Destruction of Private Property

by QualiTee

Summary

Following the law has downsides for Phryne. But, it has upsides too. Also, I hope Jack brought a couple changes of clothes.

Notes

Prompt: "Your clothes are a wreck," "It's entirely your fault, you know."

(It was supposed to be 1k, but it got away from me a little)
Chapter 1

The clue was in the trunk. The trunk, Alphonse had insisted repeatedly. Phryne Fisher sat back on her purple glacé kid heels and gave an irritated huff. She had been crawling around on the floor of Sylvia Conroy’s bedroom, hunting for any sort of key to her husband’s steamer trunk, but had succeeded only in coating her shoes, plum organza day dress, and peach and violet figured velvet coat in dust, as well as tearing a delicate glove on the baseboard. Short of taking an axe to the massive case, she was not going to be getting into it without her lockpicks. Unfortunately, her lockpicks were currently in the inner suit pocket of an extremely cross Detective Inspector Jack Robinson, who had decided he would rather criticize her handwriting than help her conduct her search. Impossible policeman!

The week had started with much brighter prospects. The Victorian police had been receiving complaints of possible real estate fraud committed by a nebulously rotating cast of characters, the most likely being one Timothy Conroy or someone affiliated with him directly. Conroy’s clients bought and sold property with unusual smoothness, but then tended to come to mischief shortly afterwards. Deeds and proofs were burned up in mysterious fires, stolen along with inconsequential jewelry, discovered to be unaccountably invalid, or outright rendered useless by the appearance of other claims upon the mines, farms, houses, aquifers, and sundry property that clients had purchased from the gentle, polite, and very rich Mr. Conroy. The Duchess of Albemarle, a canny woman if Jack had ever met one, had heard the rumors and all but demanded a police presence to oversee her upcoming purchase from the man. And she hadn’t stopped at demanding: “the best detective you have, gentlemen. I will also strongly suggest that you bring a lady investigator. I will have female guests of the utmost delicacy at my home, and I don’t wish to disconcert any of them should searches or questioning of a more direct nature be required.” Which, given that there were no female detectives, and only three female constables in the whole of the police service at the time, meant Phryne was tapped that Thursday, officially, to accompany Jack to a house party in the service of the Police.

The tentative dance the offer would have once inspired had been replaced by something much more resembling a rumba than a waltz, and she’d accepted gleefully, with possibilities spinning themselves out in her head immediately. Only his deep consciousness of his duty had put a damper on the whole thing. “Miss Fisher,” he’d begun, a little hesitantly, “I do need to warn you. The Duchess has been quite direct. She wants to avoid scandal, not invite it.”

“Yet she’s inviting me? She’s rather brave.” The lady detective settled herself onto his (her) desk corner with a wriggle of excitement. Spiriting Jack away for a weekend had been on her list of Intriguing Things to Do to a Detective Inspector since she’d arrived in Melbourne with him on her arm as they walked down the gangplank and back into the life she had missed so much. And Phryne wasn’t of a mind to be cowed by a title, no matter how stuffily far up the ranks it was.

“I am inviting you,” he stressed. “And whether or not your invitation stands is up to whether or not you’re willing to agree that while we’re on this trip, you will adhere to police procedure. Strictly.”

“Jack, you know full well that we get results because we don’t follow the same lines of investigation.”

“This time, I need to you follow my lead. Please, Phryne.” He wasn’t begging, not exactly, but his earnest look quashed her racy designs on his person. “I’ll make it up to you,” he added with a promising hint of a smile.

“Is that so, Inspector?” She was trying not to feel peevish. She may have opened her Christmas
presents early every year that they’d been able to afford them, but she was not a child anymore, and surely she could focus on work with a side helping of delicious moments, rather than the other way around. Surely. “Do you plan on starting now?”

“Unfortunately,” he said, “my case backlog still stands.” He gave a glum nod toward the teetering stack of folders that was the penance he’d been paying for a five-month jaunt around the world with the most bewitchingly sinful woman he’d ever known.

“Really Jack,” she said with a huff, then recalled herself. It was her fault he had such a mess to clean up, it wasn’t entirely fair to be upset with him for doing it. “I suppose I’d better go do some reading on real estate law then. If you’re going to have your nose buried, I’ll bury mine too. And I’ll need to get packed if we’re leaving tomorrow.” She strode out of the room, leaving a cloud of Jicky in her wake, and a lingering sense of unease in the pit of Jack’s stomach.

The time they’d spent together, the two of them in their own happy orbit cruising from port of call to fabulous port of call with only the occasional puzzling circumstance to distract them from exploring each other in every sense of the word: it had been as close to a honeymoon as one could get without getting married. But now they were back home, and there seemed to be more navigation required here than they’d ever needed in getting around the Horn. He glowered impotently at his blotter, then snatched up the next thing from his inbox. He was just going to have to bully his way through as quickly as possible, and hope Phryne would understand that this state of affairs was temporary.

Phryne was taking out her irritation, which had grown from a small pet into a raging temper on the aggravatingly slow drive back to Wardlow, on a perfectly harmless dance shoe with a cracked heel. Dot ducked behind the door as it flew through the air and crashed with a satisfying Crack! Into the opposite wall, leaving a crescent-shaped dent in the plaster.

“Miss?”

“I’m so sorry Dot!” She rushed to her companion, chastened. “I didn’t hear you coming.” Dot edged into the room as if Phryne were wearing spikes. She was only four months gone, but she’d acquired a careful protectiveness of her precious cargo already. Miss Fisher had been more than accommodating though, insisting that since this was just a weekend trip at a fully-staffed house, Dot could take her own weekend off and enjoy a little uninterrupted time with Hugh.

“Is everything alright?” She eyed the mess that Miss Fisher had made curiously. Her employer might be unpredictable, but she respected her possessions a great deal more than this, usually. There was a heap of stockings tangled on her dressing table, a pair of trousers were dangling a leg out the window frame, and there was an unhappy pile of rejected gowns lumped on the bed.

“Bad temper, I’m afraid,” she replied ruefully. “And that pair of shoes was specially made for the black lace too.” She heaved a sigh and surveyed the chaos.

“I’m no cobbler that I could fix them miss, but what about the gold ones?” Dot retrieved another pair of shoes from under a pile of underthings, doing her best not to snag any of the delicate silk with the buckles. “I was going to put that string of gold beads into the neckline anyway, to cover up the tear from when you had to shin down that drainpipe?” Almost automatically, she began folding and arranging scarves, pairing them on hangars with their matching blouses.

“Only if you have time, Dot dear. We’re leaving tomorrow at an idiotically early hour, since the Inspector is insisting on driving.” Phryne resisted the urge to throw the other shoe. Dot, sensing that discretion was the only part of valor in this case, fluttered away with the beaded lace frock trailing behind her, only narrowly missing shutting the train in the door. Phryne harrumphed down on her chaise and snatched up an old book on property law. A weekend away at a lovely country retreat
was not supposed to be this annoying or abstinent, especially in the company of Jack.

The next day did not promise fair. A slow, steady drizzle had set in overnight, leaving the roads slick and unpredictable, and Jack too focused on driving to do much more than grip her hand with a wan smile. He had worked through what had felt like literal yards of paperwork, only to be interrupted just at the end of his shift by a belligerent digger who had splattered him with a variety of unpleasant effluvia on the way to the cells. That pair of socks was going to be a total loss, he felt sure. Tired as he was, he didn’t mind that Phryne mostly drowsed or read through her tome on real estate bylaws that she’d brought along. He was pleased that she was taking his request to do this job by the book, but still, at the back of his mind was the niggling sensation that something was wrong.

His feelings were allayed slightly by the time they arrived at the Duchess’s country house, Eltham. It was a two-story stone affair with pale stone columns and a Greek feel to it. A sweeping drive wound its way around to the back, where there was a garage that appeared to have once been a horse barn. As he parked the car, he noticed another detached building, probably the guesthouse the Duchess had mentioned, and a complicated glass affair that must have been a state-of-the-art greenhouse. He wondered who of the family might be a plant collector.

Before he could do much more than register a series of general impressions (wealth, spring planting in session, people coming to greet them), Phryne had whisked herself up and out of the car and was directing the gathering of luggage and greeting of titled people with aplomb. And then it started to all go wrong in a hurry.

As he exited the car, there was a scream of shock from around the back of the horse barn. In the mass sprint of guests, at least one finely-dressed person, who turned out later to be the Duchess’s oily nephew Saint-John Worthingham, went headlong into something puddled and atrocious-smelling which appeared to be a mixture of engine oil, potting soil, and horse manure. He came up ready to brawl with the nearest person, who turned out to be the Detective Inspector. This resulted in a messy shouting and shoving match which only stopped escalating when Jack showed his badge. It was fortunate that he hadn’t needed his service revolver, which was still, embarrassingly, in the car. The argument delayed him enough that when he finally got to the scene, Phryne had fully taken charge. She was standing over a body with its face bashed in, directing a stone-faced maid to support a gibbering, hysterical man in blood-smeared trousers and singlet.

“Ah, Inspector,” she’d said, business-like. “The Duchess must have a touch of clairvoyance. We’re going to need to take some statements.” He shook mud off of his hands gingerly, wondering where his notebook had gotten to. “Perhaps I’d better?” He nodded mutely and knelt to examine the body instead while she herded everyone toward the relative shelter of a nearby willow. Saint-John threw up a fuss like a laundrywoman with goats in her yard, bemoaning the state of what had once been a pristine grey day suit. Jack spared a private moment of amusement at the privileged classes’ idea of tragedy.

The gardener looked to have been belted solidly in the face with something hard and metal before having his throat crushed. Jack shook his head as he made notes. This wasn’t the modus operandi of a subtle swindler, although if the man had discovered something he shouldn’t have, it was possible the grifter had acted in a blind panic. If that was the case though, he’d been thoughtful enough to carry away or hide the murder weapon. With the rain and the mud, there was no way to tell how long the body had been lying there. He hoped Miss Fisher was having better luck gathering evidence from interviewing the guests.

Her interview notes, once she’d compiled them, were dutifully handed over, and everyone was allowed inside to dry off and organize themselves. The Conroys had been due to occupy the guesthouse, but given that it was now a crime scene, they were going to have to make do with main
They waited anxiously for the maid to ready their rooms, but she had been shanghaied by Phryne into attending the incomprehensible man (Alphonse Gardner, American friend of Saint-John). There was another young man (Stanley Mallory, a jewelry dealer) and an additional pair of young ladies, companions of Sylvia Conroy, who began cooing over the poor, battered, damp, tired lawman as soon as he came through the door of the front parlor. He was looking for a few bites of the cold collation lunch that had been laid out while he’d been on the phone with the local police negotiating for a coroner’s van and a doctor for Gardner.

“Oh, Inspector, would you like one of these sandwiches? They are divine.” That one, the one in the delicate olive skirt with old-fashioned trim, that was Edwina Luthy, he reminded himself. The one in copper with dark curls was her sister Eleanor. She bustled over with a cup of strong tea and he nodded grateful thanks. She took him by the elbow and guided him to a plush chair, prattling emptily about the garden and the state of his suit. The clouds had blown over, and he could see sunshine peering in through the windows. He wondered if Worthingham had gone up to see his friend, but the question was answered for him almost immediately. Phryne was descending the grand staircase with the odious man on one arm, laughing seductively. Mallory trailed behind, clearly eyeing her as a potential customer. She looked across the foyer and acknowledged him, making as if to guide both men out the front patio. But then, she spotted Edwina fussing over a teetering stack of sliced ham, boiled eggs, and cheese toiles, and Eleanor refilling his cup with exaggerated politeness. All semblance of disinterest abandoned, Phryne strode into the parlor, very nearly dragging Saint-John down the last three stairs until he snagged his jacket on the decorative newel post. There was a tearing noise, and the man made a pained face and bolted back up to his room. Jack mentally superimposed a Tragedy mask over him, and found himself unaccountably amused.

Phryne bumped down in the chair next to him with a genial smile at the younger women. “Excuse me ladies, but I do need to monopolize the Inspector for just a moment or two.” Her tone was light, but the steely look in her eyes would have made a prizefighter rethink his tactics. The pair retreated to go find the Conroys, but not before matching doe-eyed smiles at Phryne’s companion. “Jack,” she said. “Alphonse is still in a state. I couldn’t get any better of a statement out of him, but his friend was more amenable.” She flipped open her notebook and trailed her finger through the pages. “Yes, here.” She pointed, but when he peered into the book, his face creased in a frown.

“And you complain about my handwriting. This looks a like a drunken mouse wandered through an inkwell.” He looked up to see Edwina, her glance flickering between him and Phryne examining the witness statements and the staircase Saint-John had disappeared up, a calculating expression on her face where it had been simpering and vacant only a moment before. Phryne noticed it too, and lowered her tone so he was forced to lean towards her. Edwina’s lips pouted for a moment, and she wafted away toward the lounge instead, followed by a predatorily-smirking Mallory.

“Well, that’s why I had Dot brush up her shorthand. In any case, Saint-John was eager to curry favor with me, and mentioned that both of the Conroys would have had time to secret something in their rooms between breakfast and when we arrived. According to him, it’s quite an excellent spot for secretive dealings.”

“Miss Fisher,” Jack sighed. “Do I need to remind you we cannot seduce information out of suspects in this context?”

“It’s not seduction, Jack,” she said. “I was gathering evidence as charmingly as possible.” She dragged one finger delicately along the curve of his jaw, flicking away a crumb of cheese that had collected near his collar, and dropping her voice to a purr. “This is seduction. Creating an enjoyable moment that we can use for… reference later.” He closed his eyes. But when he spoke, his voice was stern, and he captured her wandering fingers in a policeman’s grip.
“Miss Fisher, this is the opposite of police procedure. I asked you…” But he was interrupted from whatever lecture he was about to give by a shout from the balcony at the top of the stairs.
Chapter 2

Alphonse had staggered out of his bedroom with a wild look in his eyes. The Duchess was following closely behind him, equally outraged, a pile of paper in one hand and a broken necklace in the other. Beads and pearls clattered down the stairs ahead of her as she swept towards them. Alphonse hung on the balcony railing and was forcibly dragged back to his room by Saint-John, still shouting: “You forgot one! Come try and bash my head in!”

The Duchess was livid, though she controlled it well. “Someone sedate the American while I speak with the Inspector.” She turned her attention to Phryne, “Constable Fisher, if you would, my dear?” Phryne, whether because she was still interested in Worthingham, or because she had been addressed as Constable, obeyed with a gleeful alacrity that made Jack rather uncomfortable.

While she made her way upstairs, he abandoned his plate and collected everyone into the sitting room for yet another round of interviews, beginning with Mrs. Conroy. She simpered, she shuddered, but she gave absolutely nothing away, except for the tidbit that Alphonse had made arrangements with the gardener to join the servants’ poker game, which is why he had been so broken up about the man. Alphonse was owed better than fifteen pounds by him, which he apparently needed for nerve treatments. Jack noted the sum down, and wondered if the Duchess’ broken pearl string might supply some of that deficit. He’d need to speak with the jewelry dealer about that.

Phryne had returned, but instead of helping him, she was drifting closer and closer to the cluster of Conroy, Mallory and Worthingham, her distance from them lessening every time he turned around. When he had finally dismissed Edwina, with her curiously adamant protestations that she didn’t even understand property law, Detective, (flutter, flutter) she was only a mere woman, Phryne was occupying the arm of the chair that held Worthingham, deep in conference with Conroy while Mallory was fetching and carrying drinks. When he collected Mallory, she retreated to a quiet corner with Worthingham, driving the lines deeper into Jack’s forehead with Saint-John’s every smile.

By the end of his interview with the Duchess, who was enraged in that Grecian-marble way that only an offended pillar of society could be, it was coming on time for dinner. She was missing one key page of the contract, the one that protected her against arson on the property, which she found highly suggestive. He left Phryne to finish speaking with one of the housemaids (who, predictably, had seen "nothing, nothing at all, ma’am Constable") and saw the very tardy coroner off with the body. Somehow, the man had managed to find every single excuse in the book for why he hadn’t been able to arrive in some sort of time, up to and including having broken a shoelace while exiting his vehicle and dropping a stretcher on his bare foot. And through all of it, Phryne had charmed, and canoodled, and flirted her way through the houseguests and staff, never so much as looking his direction except to pass him more notes that he could only read with a great deal of squinted deciphering. She had to be doing it on purpose, he thought darkly. The guests filed past him as they made their way to the stairs to change for dinner. Presumably that finishing school covered orthography, but her page from Timothy Conroy’s interrogation had the words ‘luggage in guesthouse’, ‘room’, and ‘torn cerulean blouse cuff’, and everything else was hieroglyphic. Where was she anyway? He glanced out the window and spotted her purple-clad form creeping across the lawn. Infuriated, he charged out after her.

She hadn’t meant to be quite so nonchalant with his feelings, but harmless flirting to her was clearly not as harmless to him. She could practically see the icy storm cloud trailing over his head as he strode to catch her before she could leave the garden.
“Miss Fisher.” It was not an interrogative.

“Hello Jack.” She was determined to give nothing away, but that didn’t seem to help. He raked her with a penetrating glare.

“I seem to recall asking everyone to stay in the main house. They are supposed to be changing for dinner, in fact.”

“Yes, well,” she began.

“And since I am aware of the location of the rest of the guests, I can only assume that you are as well, and are using this opportunity to search the guesthouse for the missing papers before someone can occupy the room themselves and hide them.”

“You arranged things so perfectly,” she said with a smile.

“Unless,” he plowed on, “you were planning a rendezvous of some sort.” He glowered again, “Before you begin your protests to the contrary, I also noticed Worthingham creeping through the laurels. I felt I should check with you to see which it was you intended, and warn you of the consequences of either or both actions. We, you, are here specifically because the Duchess wanted a lady to lend my own presence a stronger veneer of respectability.”

“Jack…” she tried again.

“You are an intelligent woman, Miss Fisher,” he continued stiffly. “And far be it from me to do any forbidding of your actions on a personal level. But as an officer of the law, I am confiscating your lockpicks, that in case you are caught at one or both of those activities, you can at least avoid the sanction of a burglary charge by claiming the door was already open.” Annoyed as much by his being right as she was by his tone, she had plucked them from their usual hiding place and handed them over. He had pocketed them and left her to her mission.

She was now cursing his officiousness and doing so on a dusty floor in an unoccupied guesthouse on a beautiful spring evening, while he was less-than-half-heartedly fending off the solicitous attentions of Eleanor and Edwina. What was the matter with him? With her?

Phryne swatted the hardwood floor with her torn glove. Some of it was definitely her fault. She had been bristling at any constraint of her time with Jack. She was acting like a jealous fool – like the jealous fools she’d scoffed at many a time when she’d gone home with a partner while other women hissed and twittered behind their hands. But really, jealous? She examined the thought more closely. Yes, unfortunately, all the symptoms were there. Possessiveness, irritation, sharp temper, inability to focus whenever he came into view. No wonder they had both frozen over – she was hardly enjoyable company in this state. She slapped the glove again, knocking up a cloud of dust that made her choke.

“Any success?” Startled, Phryne whirled around. Jack was leaning against the doorframe, his hat swinging from one hand and the other in a coat pocket. “Or has Timothy Conroy’s mystery benefactor gotten away with yet another swindle along with the death of the gardener?”

“It took a while to convince Mr. Worthingham to go away,” she said. “He seemed to be under the impression that I was interested in helping him disrespect his marriage vows, despite my explicit affiliation with you. Even a judo throat lock wasn’t convincing.” Jack watched her, his face inscrutable. “Fortunately, you only deprived me of my lockpicks, not my knife.” Startled and abashed, Jack shook his hands free of his coat and took a tentative step forward. She held out her own hand, and he assisted her up off the floor. He tucked her arm under his protectively as he
scanned the damage to her outfit with a new level of concern. “I’m fine. His pride is bruised, but not
enough that he’ll be running to the Duchess to ask for my head on a platter. Though I’m sure he had
quite the time of it trying to get back to the house decent, given the size of the hole I tore in his
trousers.” She hiked the hem of her dress up so he could see the damage. “Ruined my garter and
stocking in the process, unfortunately.”

“Phryne,” he began. She held up a hand.

“My turn to interrupt,” she said. “I understand your position Jack. I’m here under the umbrella of
your authority, and whatever my reputation is generally, and whatever my reputation is generally, when I borrow the force of the Law, I need
to be true to it as you are.” He nodded, and she could see his features relax, just slightly. “Alphonse
was repeating ‘the trunk, the trunk’ when I spoke with him both times. The gardener’s death threw
him into such a panic, I couldn’t get anything more than that. I wanted to see if this could be the
trunk in question. I wasn't going to conduct any sort of illicit search. I was examining the area for
impressions that we,” she paused and stroked his lapel gently, “we, darling, could use to conduct a
more directed line of inquiry. With reasonable suspicion established.” Jack paused. He swallowed
hard. Phryne realized how conscious he was of the lack of distance between the two of them. Things
were definitely beginning to thaw.

“Miss Fisher,” he said, and swallowed again, “I seem to have jumped to some conclusions. I
apologize.”

“Not hardly, Jack,” she said, more lightly than she felt. Time to remedy this jealousy by taking what
chances she had, rather than resenting those she did not. “It wasn’t precisely a bad guess.”

“Oh?” Now he was definitely fidgeting.

“This is an excellent place for an assignation. Though I only had one particular partner in mind.” She
flashed a smile of extraordinary wattage at Jack and felt a trembling current shoot through him and
gooseflesh rise on his wrist. “What do you think?”

“Well,” he said, attempting to regain his equilibrium. “Other than it being someone else’s room
entirely?”

“Spacious, discreet, quite comfortable,” she continued, insinuating his hat out of his hand so she
could gesture with it. “And even a number of different options, such as that cozy chaise, or the
deply plush rug, should one feel squeamish about using a mattress that hasn’t been made up yet.”

“Miss Fisher, is there a reason you’re suddenly trying to persuade me of the suitability of such a
thing?” Jack’s voice was dry, but his expression was shifting rapidly.

“Chaos occurs – furniture often gets knocked over or even broken in the course of the action – it
does make an excellent pretext. Or, alternatively, an excellent celebration of a job well done.”

“Or we could consider that there are more trunks in the household than just this one.” He attempted
to tug his hat loose from her grip, but she merely drew it away until he was all but embracing her.
“Like, for example, the boot of a car, which in Alphonse’s American parlance, is called a trunk.”
Jack was fighting a blush now, his ears turning a fine rosy hue. She tried on his hat, swapping it for
her own.

“An excellent thought, Inspector,” Phryne smiled up into his face, sending a waft of citrus and floral
perfume into his nose as he caught his breath. “And I did happen to notice blood on the fender and
rear lock of one of the cars. On Edwina’s, in fact, which should have been washed away in the rain
normally. It’s possible the gardener was run over, rather than struck with a weapon. That should be
reason enough to allow a search during daylight, even if it does turn out to have been nothing more than roadkill. If not,” she said, smoothing his tie with her hand before extracting her lockpicks from his pocket with more deliberation than was strictly necessary, “there’s always a chance that the lock will give way on its own after having gone over such rough roads. I should check it before I go in to change for dinner as well.” She smiled again, a flash of red lipstick framed with crystal earrings and inky hair, like a firework in the night sky, and he gave himself up for lost.

“Miss Fisher, wait,” he said as she stepped toward the door, hem swishing raggedly. “We’re going to need to find an explanation as to why your clothes are covered in dirt and there’s a broken feather in your hat, one that does not involve either an attempted seduction by the Duchess’s nephew or your conducting a questionably legal search.”

“Indeed? And what would you suggest we say?”

“You’re the one with all the pretexts,” he replied, shucking his muddied coat and laying it on top of the steamer, followed by his wristwatch. Phryne watched with interest. “But you are right about the privacy a guesthouse like this affords.” He shrugged out of his suit jacket and laid it next to the coat, then raised hands to the buttons on his vest, undoing them with delicate deliberation. “And I do believe I said two things: that I would make it up to you, my asking you to suppress your usual methods.” Vest undone and laid safely aside, he began to loosen his tie, exposing a throat that was also blushing more than a slight pink. He considered for a moment, then seated himself and began untying and removing his shoes. He looked up at her with eyes full of gentle mischief. “And second, that I would not disgrace the Duchess’s house with any impropriety.” Phryne stared at him for a long, heated moment, and then he was rewarded with a sound halfway between a laugh and a growl as she all but hurled her cloche against the wall. She leapt on him like a tiger, squashing the brim of his hat against him as she captured his mouth with her own. There was a small pop when one of his cuffs gave way, and he maintained his presence of mind just long enough to stagger forward and kick the door shut.

Some significant time later and well late for the meal, the blasted detective inspector and his lady assistant turned back up, Saint-John observed. Judging by the man’s suddenly unconstrained curls peeping from under his battered hat, his creased tie, and the several missing shirt buttons, they had been detecting something other than real estate short sales. And she looked even more destroyed, which only served the minx right. However, the car race proposed the next day by the lady turned out to be the key to dragging Sylvia and Edwina’s machinations into the light when Edwina’s car hit a bad bump and the boot burst open. Inside was Sylvia’s valise, full of direly incriminating paperwork, including the three signature pages from the Duchess’s purchase. Alphonse was rescued from Edwina’s attempt at smothering by a very fine barge through the door from the policeman. Timothy Conroy, surrounded by evidence of his own complete foolishness and his wife’s larceny, agreed to the sale at no mean terms. There was something to be said, Saint-John Worthingham said later to his aunt, something very fine to be said for the serendipity of the whole thing. Though, given how hard they both were on his clothing, he would be quite glad to see the back of both of them. Particularly, hem hem hem, the back of the lady. The Duchess slapped him with her fan hard enough to break his wristwatch.

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