as a masked pain reflected in her eyes during those rare moments when Miss Fisher
was not in motion or actively taking part in the conversation. Perhaps, she had also sustained some injury during the entire ordeal in the undercroft? The Frenchwoman made a point of asking their unofficial hostess about it when she caught another glimpse of the lady detective deliberately shielding her haunted expression after Maddie had Simone had been sharing a few stories from their own war experiences for Arthur and Phryne's benefit.

“I’m perfectly all right, Maddie, thank you for asking,” Phryne had been quick to reassure her. “Why don’t I go and thank the housekeeper and check in with Mrs Crawford and her daughters whilst you all brief Mrs Fletcher on the situation over these delightful sandwiches before the police return to take our statements!”

After entrusting Sergeant Tring and Jack to transport and transfer George Hagen into the custody of the Chief Constable at the local station, Alec had had the foresight to arrange for Dr Crawford to retrieve his family when the superintendent had returned to fetch his own wife and children from what was left of the fete. The Chief Constable had also sent several of his local constables to help transport several of the school’s staff members, including the housekeeper and the maid, after they had finished giving their statements. Once back at the school, the two women had thrown themselves into quickly making up and serving refreshments, more than eager to help assist the police with the ongoing investigation taking place there. Jenny, the maid, had then eagerly agreed to spend time with the Fletcher children in the library so their mother could go assist her friend, Miss Fisher, in the Yellow Room.

Madeleine took an instant liking to Daisy Fletcher who, like her friend, easily won everyone’s affections, and had them trading more stories after another cuppa tea or two. In fact, the friendly atmosphere continued even after Superintendent Fletcher returned to take everyone’s statements accompanied by a dashing, uniformed officer by his side. Maddie was struck by how all manner of gloom was instantly dispelled from Miss Fisher’s entire demeanour once she spotted the men in the doorway, and rose to welcome them warmly.

“Welcome back, Superintendent and Inspector! Please come join us first for some refreshments before we begin!” She then laced her hand through Inspector Robinson’s proffered arm, and swept an openly hungry and pleased look over his recently borrowed attire as he replied with a glimmer of a half smile and quirk of his eyebrows at her own appearance before allowing her to lead him back towards the rest of the group.

Once again, Maddie found herself marvelling over the couple’s innate ease and sense of connection with the other as she watched Miss Fisher pile a plate with a mound of sandwiches, fruits and cake before passing it to her partner. They were each fascinating to observe on their own, but when they were together, well, their unique combination once again made the cryptographer feel as though she had been presented with an extraordinary set of codes.

“Thank you, my dear,” the superintendent responded gratefully to the similarly laden plate his wife had just passed to him as he settled into a winged-back chair covered in a material that resembled an overcooked cheese fondue. “Would you mind taking notes for us, Daisy, as it could be awhile before Tom can return?”

Thus, with their bodies being replenished by the excellent food and their minds being queried and challenged by well-honed questions and information, more of the mysterious case fell into place of this intriguing and deadly puzzle.

Over the last year or so, George Hagen had become particularly friendly with both Miriam Rothschild and her cousin, Simone Wright. Telling them that he was a budding cryptographer, the music teacher had claimed that he wanted to improve on his own skills as well as to learn more
about their respective coding connections. He had even arranged for the two to come give talks at the school. But, now they knew that he had secretly hated them for their Jewish background and what he felt was their family’s undeserved wealth.

“Sergeant Tring and I were able to glean a lot more information from Hagen to support this theory based on our initial interrogation of the suspect himself just now at Aylesbury Station,” Inspector Robinson had filled them in on what he was able to share to the entire group.

Hagen had started to use his passable coding skills to learn some basic British intelligence gleaned from his connections at RAF Halton, and its connection with Aston Clinton House when it was used by the British military. Eventually, he was able to begin passing some of this intelligence to several contacts in Germany who were members of a popular and fast growing nationalist movement simply known as the “Nazi Party.”

The party was beginning to notice that the ICPC and Scotland Yard were keeping tabs on their own activity including a lucrative human smuggling ring, so they had tracked down Simone’s friend, Madeleine Belanger in France and tortured her for information. After revealing her familial connection to her friend and half-sister, Simone de Rothschild Wright, the enemy had threatened to kill Simone if she didn’t go to England to spy on her sister and find out more information that could be used to lure away the international police network.

“I tried to warn Simone as much as I could before they sent me here” Maddie explained with her eyes focused dully on her feet and the patterns of the bright rug beneath her shoes. “Which was why I decided to use elements of code that only Simone would be able to understand made up her husband’s name. I tried to pass as much information along to her as I could so she could alert the British about the sympathizer and the smuggling ring.”

“Well, it certainly caught my attention,” Simone agreed. “I started to notice and intercept the messages and was unravelling the details about the smuggling ring.”

“This was around the time when the Nazis had instructed Hagen to begin learning more about what he could from Miss Rothschild and Mrs Wright,” the inspector had interjected. “They had also told him to work with Miss Belanger whom they were sending over to help him encode his messages better once she arrived.”

Maddie couldn’t help hanging her head down in shame at the inspector’s words. She then looked up gratefully at her sister who had reached over to squeeze her hand. The cryptographer again couldn’t help noticing Miss Fisher staring intently at the two before the inspector had placed his hand on her knee.

“But, I immediately became suspicious of Hagen and his even friendlier manner around this time,” Simone told them. “Then, I soon became consumed with my plans to leave the country and go search for my husband in France.” Now, it was her sister’s turn to look downward before Simone quickly smiled and looked up at the squeeze her husband gave her as he continued keeping her ensconced in the shelter of his arm about her shoulders.

“That was when Hagen broke into my home and abducted me whilst I slept,” Simone recounted slowly. “He had drugged me and then hid me down in that horrid tunnel beneath the school. When I woke up, he had already chained me to the pipe and told me how he had discovered the underground chamber using hidden schematics of the mansion left over in the RAF archives he had discovered.”

“I then arrived only to find that Simone was gone. I was forced to comply and pretend to work with Hagen as I tried to figure out what was going on,” Maddie took over the narrative. “But, I knew
that he felt threatened by my decoding skills; he was always second guessing my information since there was simply no way he could ever reach my level. I knew though, that this meant he could never completely trust me.

“Thus, it was such a coincidence that day when Miss Fisher and Inspector Robinson showed up at the school here when they did,” Maddie quickly glanced over at the detectives. Phryne smiled and Jack nodded for her to continue. “I was scheduled to pass more information to Hagen that I had just placed into the ‘contact’ book we were using to pass codes to the other. We kept it in the library.

“But then, Hagen’s colleague, Professor Sinclair had entered the library then. He had made plans to meet Matron Quincy there, and had started looking for a book when he spotted me in the corner,” Maddie paused and took another sip of her tea. “And then he tried to…to kiss me. So, I quickly slipped the paper bird with my coded information into the book that I had been reading whilst I waited for Hagen.

“But, you dropped it when Sinclair furthered his advances on you,” Miss Fisher came to her aid, now a steely look loomed in her eyes.

“Yes,” Maddie confirmed as she felt her cheeks grow red. “Then, Matron Quincy appeared just as Sinclair was trying to kiss…and disrobe me in the library.” She closed her eyes and fought to get over her embarrassment.

“It was not your fault, Miss Belanger,” Inspector Robinson reassured her as everyone around her nodded their agreement. “What Sinclair did was despicable and wrong.”

“I know, but it is still difficult to describe,” Maddie agreed. “I had slapped him in the face by that point, but it didn’t matter. The matron became fiercely jealous and enraged regardless. They argued right in front of me, and then she threatened to tell the police about how she thought he and I were up to no good. She told us that she always spied me here at the school, leaving things in secret.”

“She never realised that your messages were meant for Hagen, and not Sinclair,” Miss Fisher again concluded.

“Yes,” the inspector agreed. “Hagen admitted that he had arrived at the library during that point, but had hidden outside listening to the exchange. After Matron Quincy left the library and returned to the surgery, Hagen apparently followed her stabbed her with the syringe…”

“Leaving her on the cot to bleed out whilst he went to sets it up to frame me,” Miss Fisher finished in an icy tone as her partner once again slipped a reassuring hand over to grasp her hand this time. The lady detective held on and didn’t let go.

“That was when I left my next message for Mr and Mrs Jones to meet me again,” Maddie resumed. “But, before I could, my contacts who were part of the French Resistance sent word to me, and so, I needed to go meet with them immediately. I had to journey into London, however, and didn’t have time to leave word.” She looked apologetically over at the Australian detectives.

“We can go into more detail about that meeting during a follow-up interview, Miss Belanger,” Alec Fletcher added at this point. “So, what happened next?”

Jack Robinson carried on the tale. “At this point, Hagen later realised that the information that Miss Belanger was supposed to leave him is missing, so he goes to confront her, but she’s gone.

“So he ransacks her cottage,” Phryne Fisher interrupted as she worked out the next piece of the
puzzle. “And then goes to Primrose Cottage to search and steal Jack’s notes, not realising that we had both been released, albeit under ‘house arrest.’ But, he had come prepared with a pair of Maddie’s boots so he could pin the break in on her anyway.”

“Who killed Professor Sinclair then?” Daisy Fletcher spoke up as she had finished adding the last comments to her notebook. “Was it also Hagen?”

“We had a suspicion that everything was linked somehow,” the Inspector Robinson confirmed. “Apparently, Hagen was later confronted by Sinclair, who had become spooked by Scotland Yard’s subsequent questioning.

“This morning, Sinclair had confronted Hagen when the two had been assisting with loading up some of the cider to take over to the fete. Sinclair said that he had witnessed how Hagen had quickly left the surgery, and after he had found Matron Quincy’s body, the other teacher had put things together.

“He then attempted to blackmail Hagen, by demanding money, otherwise, he would go to the police with everything. Hagen informed us that they had continued to fight until Hagen managed to subdue Sinclair with the lid of the cider barrel and then strangled him with a spare violin string. Hagen then hid Sinclair’s body in one of the cider barrels.”

“And he might have gotten away with it, had the tug-of-war not concluded in the way that it had,” Superintendent Fletcher shook his head at the outcome of their combined cases.

“Seriously puts one off of cider for life,” Miss Fisher quipped. “Good thing, I’m much more partial to champagne…or a good malt whisky.”

“Speaking of drinks,” Alec Fletcher concluded. “Why don’t we take a break there for now before taking up the rest of the interviews with what happened when we reached the school.”

Madeleine glanced around the room then before pausing to secretly observe the loaded expression between Miss Fisher and Inspector Robinson as the two of them toasted each other with their tea cups. She was still curious about the unmistakable bond between the two that stayed with her from their first meeting. It was more than just their physical chemistry, and filled with what she could only describe loosely as a solid combination of deep friendship, respect, and yes, love.

Even though they were no longer Mr and Mrs Jones, and no longer needed her as a contact, Maddie hoped they would still be willing to fulfill their rendezvous at The Bell with her after everything was wrapped up for the case. They represented an enigma with layers of complex meaning that she was more than eager to try to decipher.
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

The detectives finally discover the truth behind the mysterious disappearance (and reappearance) of Arthur Wright...and Jack finds out that Scottish reels aren't so bad.

Chapter Notes

I can hardly believe that we are nearing the end of what began as an overly-sentimental blurb I had written to deal with all the feels that overwhelmed me at the end of S3. Huge thanks again to the wonderful @comeaftermejackrobinson for encouraging me to not only post this blurb, but who has motivated me to turn it into my longest fic story to date!

As always, thanks for joining me on this fic adventure and keeping me going with your wonderful comments! Let me know what you think of this one!

P.S. Don't worry, there's still an epilogue to come because what MFMM tale could ever be complete without some version of Phrack's nightcap?

A palpable sense of disbelief mingled with apprehension hung suspended in contrast to the cheery tones of the Yellow Room as its occupants all felt more like they were the audience of a harrowing play instead of participants in a police interview. Although, sometimes, that was exactly how certain interviews and interrogations ended up feeling like, thought Inspector Jack Robinson wryly. In fact, in his experience, the evidence of man’s inhumanity to man often tragically outdid any type of entertainment he had come across.

But, as he had only recently been reminded thankfully, the inspector was also someone who had learned to cherish the fact that hope and beauty still existed even in the midst of gruesome reality. He quickly returned the strong squeeze of his partner’s hand, who was the very living personification of this, as they both continued to listen raptly to the tale being told by Arthur Wright, also known as Alfred Wren.

Captain Arthur Wright had been captured and severely tortured during a mission that had gone wrong back when he had been an intelligence officer during the Great War. Despite surviving one particularly prolonged procedure, Arthur instead descended into a coma from his extensive physiological as well as psychological injuries just before the armistice was declared in 1918. Since his identification had been retained due to his undercover work and he was unable to respond due to his comatose state, Arthur had been sent to Switzerland to recover. After several months, he began responding to the top-rate treatment, and woke up. His physicians’ and carers’ joy was short-lived, however, when they discovered that their patient had an acute case of amnesia.

“At this point, I could only remember that my name might have started with the letter ‘A,’” Arthur
explained. “On top of it all, I could only recall the surname of ‘Wren,’ which I eventually learned was my mother’s maiden name.”

Without any other type of identification, those in charge, had then decided to send him to Canada with several other recovered troopers. Having adopted the name of “Alfred Wren,” by this point, the mysterious former soldier had then thrown himself into rebuilding his life in Toronto over the past decade.

“People soon learned that I had a knack for exceptional details as well as drawing,” he continued. “I was also completely fluent in French, which opened opportunities for me to train as an architect. I quickly made my mark in an old, French-Canadian architectural firm that was affiliated with a French firm in Montreal as well as in Paris.”

All was well until one day, Alfred had a business meeting with some clients who had been visiting all the way from Melbourne. That night, the architect was startled awake from an exceptionally vivid dream in which he had been an Australian intelligence officer during the war. The images and sensations from the dream remained with him even after the morning dawned.

Gradually, other little experiences or moments continued to trigger even more dreams leaving him exhausted. After three days of frantic insomnia, Alfred gave in and made an appointment with the neurologist who had tended to him when he had first arrived in the country. The expert predicted that whatever had been causing his amnesia was beginning to erode, and informed his patient that he was actually regaining memories whilst he slept.

“One morning, I woke up and realised that my name was, in fact, Arthur Wright. And, more importantly, I suddenly recalled that I had been married to an incredible woman named Simone de Rothschild.”

Simone, who had already been crying silently as she listened to her husband recount his story, wept openly now at this statement, prompting a few others in the room to also wipe away a few tears.

Once he regained his cryptography skills, Arthur immediately wanted to contact Simone. But, he had no idea where she was since the last time he had known her was in France. After failing to reach her by any of her previous telephone numbers and receiving no replies to his letters, Arthur resorted to one last method of contact. He contacted some of his former military intelligence friends, and began to send out encrypted messages using a specialised code that he and his wife had developed during the early days of their courtship.

“I had to find out if she was still alive! And then let her know that I was alive!”

And that was when he began to receive her replies! She was alive, and living in England. She wanted to find him! The two began to make arrangements for their grand reunion in France.

“We thought it would be more romantic to meet where it all began,” Simone admitted shyly with a big sniff. “Arthur had booked his passage to England, where we would meet up in Southampton and then continue from there to Paris.”

But, around the same time, the two of them had also stumbled on key intelligence about a human trafficking ring. Together, they picked up signals by someone using Arthur’s code name about a smuggling branch in Australia that had recently been a hunt down and that international police and officers had begun to pick up on their messages.

No one seemed to notice the pointed glances between the two Australian detectives at this point in the story.
Baffled as to how someone could know Arthur's old codename, the two cryptographers, also began to notice some more sophisticated messages emerging from France alerting the network about a new ring that was smuggling young British and European girls of Jewish descent. There was a premium on them from German buyers, especially because the majority of them came from wealthy families who had begun to unwittingly agree to send their daughters off to an exclusive conservatoire music school in Vienna. Or so they thought.

“These messages were coming from my contacts with the former French Resistance,” Madeleine explained. “I was being monitored closely by the Nazis by this point, and was about to be shipped to England by them. So, I remembered Arthur and Simone’s old code language and I used it to get her attention. But, now, as you know, by the time I arrived, she had already disappeared. So, I continued alone and discovered more about this nefarious plot, which was obviously masterminded by someone who had access to many of these girls by way of posing as a highly-recommended private music tutor.”

“Hagen,” Alec and Jack both growled out simultaneously.

“After I arrived in England, and Simone failed to show up to meet me,” Arthur resumed. “I knew that something had gone wrong. So, I decided to journey here to Aston Clinton to find out her whereabouts, pretending to be a tourist on the trail of my former ancestor's great work. And the rest, as the saying goes, is now history in the making.”

“What will you both do now?” Phryne asked them with genuine interest.

“We’ve decided to go to Australia,” Simone told them happily. “It seems like the ideal place where we can both build new memories together and make up for lost time.”

“Wonderful choice,” the lady detective affirmed. “You must definitely look us up whenever you arrive in Melbourne!” Her smile was infectious as the cryptographers readily agreed before they slipped back into a world that only contained the two of them.

“And what about you, Madeleine?” Daisy leaned over to ask the other Frenchwoman who had remained rather pensive throughout Arthur’s story. “What will you do now?”

“Well, I think that in spite of what has happened since my arrival, this charming country has begun to grow on me,” Maddie began rather cryptically. “I think I may take Scotland Yard and the British Home Office up on a position they have offered me to lead a new cryptographic division in London.”

“We wish you well and all the best on this endeavour, Miss Belanger,” Inspector Robinson congratulated her. “I think we will rest much easier knowing someone of your expertise will be at the helm to aid us in warding off further international intrigues.”

“That’s indeed marvellous,” Daisy joined in. “I look forward to getting to know you better! You simply must come to tea soon in Hampstead. I simply will not take no for an answer!”

“Only if you will agree to join me now,” Maddie responded with a smile. “Once Superintendent Fletcher has completed his work, of course, for dinner at The Bell Inn tonight! In fact, you all must come!”

In the end, that was how Inspector Jack Robinson ended up experiencing his earlier sentiment that no matter how bleak life could get, even after enduring the most hellish of tortures and combating the worst of humanity’s capacity for evil, there was still so much about it to celebrate.
And, the look in his Miss Fisher’s eyes would always remind him of this as he spun her away from him, and then pulled her back into his arms again as the two of them wove their way through a merry queue of fellow dancers. The tinkle of her laughter as she swept about the dance floor in her borrowed nurse’s outfit fell upon him like the rain to a parched land.

Yes, the normally reserved inspector could never have dreamed when he first set out on his hare-brained adventure to chase after a certain lady detective that he would eventually find himself engaging in a Scottish reel in the middle of a very public inn. What was more, he never expected to be doing so in the middle of the English countryside surrounded by many cider-filled villagers who wouldn’t allow a murderer to taint the end of their Apple Day fete.

No, it was far from the harrowing experience he might have expected it to be once upon a time.
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Phryne and Jack unwind following the end of this complex case and discuss their next adventures...oh, and Archie remembers to give Fern his lesson on the wonders of fungi.

Chapter Notes

Since I’ve already written my long spiel when I posted the penultimate chapter yesterday, I must once again thank you all for joining me on Jack’s journey once he decided to go after his Miss Fisher. It was so much fun being able to incorporate so much of the history of this beautiful pocket of England where I lived when I first arrived here well over a decade ago.

Thank you for your ongoing lovely and encouraging feedback that has helped me to rediscover my long-dormant love (and dare I say finesse?) for creative writing.

And as ever, I must give my heartfelt thanks and massive kudos to my fellow, Phrack writing partner-in-crime-solving, Dai (@comeaftermejackrobinson)! Who knew that I had it in me to produce all this? Well, she certainly did!

We both hope you continue to enjoy the adventures that we both dream up for our fave detecting duo!

The sound of intermittent creaking floated through the open kitchen window of Primrose Cottage beckoning to its lone occupant who had just finished brewing a pot of tea to go investigate. At least she now knew where her partner had disappeared to after a happy, yet tired Mr and Mrs Northfield had dropped them off following the village’s continuation of its fete at the pub.

Pouring out the brown liquid into two china cups, Phryne added a spot of milk and lemon to hers before carefully picking up the plain one. Nudging her foot through the slightly opened back door, she balanced the tea like an expert hostess as she made her way slowly down the stone pathway towards the tree swing in the far corner. Even without the smattering of moonlight and the glow of the kitchen’s lights warmly shining through the evening’s darkness, Miss Fisher experienced no issues navigating her way through the garden. Besides, she could always find her way towards Jack Robinson, no matter what the environment.

He had grown more quiet than usual towards the end of the evening’s frolicking, which the lady detective knew had more to do with something other than the exhaustion of a long day or the calm following the exhilaration of closing another complex case. She also knew that the inspector would share his thoughts with her in due course when he was ready.

In spite of her avant garde approach to life, Phryne liked to respect others’ spaces, both physically and emotionally. However, she had always had no qualms about intentionally invading the physical
aspects of Inspector Robinson’s personal space, which she promptly demonstrated by squeezing herself next to him on the less than spacious swinging bench. Jack simply responded with one of his trademark quarter smiles before accepting his cup of tea with one hand whilst slipping his other arm around the waist of his newly acquired swing companion.

“How do you know, I’m actually beginning to loathe the fact that we’ll have to leave our little cottage behind soon,” she sighed with a small pout as she leaned her head against his shoulder. “I’m certainly in no hurry to rush back to my family’s estate. Although, it will be much more bearable with you there, Jack.”

Jack still didn’t reply as he nuded the swing back into motion slightly, careful not to spill their tea. Its methodic creaking was oddly soothing.

“Of course, we don’t have to remain there, by any means. In fact, we should only stay as long as necessary in Somerset before escaping back to Fisher House in London. I cannot wait to show you my favourite haunts. Or to explore it together with you, Jack! You must tell me all the places you’ve ever wanted to see…”

She was unexpectedly interrupted in mid-sentence by one of the inspector’s all-absorbing kisses. He was naturally buoyed by her enthusiasm, and touched by her assumption that he was simply going to join her after they did finally leave Aston Clinton behind. In fact, that meant more to him than he could convey verbally at the moment, so he allowed his lips to tell her by this method instead. He loved how she tasted of milk and lemon, and some essence that was essentially hers, making a mental note to try his next cup of tea that way as well. For now, he enjoyed the soothing combination of flavours until the two of them broke apart for a gulp of fresh air.

“So glad you agree, Inspector,” she flashed him a more than pleased smile before taking another sip of her tea and sending him a smug glance from beneath her dark eyelashes.

“I’d be delighted to see any place with you as my tour guide, Miss Fisher,” he confirmed. “Tell me a bit more about this ancestral home of the Fisher clan.”

“Well, it’s a drafty monstrosity of a thing, to start with, but there are several lovely wings filled with more than a few curious things to explore. And plenty of remote, hidden alcoves and passageways where we could explore one another.”

Jack coughed suddenly as he choked on his current mouthful of tea. Phryne continued to look at him with her impish grin as she patted his back and took his tea cup from him before he upended it. She placed both cups onto a side table next to the swing before turning back to give him another little pat on the back for good measure.

“I’m sure that there are, Miss Fisher,” he responded with another slight cough. “Although, I would hate to impose upon your parents’ hospitality. Especially in that manner.”

Having recovered, Jack began to push the swing again as he grew sober when the niggling issue that had been eating at him slightly whenever he thought about their imminent departure took an extra stronger bite. Phryne sensed this and simply nuzzled her head into her favourite curve between his shoulder and neck, wrapping her arms about him again, and simply enjoyed the pendulum-like sensation of being suspended in the air as she waited for him to share his burden.


The rhythm had nearly lulled her to sleep when Jack cleared his throat abruptly, jolting her out of her reverie and signalling that he was ready to tell her what his mind had been wrestling through.
“I’ve been thinking about going to Somerset with you, Phryne,” he began. “A lot actually. And how I feel about that.”

“What do you mean, Jack? Would you rather not go? We can certainly go straight to London instead…” she started to reassure him.

“No, no, it’s not that,” he stopped her quickly. “It’s more that I’ve been thinking about this other world that you belong to, Phryne. Within the English aristocracy, I mean. I haven’t really had to think about it much, not back in Australia. I suppose it’s simply never seemed like such a divide, even when we’ve been at your aunt’s more imposing house for one of her society events.”

“Oh, Jack!”

“But, going to your family’s ancestral estate, and knowing the staff there and everyone we encounter will be part of this centuries old, complex hierarchy…it’s all just a bit overwhelming to me, to be honest.”

“You don’t have to feel overwhelmed, Jack,” she tried reading his thoughts. “They are all just people. Silly, boring people, more often than not. And it’s all just a ridiculous game they play at. One that I’ve been forced to learn and sometimes need to participate in. But, underneath it all, it’s all poppycock really. I actually despise the hypocrisy and condescension behind it all.”

“But, that’s just it, Phryne,” he attempted to point out. “You can flaunt your nose at them because you’re one of them. As far as they’re concerned, I’m not even a viable candidate for a trial run. Not that I have anything to prove to them, or anyone else really. Except, perhaps, to you.” He quickly placed a finger gently against her lips when she was about to protest again.

“I’m simply aware that it’s an uneven playing field, and that according to their rule book, I will not measure up as a contender. Nor do I wish to be. Unless, you need me to be...” he trailed off pensively.

Stomping both her feet down suddenly, Phryne quickly stopped the swing’s movements causing Jack’s body to lunge forward and his hat to flop over his eyes. The inspector quickly braced himself, his grip tightening around Miss Fisher as he steadied the swing to keep them all from toppling over. Phryne reached up then to readjust the more than familiar fedora before cupping Jack’s face with both of her hands. She pulled his head towards her so she could look directly into his eyes.

“Jack Robinson,” she began resolutely. “Now, you listen to me! You are an honourable, courageous, and magnificent man. Not just in Melbourne, or here in Aston Clinton, but in the bloody, entire world. And beyond that, as far as I’m concerned.” She added for extra emphasis.

“You’re worth far more than some uppity idiot who thinks he or she can mistreat you or anyone else simply because their father holds some ancient title, or that they can waste vaults filled with wealth they never lifted a finger to earn.”

“Are you saying that you consider me the most magnificent man in the cosmos, Miss Fisher?” he queried with his most deadpanned expression. “Because, I believe I once made it clear that you’re not a telescope.”

“Oooh, I take it all back,” she quipped in return with a playful swat to his hat, pushing it back over his eyes. “You’re the most insufferable man in the blooming universe!”

With his eyes still covered, Jack leaned over in the direction of her voice and halted expectantly
“Jack, like I told you the other night, just as I’ve grown to realise that Melbourne is now my home, you and our lives there are also the only world I want to belong to now. Yes, we are currently here in England, and yes, this is where my family is and, consequently, I’m forced to put up with this upper crust way of life,” she reached out to finger the brass buttons of his borrowed constable’s uniform that he still wore.

“But, it’s only temporary, and I have no expectations whatsoever of how you should or could fit into it because as I’ve said, you supersede it and all others worlds to me. You don’t even have to come to any of the parties, balls, or, god knows, what Mother has accepted on my behalf already.” She rolled her eyes dramatically, which prompted his downturned lips to twitch ever so slightly. “I barely even attend them any more. But, I might reconsider making an appearance now that I’d have a dashing detective inspector by my side.”

His eyes twinkled as he nodded in slight amusement at her tone, and began to push against the ground to set them back into swinging motion again.

“The most important thing of all, however, Jack,” she continued after curling back up against his side. “Is that we don’t waste the opportunity and the time we have now to spend with each other. I hope we never end up having to make up for lost time like dear Simone and Arthur.”

“I agree, Miss Fisher,” he responded a tad grimly as the all too recent memories of a bullet whizzing past Phryne’s head threatened to freeze his blood again. He tightened his arm around her grateful to feel her instinctive squeeze in return as she nuzzled even closer.

“So, let’s not waste the time we have worrying about how we will spend it here in England,” she glanced up at him with the mock innocent expression he instantly grew wary of. “How much leave time did you say you have again, Inspector?”

“Well, since I mentioned Arthur just now, I’ve just started thinking about Canada actually. Since that’s where he spent the last decade of his life and all.”

“Another fine member of the Commonwealth,” Jack stated, secretly smiled to himself for being correct. He would never have guessed that Miss Fisher would suggest Canada as part of their next grand adventure. Perhaps, he would get to meet a samurai on another trip.

“Indeed. I’ve recently received several letters from a friend of mine who has been living over there since her husband took up a high-ranking post with the Canadian government. Anyway, she’s invited me to visit soon to consider investing in a new film venture there.”

“Oh, that sounds intriguing. Any idea what the plot will be about?”
“Hmm, well, she has mentioned that it has to do with ‘mounties,’” Phryne informed him slowly as she eyed Jack suggestively in his current uniform. “I do wonder what you’d look like in a mountie officer’s uniform, Jack. Rather striking, I’d imagine, in all that red…and in those sturdy boots.”

He responded by giving her a gentle tickle and was rewarded by her squeal of protest. “Only if my nurse is there to look after me should I happen to fall off of my horse in the line of duty.” He brushed his hand intentionally across the bib of the matron’s apron that she still wore.

She responded by poking him playfully in retaliation, quickly earning one in return, which escalated in a tickling match that toppled them off the swing where they collapsed in laughter onto the ground. A loud rumble of thunder reverberated throughout the hills around them, sounding more nearby than it was, as a few droplets of rain began to warn them.

Jack ignored the weather as he gazed down at the beautiful woman laying in his arm, staring up at him with mirth still dancing through her eyes. His own intense gaze quickly darkened as he picked a velvety mushroom from near the base of the tree next to where they were laying.

“I believe, Mrs Jones, that I had promised a full recitation of my ‘Treatise on the Interspecies of Fungi’ before we completed our little holiday excursion here?” He began to trail the soft down her throat and across her decolletage that had become conveniently exposed during their tickling match. “Shall we begin your first lecture now?”

“Yes, by all means, do enlighten me, Mr Jones,” Phryne replied suddenly finding herself rather short of breath as she arched into the delicious sensations he was igniting across her skin. “I promise to be a most studious pupil, especially when it comes to applying any experimental methods.”

With that, the two eager scholars began to research and explore the many delights and possibilities that could be derived from making love on a bed of mushrooms. That is, until a series of thunder overhead drowned out the delighted exclamations resulting from their eager, scientific discoveries. Eventually, the accompanying onslaught of flooding rain halted their lesson as they both quickly became drenched for the third time that day.

Unperturbed, the couple simply retreated to the warmth of their little cottage, and, specifically, to a rug that had become a particular favourite where they settled in to enjoy the start of their hard-earned holiday.

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