

KERRY GREENWOOD



MISS
FISHER'S
MURDER MYSTERIES

AS SEEN ON ABC1

RUDDY GORE

A woman with a black bob haircut and red lipstick, wearing a blue velvet dress with a large white fur collar and a matching long white fur stole. She is standing in a room filled with traditional Japanese paper umbrellas (wagasa) and a red lantern. The background is dark, making the woman and the umbrellas stand out.

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Praise for Kerry Greenwood's Phryne Fisher series

'Independent, wealthy, spirited and possessed of an uninhibited style that makes everyone move out of her way and stand gawking for a full five minutes after she walks by—Phryne Fisher is a woman who gets what she wants and has the good sense to enjoy every minute of it!' *Geelong Times*

'Phryne . . . is a wonderful fantasy of how you could live your life if you had beauty, money, brains and superb self control.' *The Age*

'Fisher is a sexy, sassy and singularly modish character. Her 1920s Melbourne is racy, liberal and a city where crime occurs on its shadowy, largely unlit streets.' *Canberra Times*

'The presence of the inimitable Phryne Fisher makes this mystery a delightful, glamorous romp of a novel—a literary glass of champagne with a hint of debauchery.' *Armidale Express*

'Elegant, fabulously wealthy and sharp as a tack, Phryne sleuths her way through these classical detective stories with customary panache . . . Greenwood's character is irresistibly charming, and her stories benefit from research, worn lightly, into the Melbourne of the period.' *The Age*

'The astonishing thing is not that Phryne is so gloriously fleshed out with her lulu bob and taste for white peaches and green chartreuse, but that I had not already made her acquaintance.' *Bendigo Advertiser*

KERRY GREENWOOD is the author of more than fifty novels and six non-fiction works, and the editor of two collections. When she is not writing Kerry is an advocate in magistrates' courts for the Legal Aid Commission. She is not married, has no children and lives with a registered Wizard.

Phryne Fisher mysteries:

Cocaine Blues

Flying too High

Murder on the Ballarat Train

Death at Victoria Dock

The Green Mill Murder

Blood and Circuses

Ruddy Gore

Urn Burial

Raisins and Almonds

Death Before Wicket

Away with the Fairies

Murder in Montparnasse

The Castlemaine Murders

Queen of the Flowers

Death by Water

Murder in the Dark

Murder on a Midsummer Night

Dead Man's Chest

A Question of Death: An Illustrated Phryne Fisher Treasury

Corinna Chapman mysteries:

Earthly Delights

Heavenly Pleasures

Devil's Food

Trick or Treat

Forbidden Fruit

Cooking the Books

KERRY
GREENWOOD



RUDDY GORE



Please note that all Chinese names in this book are derived from the sixteenth-century classic *Outlaws of the Marsh*. The 1928 cast of *Ruddigore* did not include any murderers. No identification with any persons alive or dead is intended or should be inferred.

This edition published in 2012.

First published by Allen & Unwin in 2004.

First published in 1995 by McPhee Gribble Publishers.

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Cataloguing-in-Publication details are available from the National Library of Australia

www.trove.nla.gov.au

ISBN 978 1 74237 962 3

Set in 11.5/14 pt Adobe Garamond by Bookhouse, Sydney Printed in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



The paper in this book is FSC® certified.
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To my sister Janet Greenwood, for her courage and her delightful spirit.

With thanks to Jean Greenwood of the tireless feet, Foong Ling Kong, Jenny Pausacker, Richard Revill, David Greagg, Themmy Gardner (ol' pal, ol' buddy), Laurie (cariad) Horner, Matthew Gordon Clark, Tim Daly, Dr Andrea Walker, Brian Di Caffa, Sarah Jane Reeh, Stuart Reeh, Arnold Pears, the memory of my great-uncle Gwilym Davies, the Chinese Museum, the Performing Arts Museum, the management of Her Majesty's Theatre and the archives of the Victoria Police.

'They do it with mirrors, my boy.'

Arthur Horner
Colonel Pewter in Ironicus

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CHAPTER ONE

'How's Bloodygore?'

'It's Ruddigore.'

'Same thing, isn't it?'

'Does that mean when I say I admire your ruddy countenance, it means I like your bloody cheek?'

Conversation with
W. S. Gilbert (attrib.)

The hatchet flicked past, end over end, and struck a wooden shutter with a hollow thud. Light gleamed along the polished blade.

Phryne Fisher closed a leather-gloved hand on the handle and extracted it with one strong pull. She hefted it. An admirable weapon, well-balanced, not too heavy, wickedly sharp.

'Were you trying to attract my attention?' she asked politely.

An Asian face turned to her out of the mass of struggling bodies. He saw the black hair and pale face, the body shining silver like a Taoist goddess, and screamed at her, *'Jau!'*

This meant nothing to Phryne, who had seen an old woman go down without a cry under three attackers clad in dark blue. Little Bourke Street was chill, empty and dark. Sodium glare from the widely spaced street lights turned every puddle on the slick cobbles into a mirror and left black velvet pools of night in between.

In one of these some sort of street fight was occurring. Phryne was on her way to a gala performance of *Ruddigore* at His Majesty's in celebration of Bert Hinkler's triumphant flight. She was beginning to wonder whether taking a short cut had been such a good idea as it had seemed ten minutes before.

Bunji Ross gasped, *'There's an old lady in that crowd of Chink blighters!'* She ran towards the fight and vanished into it like a fly in a frog's mouth. Something would have to be done.

Phryne stepped lightly to a corner, yelled, *'The cops!'* and watched as two blue-clad toughs scrambled up and ran away. The other one stopped to kick the recumbent old woman again, and Phryne could not allow that. He had had his chance. She walked quickly up behind him, waited until his head was in the right position, and clipped him neatly with the hatchet, considerably using the back. She was clad in an outrageously expensive dress and did not want to get blood on it.

He collapsed with a satisfactory moan. A returning blue-clad person grabbed him and dragged him off. The soft scrabbling footsteps died away and Phryne hauled Bunji up by the arm. She was much disarrayed but seemed uninjured.

Phryne brushed Bunji down, found her hat, and said, 'I wish you weren't so hasty, Bunji dear. This looks like a private fight, you know. And that is—it was—a rather nice new dress.'

'Yes, yes, and I'm sorry about the dress old thing, but we can't allow old ladies to be attacked. It might start a fashion,' panted Bunji, rubbing her midsection. 'Ooh, drat, that hurts! One of those thugs punched me in the stomach. Don't they know you aren't supposed to hit a woman? I got him a good one, though. He'll know how I feel about this sort of thing.'

'Unchivalrous in the extreme,' agreed Phryne, sighing. Bunji Ross, who was good friend and a brave and determined flyer, was very hard on clothes. Since everything that Phryne had ever lent her had come back ruined, Phryne had paid for a new dress for her short plump companion. It had been a flowing but restrained dark plum velvet sacque with matching hat and shoes, but a roll in the gutters of Little Bourke Street had not improved it. Bunji was wet and muddy and had holed both her stockings.

The young man got to his feet, supporting the old woman. She straightened slowly, wiping a shaking hand over her bruised face, then fastened her eyes on Phryne.

She saw a small woman dressed in silver; a brocade dress which fitted close to her slim body, a cap of the same material with wings at each side, and on her small feet silver kid boots with wings at the ankle. Over the dress, she was draped in a flowing velvet coat with a yoke of brocade. She had a pale face and startling green eyes, and black hair barely longer than the cap. The hatchet swung loosely in her gloved hand. The old woman, creaking in all her joints, bowed. It was possible, she considered, that she had been rescued by a spirit, doubtless sent by the ancestors.

The young man, who knew that there were no spirits, saw through his one functioning eye a woman of surpassing otherness, immensely attractive, supremely alive and shining from head to heel.

Phryne abandoned the attempt to make Bunji elegant and decided that she would be acceptable if most of the mud was removed. Someone spoke to her and she turned.

'*Ngo zhang lei koh yan cheng,*' said the old woman, speaking to Phryne's knees in a soft, cultured voice.

'My grandmother thanks you,' said the young man. 'She says that we are deeply in your debt, Madame.'

'Not at all,' said Phryne. 'Is your grandmother hurt?'

'She says it is nothing to signify,' the young man bowed in turn. 'I am Lin Chung; it is the Lin family you have rescued in so timely a fashion.'

His accent, to her astonishment, was pure Eton and Oxford. Phryne took the offered hand and looked appreciatively at him. She could not tell if he was handsome, as the recent altercation had split his lip and blackened his eye. However, he was not much taller than herself, beautifully compact and sleek, the hand in her own strong but gentle. She was intrigued.

'Mr Lin, I have an engagement at the theatre. I really must restore my friend to respectability—can you provide us with a wash and brush up?' He nodded and walked to a nearby door. It opened to his tap and the old woman hobbled inside.

'I say, Phryne, is this safe?' whispered Bunji. 'They aren't white slavers or something, are they?'

It was too dark for Phryne's withering glare to have any effect, so she settled for saying, 'Don't be so silly, Bunji. Besides, I've still got this hatchet.'

They were in an anteroom to a warehouse, piled with bundles which oozed such pungent and alien

scents that Phryne sniffed with delight. Saffron, she was sure; but what was that strange antiseptic reek, and what on earth could anyone use those evil-looking dried eels for?

‘In here, if you please, Madame,’ said Lin Chung. ‘I will send someone to attend you.’

He conducted Phryne and Bunji into a small room of such elegance that Bunji exclaimed, ‘By Jove!’ and Phryne gasped.

The walls were hung with red silk—bolts of it must have gone into the decoration. It was figured with small medallions of thread which, from the soft gleam, Phryne decided must be pure gold. Bunji stood on a priceless silk carpet carved with phoenixes and did not dare to move.

‘I say,’ she whispered, ‘what have we got ourselves into?’

‘I don’t know, but it’s very pretty.’

A door opened in the silk-clad wall and a young woman as distant and aloof as a porcelain doll entered. With her came a stout elderly woman in a print dress and apron.

Unspeaking, the woman and the girl laid a sheet on the floor, poured hot water into a huge T’ang bowl decorated with horses, and produced fluffy towels and soap. They divested Bunji of her dress, which was taken by an unseen person outside the door, and then dabbed gently at the mud stains and small graze on Bunji’s knuckles.

Bunji stood in exquisite embarrassment, not wishing to interrupt what appeared to be a ritual, as she was cleansed, dried, and provided with new stockings and wrapped in a padded silk gown. While the old woman took the washing things away, the girl produced a decanter and poured a stiff brandy for each woman, still mute. She looked about sixteen and had evidently been in bed, for her waist-length hair was still in its night-time plait. Phryne accepted the glass and said, ‘Hello.’

The girl looked at her for the first time.

‘Hello,’ she replied sulkily. ‘Is this the sort of thing you drink? Only Grandmother said to look after you because you rescued her and I’ll get into trouble if it isn’t right.’

‘It’s just what we wanted. Thank you. What’s your name?’

‘Here they call me Annie. I’ll go and get the dress. Po Po’s maid is cleaning it.’

‘Annie, what did we interfere in?’

‘I can’t tell you.’ The composure broke and Annie’s black eyes flashed. ‘I’m not going to tell you. Why did you have to come along just then?’

‘Fate,’ said Phryne, nettled. ‘Can you find a safe place for this?’ She handed over the hatchet. Annie took it.

‘Grandmother wants her address,’ she pointed to Bunji.

‘Oh, why?’ Bunji’s thoughts had clearly turned to white slaving again.

‘So that she can send you a present. To thank you for rescuing her.’

‘Very well,’ said Bunji, writing down her name and address in a silk-covered notebook which the girl held out. ‘But it was my pleasure, really,’ she said doubtfully. Closing the book, Annie reverted to her doll-like stillness, bowed to an exact degree and left.

Phryne looked at Bunji, who shrugged.

‘They’re Chinks, they’re aliens, what did you expect?’

‘Bunji, do stop calling them Chinks, it’s not polite.’

‘What else can I call them?’ asked Bunji reasonably. ‘That’s what they are. This is a nice robe, though.’ She smoothed the decorated material with a hard hand.

The elderly woman returned with the dress, invisibly mended and cleaned of stains, and Bunji pulled it on and shoved her hat back onto her head, hiding her short hair.

‘Well, let’s go, it has been an exciting evening but I don’t want to miss seeing Bert again, though I don’t know about this opera, Phryne, I’ve never been a culture shark like you. Is it all fat ladies bellowing at each other?’

‘No, it’s very funny and you’ll like it,’ said Phryne firmly. She finished the cognac and put down the glass, wondering if they should just walk out. Bunji settled this by striding through the ante-chamber and into Little Bourke Street and Phryne followed. She had reached the door when the young man appeared, touched her arm and said, ‘Madame, we are in your debt. Can we know who you are?’

‘Why do you want to know?’ asked Phryne, pausing at the door. ‘It was all my friend’s idea, I just cleaned up after her. She’s the valiant one.’ He smiled at her, an action which must have hurt.

‘I wish to come and express our family’s gratitude in some tangible form.’ The sensual suggestion was strong and Phryne was attracted. She found her card and held it up.

‘What will you give me, then, Mr Lin, to express your gratitude?’

‘I will sit at your feet and sing your praise all night, Silver Lady.’ The voice was soft and Phryne felt an answering smile curving the corners of her mouth. ‘Most beautiful lady,’ said Lin Chung, ‘I will do whatever would most please you.’

Phryne felt that this offer was agreeably unconditional. She allowed him to take the card, swept her velvet coat around her, and said, ‘Come on Thursday night, Mr Lin. To dinner at eight o’clock. I will think of something that you can do for me by then.’

By then, she reflected as she walked quickly away behind Bunji, his face will have healed. And she calculated that she would at least get a length of that absolutely exquisite silk for the trouble of hitting an assailant over the head with a hatchet.

Lin Chung gazed after the twinkle of her winged heels as the Honourable Phryne Fisher receded into the night.

His Majesty’s Theatre was ablaze with light as they walked up to the corner and turned into the main street. Expensive cars were stopping to allow expensive by-invitation-only patrons to alight. There was a scent of French perfume so strong as to be almost a stench, and a flurry of coats and cloaks and glossy top hats.

‘There—’ Bunji dragged Phryne through the ranks. ‘There’s Bill, and Captain Larkin—come on, Phryne.’

It was easy to find the flyers. They were gathered into a tight little group in one corner of the foyer looking uncomfortable among the most shrill and glamorous of Melbourne Society.

‘What ho, Cap’n,’ Bunji hailed. ‘Is Bert here yet?’

‘No, he’s being smuggled in through the back. I say, Miss Fisher, you look spiffing! Mercury, ain’t you, like the Greek god? Remarkable, even down to the winged shoes.’ Phryne, who had been keeping her ensemble for just such an occasion, smiled warmly at the captain. Bunji nudged him.

‘Well, how’s poor Bert bearing up? He must be a nervous wreck by now.’

‘Oh, yes, the hero of the hour, poor chap,’ observed Captain Larkin, smoothing his moustache complacently. ‘Can’t bear publicity. I bet he’s wishing he was back up in the sky.’

‘Oh, why?’ asked Phryne, who had preserved her cloak uncrushed in her passage through the multitude by following exactly in the stouter Bunji’s wake.

‘Simple, it’s all predictable up in the air.’

‘Predictable?’ Phryne could not think of a less predictable pastime than flying.

‘Yes, only a certain number of things can go wrong, and only a few of those will kill you. Pity about Chubbie Miller and old Bill Lancaster breaking a wing, though. Otherwise they might have made it in before Hustlin’ Hinkler.’

‘Why is he called hustling?’ Phryne was shoved against Captain Larkin, who smelt delightfully of Floris’s stephanotis.

‘He leaves on time—every time. He arrives on time though Hell should bar the way. Most amazing chap. And he made the flight from Croydon to Darwin across all those islands and countries in fifteen and a half days. Remarkable man. But he’ll be deeply embarrassed by all this adulation. Not one for the populace, Hinkler.’

‘No? Dislikes his fellow man?’

‘Hates crowds and doesn’t trust enthusiasm any more than a Presbyterian,’ rejoined Bunji. ‘Unsentimental, perhaps that’s it. He really only likes a few people, his co-pilot and some flyers and his Mum. He hasn’t even given his plane a name.’

‘Now that is interesting,’ Phryne said, ‘I thought all planes had names.’

Bunji agreed. ‘Yes, well, there’s *Red Rose*, that’s the Miller/ Lancaster Avro, and your *Rigel* and my *Tiger Cat* and Bill’s *Moonraker* and Lindbergh’s *Spirit of St Louis* and Kingsford Smith’s *Southern Cross*. Yes. We all give the planes names—but he just calls his GE BOV, the call sign. Either he doesn’t want it to develop a personality, or . . .’

‘He just doesn’t think like that,’ concluded Captain Larkin. ‘By the way, Bunji old girl—someone took up a Tiger Moth and did some very pretty stunts to welcome Hinkler. You wouldn’t happen to know who it was, would you?’

‘No,’ said Bunji, blushing the colour of her dress. ‘No, really? I can’t imagine how I missed it.’

‘I can’t imagine either,’ said Captain Larkin drily.

Bunji, desperate for a distraction, asked, ‘Phryne, who is that woman in the red dress? She’s been staring at us.’

‘Oh, that’s Diana Ffoulkes,’ said Phryne, returning the gaze of bright blue eyes with interest. ‘Terribly rich, terribly bored, with a penchant for celebrities. Her last affair was with a flyer, I believe her lovers never last. I wonder if she’s prospecting for a new one?’ She caught a glimpse of spun-silk hair and cupid’s bow mouth as Miss Ffoulkes bent her regard elsewhere. Phryne caught Captain Larkin smoothing his moustache complacently, a movement just short of preening, and grinned at him. He coughed and said quickly, ‘Come along, ladies, let’s go inside. There’s a surprise in the theatre.’

Phryne, who considered that she had had enough surprises for one night, took his arm and followed him up the steps into the dress circle.

Red plush was the dominant motif in His Majesty’s Theatre. That and gilt equal to the output of the

Ballarat goldfields for at least three months. Everything glittered and shone which wasn't draped and soft. Phryne sat down and looked at the stage.

Over the proscenium was a large map of Hinkler's epic journey, with the fuel stops picked out in red lamps. There were a lot of them, dotted across Europe and Asia.

'Look up,' invited Captain Larkin.

Phryne leaned back and stared up into the blue dome with gold stars which dominated the theatre and gasped.

There, circling on a hidden line, was a scale model of Hinkler's Avro Avian, its propeller revolving slowly in the hot air.

'I say!' said Phryne. 'That *is* impressive.'

'It's mine,' said the captain modestly, 'made it this winter. Luckily both the contending flyers were in Avros. Brought it into the theatre this morning and spent most of the day riggin' it up, to the groan of the stage hand chappies, by the way. Said it couldn't be done without ruining the sightlines, whatever they are. Said it would cast shadows on the stage—apparently there are banks of lights on the dress circle, can't say I've ever noticed 'em. They insisted on hauling it up that high, don't know why. But it looks good, don't it?'

'It does indeed.' Phryne was impressed. 'Very nice work, Captain. And the map over the stage, that's Hinkler's journey?'

'Yes. Started at Croydon, see, then stopped for fuel all the way across. Through Lyons and Dijon to Rome and Naples, then Catania, Tripoli, Benghazi, Sollum, Cairo, then Baghdad, Ur, Bushire, Bandar Abbas, Char, Karachi, Jodhpur, across India to Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Muntok—that's where Miller and Lancaster came to grief—then Surabaya, Bima, Atambua and Darwin. Amazin' journey. All on his own. Have to admire him.'

'Yes, I do,' said Phryne. The model plane circled endlessly against the gold stars of the ceiling, and Phryne wondered what it would be like to set out on a cold night with real stars burning like lamps in the sky, nothing at all to mark your passing but the icy slipstream screaming past, and no one at all to notice if you fell out of the sky but a few startled fish as the pitiful wreckage of balsa wood and canvas floated on the uncaring waves . . .

She shook her head. Night, cold and solitude were too threatening in a plane.

People were leaping to their feet as a diffident figure was shoved to the front of a box.

'There he is,' observed Bunji. 'Poor old Bert.'

He was dark, small, and dreadfully embarrassed, as the captain had predicted. He waved valiantly to the assembled multitude and sat down hurriedly out of sight.

The orchestra came on and the crowd applauded the conductor, as their hero Hinkler was no longer in evidence. The sounds of the pianist's 'A' being repeated on a variety of instruments sent the usual frisson of excitement down Phryne's spine.

'You're sure that this isn't going to be in German,' said Bunji uneasily. 'You promised, Phryne!'

'No, I tell you, it's in English and it's funny. Why do you think it's going to be German? What have you got against Germans? The War's over, you know.'

'I went to a theatre in London when I was there with the Flying Circus,' said Bunji, wounded, 'and there was the most God-awful row going on, all these women in armour shrieking at each other and a

bloke who I wouldn't have cared to meet down an alley trying to hack an anvil in half. They wouldn't let me out until interval and it went on for four hours. Four hours!

'Well, next time you see the word "Wagner" on a poster, don't go in,' said Phryne unsympathetically. 'Now, hush, Bunji, there's a dear.'

'Tell me what's going to happen,' said Bunji.

Since her companion was showing signs of being ready to bolt at the flourish of a Valkyrie's spear Phryne drew a deep breath, consulted her programme, and said quickly, 'It's a parody of a bloodthirsty melodrama plot. Rose Maybud has to choose between a poor farmer called Robin Oakapple, a dashing Jack Tar called Dick Dauntless and the local wicked Squire, Sir Despard Murgatroyd. He belongs to a family that has a curse, they have to commit one bad deed a day or die horribly. She eventually decides to marry Robin. Then Dick and the Squire get together and reveal that Robin is actually Ruthven, Despard's elder brother and therefore he gets the Lordship and the curse and Dick gets the girl.'

'Phryne, that's the silliest plot I ever heard.'

Giving silent thanks that she was not attempting to explain something truly silly, like *Il Trovatore*, Phryne went doggedly on. 'But Rose still can't make up her mind. So there is poor Sir Ruthven Murgatroyd who used to be Robin Oakapple making up his mind to do one bad deed every day. And Mad Margaret who was spurned by Sir Despard is back with him and sane once he is relieved of his curse. Then . . . that'll do for the moment. The curtain's going up.'

The huge red curtain rose slowly on a scene of village life. Various maidens in bodices and print smocks were watching the entrance of a row of bridesmaids, who were lamenting their under-employment. An older woman in widow's garments entered and began to sing of the Ruddigore curse.

'That's Agnes Gault playing Dame Hannah,' observed Phryne, noticing that Bunji was getting interested in the play.

Each Lord of Ruddigore
Despite his best endeavour,
Shall do one crime or more,
Once, every day, for ever!
This doom he can't defy,
However he may try,
For should he stay
His hand, that day
In torture he shall die!

sang the respectable Dame Hannah, outlining the dreadful fate of the Ruddigores. The audience were settling down to enjoy the unfolding of the ridiculous plot. Phryne looked across to Hinkler's box but could not see the daring flyer. She hoped that he liked music, or that he could sleep through it.

A slender young woman in a pale green smock and a froth of petticoats, clutching an etiquette book, denied all intention of marrying.

‘That’s Rose Maybud,’ whispered Phryne to Bunji, ‘played by Leila Esperance.’

‘Nice voice,’ commented Bunji. ‘Pity about the clothes.’

It was true. Leila’s dark slender charm was entirely muffled in the wodge of drapes and gathers, and her celebrated profile was extinguished by the frilled linen sunbonnet. Phryne reflected that Miss Esperance was credited with a truly volcanic temper and felt a pang of pity for the wardrobe mistress who had been required to insert the star into this regrettable costume.

Robin Oakapple sidled onto the stage, a shy young man in farmer’s clothes. He and Rose conducted a conversation remarkable for what it did not say. Robin was tall, blond, and moved with a grace that spoke of ballet training. Phryne consulted the programme.

‘Walter Copland,’ she said. ‘You remember him in *Hamlet*.’

‘He was the gabby old man who got himself spiked through the tapestry,’ agreed Bunji. ‘Washes up well, doesn’t he?’

‘Poor little man!’ sang Rose, and, ‘Poor little maid!’ sang Robin, both managing to avoid mentioning that they were in love with each other.

An old man entered, so convincing an old man that Phryne could practically hear his joints creaking. He revealed that Robin was actually Sir Ruthven Murgatroyd and announced that his foster brother Richard Dauntless was even now approaching.

‘The old man’s Leslie Franklin—and here comes Dick Dauntless, played by Gwilym Evans—well, well.’

The sailor, escorted by a chorus of adoring bridesmaids, entered stage left and the play was transformed.

Gwilym Evans was not tall, but stocky and strong. He swaggered rakishly across the front, the ribbon on his Jack Tar’s hat fluttering behind him. His every movement was vigorous, robust and sure, and Phryne could just catch the wicked grin which he awarded Robin. He was so attractive that he almost stopped the show, yet he was not conventionally beautiful. He had immense gamecock assurance.

‘Well, well,’ murmured Phryne, but Bunji, though not immune to his charm, was frowning.

‘Looks like a bounder to me,’ she commented.

‘Absolutely, my dear Bunji, but a very attractive bounder. Bounders usually are; that’s why they are successful,’ said Phryne as the sailor came down to address the bridesmaids on the subject of maritime glory.

‘I shipped, d’ye see, in a revenue sloop,’ he began, in a voice full, rich and strong, with precise diction which made every scandalous anti-French word audible.

‘He won’t do no good for his brother,’ observed Bunji, quite caught up in the plot. ‘It’s not safe to ask him to make love to the girl instead of Robin!’

So it proved. When Dick Dauntless caught sight of Rose Maybud, he fell in love—the audience saw him do it. He stepped back half a pace and stared at the girl, his burning eyes absorbing her every detail, from her beribboned shoes to her lace cap, at such ambient temperature that Phryne half expected her to burst into flame.

Pleading Robin’s case was wiped from Dick’s mind like chalk off a slate, and Rose Maybud’s objections vanished likewise. Robin re-entered and managed to change her mind again—until she left

the stage with Robin. Dick Dauntless stood alone. He took off his hat, his whole body expressing desperate hurt; although all he did was to look inside the hat, turn, and walk away, one hand to his face as though he was weeping.

Mad Margaret leapt on stage, alternately screeching and whispering, clad mostly in weeds, her hair tangled around her. 'Violet Wiltshire,' said Phryne. 'An imitation Ophelia.'

'Not a good imitation,' said Bunji. 'Far too sensible.'

'He gave me an Italian glance,' mourned Mad Margaret, 'Thus,' and she bent on Rose a perfect imitation of Dick Dauntless's gaze. The burlesque was instantly recognised and got a laugh. 'And made me his,' continued Mad Margaret, suddenly convincing, and Phryne remembered that Gwilym Evans was followed by scandal wherever he went. She would have hazarded good money on the object of Gwilym's latest *affaire de coeur*.

No crime—

'Tis only

That I'm

Love-lonely!

That's all!

sang Mad Margaret, and Phryne detected what critics called 'truth' in her voice.

A group of bucks and blades entered and began to impress the village maidens. Phryne reflected that this was probably roistering—she had always wondered what that meant.

They were followed by a saturnine person. 'Sir Despard Murgatroyd,' murmured Phryne, 'Selwyn Alexander—the patter singer.'

He was the perfect melodrama villain. Moustaches, black hat, dark makeup, a glitter of eyes under the brim and a most professional sneer. He looked personable and a little dangerous as he explained that he was balancing his bad deeds with good ones. Richard Dauntless the sailor, approaching, made an interesting contrast. Beside the sailor's vigour Sir Despard appeared a weary rake; his lustre was dimmed. Dick Dauntless's plan was adopted and the wedding gavotte came to an abrupt end.

'I am that bad baronet,' Robin confessed, and Richard removed Rose Maybud's hand from his. She turned away from the new baronet and smiled on the sailor, and even Bunji was impressed by the intensity of her regard.

'I say,' she whispered, 'there's something between those two.'

Phryne nodded and opened the box of Hillier's chocolates. Bunji prodded them, looking for soft centres.

The bridesmaids went into their chorus as Sir Despard—now reformed—claimed Mad Margaret—now sane—and everyone was dancing and singing except poor Robin Oakapple, now Sir Ruthven Murgatroyd, who put both hands to his head, reeled, staggered, and fell senseless to the stage.

'That was a very convincing fall,' said Bunji, rejecting a truffle and finding a mandarin cream.

'Very convincing,' said Phryne, staring at the fallen actor. Was it her imagination, or was he actually convulsing? The soggy thump with which he had hit the boards had been heard even over the concluding choruses. The bridesmaids danced forward and hid him from the audience in a froth of

frilly white skirts.

The curtain came down, the house lights came up, and there was the rustle of patrons finding bags and shifting in their seats.

‘Well, Bunji, how do you like it?’

‘It’s jolly good,’ said Bunji, finding a strawberry cream. ‘Jolly funny, too. I didn’t know that opera was allowed to be funny.’

‘It wasn’t, until Gilbert got hold of it.’

‘But that girl, Phryne, that Rose Maybud—what a silly girl! So far she’s changed her mind three times.’

‘Yes, I don’t think that Gilbert really admired sweet English maidenhood all that much. All of his delicate little maidens are as tough as nails and as fickle as weathercocks—though I admit that Rose Maybud is an extreme example of the species.’

‘And that sailor—he’s a dashing fellow,’ commented Bunji. ‘I wonder what he’s really like?’ Phryne captured the last coconut cream, her favourite, a split second ahead of Bunji’s probing forefinger.

‘Actors aren’t half as interesting as you’d think—they either expend all their emotions on the stage and are as cold as frogs off it or they have egos the size of a small planet and no topic of conversation that doesn’t begin with “When I played . . .” Tedious, really. Though the manager, Bernard Tarrant, used to be an actor, and he’s an old sweetie-pie so it doesn’t always follow.’

‘Tarrant? The brother of Charles?’

‘Yes, do you know him?’

‘He flies with Bill. Reasonable pilot.’ This was high praise for Bunji. Phryne was about to agree to Captain Larkin’s suggestion of slipping out for a quiet tot when someone came stumbling over outraged patrons’ feet and tugging at her sleeve.

‘Miss Fisher, please, Miss Fisher, can you come with me?’ begged a white-faced young man in full evening dress. ‘Sir Bernard wants to see you. There’s been an accident.’

CHAPTER TWO

ADAM: *Richard Dauntless and Pretty Rose
Maybud are here to ask your consent to
their marriage. Poison their beer.*

Gilbert and Sullivan
Ruddigore

Phryne gave Bunji the chocolates and said, 'Back in a tick, old thing.' She followed the young man down the stairs and round several corners into a dark corridor. It smelt of dust and old oilcloth and paint was peeling off the walls.

Phryne was conducted into an office which contained, reading from right to left, a hysterical older lady, a young woman in evening dress supplying same with smelling salts and handkerchiefs, and Sir Bernard Tarrant and his trademark cigar.

It was rather crowded.

'Phryne my dear, sorry to drag you out of the house, but something's happened.'

'Sir Ruthven?'

'Yes. Dammit, that was the best fall he has ever taken—as soon as I saw him fold in that perfect boneless manner, right on cue, I knew something was wrong.'

'Well, what is wrong?'

'He's been poisoned,' said Bernard reluctantly. 'At least, either that or he gave himself a big dose of something.'

'Does that seem likely?'

'Er . . .' Bernard looked at the women, 'probably not.'

'No!' wailed the old woman, raising a countenance purple with tears. 'Not my Walter! Walter would never leave me! He'd never do such a thing!'

Bernard Tarrant was an old friend of Phryne's. He was tall, stout and always immaculate, from his smooth white hair to the bright red rose in the buttonhole to the toes of his polished patent-leather shoes. Now Bernard, who had always been larger than life, looked smaller than life and Phryne realised that the situation was serious.

'Look, why don't we all sit down. You can dispense some of the good whisky and tell me all about it.'

'So you'll help me,' said Bernard eagerly.

'Don't know. It depends on what you want me to do. If it is to perform in your chorus the answer is

“no”. I’ve done enough performing lately. Come now, Bernard dear, this is not like you. You’re the manager.’

‘Yes, so I am.’ Bernard stood up to his full height, smoothed his blameless waistcoat front, and found the decanter. ‘It’s been an unlucky run,’ he commented. ‘Mrs Copland, have a glass of this, it will make you feel better. Oh, I’m sorry, I haven’t introduced you—Miss Elizabeth Copland, Walter’s sister, and his mother Mrs James Copland. This is the Honourable Phryne Fisher, an old friend of mine and a most enterprising young woman. I’m hoping that she might be able to help me.’

‘I’ve heard of you,’ said Elizabeth. ‘You investigate things.’

‘Yes. How is your brother?’

‘The doctor’s with him now. He says . . .’ She choked, took a sip of neat spirit and choked again, ‘He doesn’t know what it was, but he thinks . . .’ She began to cry.

Phryne left the two women to comfort one another and said crisply, ‘Bernard, you will now tell me what is going on.’

Bernard glanced admiringly at the silver figure perched on his scarred desk. On another woman the outfit would have looked overdone—but on the admirable Miss Fisher it was stunning, a touch outré, and altogether picturesque. So assured. So soignée.

And, he observed, beginning to look so impatient. He pulled himself together.

‘He collapsed on stage. Luckily I fished a G and S-loving doctor out of the audience. Copland must have taken something—the doctor thinks he might . . . er . . .’ At this both ladies wailed.

‘Come for a walk, Phryne dear,’ said Bernard, looking harried. Phryne tucked one hand under his elbow and he led her out into the passage and said rapidly, ‘I need your help. This is only the latest thing that has gone awry. Let me take you to supper, Phryne darling, and I’ll tell you all about it.’

‘If there has been an attempted murder, Bernard, you have to call the police.’

‘But, Phryne, the scandal.’

‘You really must,’ she insisted, and Bernard realised that he really had.

‘Oh, very well,’ he said pettishly, ‘but the scandal will be immense. You see, it’s not just poor Walter. There’s been a lot of . . . well, I’ll tell you about it later. Robert Craven can go on as Sir Ruthven, he’s a good lad enough, but not up to Walter’s skill. Nothing like as good an actor, and G and S requires good acting. I . . . yes?’

A panting boy slid to a halt before the manager.

‘Mr Craven’s asking if he should go on.’

‘Tell him yes and to break a leg. See if they can get the costume off . . .’ He noticed Phryne’s raised eyebrow. ‘Well, no, I suppose not, there’s a change anyway for the second act, go and ask Mrs Pomeroy if she can cobble up a baronet’s garb, and get a move on, Herbert.’

The functionary ran away along the peeling corridor. Phryne released Sir Bernard’s arm. He smelt agreeably of port and cigars and expensive pomade.

‘I’m going back to my seat,’ she said. ‘I’ll come to your office after the show. But I still think you should call it off and send for the cops. They won’t like it if you just clear the stage and try not to think about a murder, Bernard.’

Bernard drew himself up to his full six foot height and snorted theatrically, regaining his old performer’s assurance as he spoke, his voice gaining bass notes and increasing in volume until it rang

like a trumpet. He brandished his cigar like a crusader's banner.

'Miss Fisher, you know the old saying,' he said pompously. 'I'm not going to interrupt the Hinkler gala, the high point of the theatrical calendar—I got the hero of the hour over some mighty stiff bidding from the Prinny, you know—just because someone has tried to kill my Sir Ruthven. Consider our glorious history and the traditions of the Craft. We went on with *The Mikado* in New Zealand when there was an earthquake. We carried on with *Hamlet* through the Zeppelin raids in London and when the stage hands went on strike we did not miss one performance of *Pirates* even though we had to work the lights ourselves and Mollie Webb burned her hands on a follow spot. We soldiered on with *The Merry Widow* after old Charles had a heart attack in the wings and when that soprano whatever-her-name-was set her hair on fire by standing too near a candle. The show must go on!' he declaimed.

Phryne kissed him resignedly and threaded the labyrinth back to her seat, contemplating actors, and deciding that the stage really was another world.

The Hero of the Hour was dragged onto the stage at the end of interval to the cheers of the populace. He smiled weakly.

'Poor Bert,' commented Bunji, discarding the empty chocolate box and applauding with enough vigour to split her gloves. 'This'll take more courage than low flying in fog through them Malay mountains. I hope they aren't going to force the modest old blighter to talk.'

'They certainly are going to demand a speech. Hard cheese if you don't like being a hero. His mother looks pleased, though,' returned Phryne. The small bundle that was Bert Hinkler's mother was radiating pride and delight.

'Who wouldn't, with a son like that?' observed Captain Larkin. 'Yes, he's going to talk. Silence for the hero.'

'This has been a wonderful reception,' said Bert Hinkler with a fair show of firmness, 'and it's nice to be here. And the performance has been really wonderful and I wouldn't think of interrupting it any further,' he added, and almost bolted off stage and out of the public eye. And off-stage he firmly remained, despite three cheers of such deafening force that plaster flaked off the ceiling and snowed down on the audience.

'That's Bert,' sighed Bunji. 'It's no use expecting him to be a lion. He's good at flying, not talking. The ladies sat down again and the curtain opened on a gloomy hall, lined with portraits.

Robert Craven entered, as Sir Ruthven, and managed the patter song with Old Adam competently. He had little presence, but the part carried him. The audience did not appear to have noticed the substitution.

Enter Dick Dauntless and his Rose, singing gaily that she was a neat little, sweet little craft. Sir Ruthven's attempts to abduct Rose were foiled by the production of a Union Jack, a piece of burlesque which Dick played with complete, self-absorbed seriousness which was irresistibly comic. Phryne laughed aloud, and Dick Dauntless heard her; there was a heightened alertness in his manner, though he did not deviate from his part by one iota.

Releasing Rose to go off with the sailor, Sir Ruthven confronted his ancestors.

The lights dimmed. 'Painted emblems of a race all accurst in days of yore' stepped down from the frames and railed at him. 'Alas, poor ghost!' said the kneeling descendant, reminding Phryne of Prince Hamlet—could Gilbert have really been burlesquing *Hamlet*? Well, why not? It was only a play. She chuckled when she considered what a particularly pompous Shakespearan actor of her acquaintance

would think of her calling *Hamlet* ‘only a play’.

Meanwhile the ghosts had sung a fast, whirling song stating that being a ghost was not all that bad. Robert Craven as Sir Ruthven was managing the dialogue with the ghost of his father fairly well until Sir Roderick said, ‘Very well—let the agonies commence.’

The ghosts circled him as he fell and writhed on the floor, but they did not speak. The spectres danced more quickly, and someone bent to whisper to the recumbent actor. Finally he gasped out his line.

‘Stop it, will you? I want to speak.’

Sir Roderick dragged him to his feet, holding him strongly around the body, and omitted a whole chunk of the play by signalling the chorus into ‘He Yields!’

‘Something’s wrong,’ said Phryne, as the ghosts completed their dance and retreated to their frames. Sir Roderick handed his son over to Old Adam, who announced unilaterally that he was going to kidnap a lady and escorted his master off stage.

Despard and Margaret came in, dressed in sober black, announcing that they were now very respectable, and danced a blameless dance. Margaret requested her new husband to use the word ‘Basingstoke’ to restore her to sanity and they launched into the patter song with a shaky Sir Ruthven.

Phryne noticed that either one or the other of the black-clad pair kept a hand under his elbow. Something was wrong with this Sir Ruthven Murgatroyd as well.

Did someone dislike *Ruddigore* so much that they had poisoned both Sir Ruthvens?

It seemed unlikely.

Meanwhile, on the stage, Adam brought in Dame Hannah, fighting tooth and nail. Being dragged across difficult country had not improved her temper, and she attacked Sir Ruthven, who was rescued by his father.

It then transpired that Sir Roderick ought not to have been dead—as refusing to commit a dreadful deed exposed the Murgatroyds to death, that was effectively suicide and suicide was certainly a dreadful deed, therefore Sir Roderick ought not to have been dead, and suddenly wasn’t. He sang a touching duet with Dame Hannah.

Phryne was staring at Sir Ruthven. In his embrace with the utterly faithless Rose, he was leaning on her heavily, but she was bearing him up and still contriving to speak.

‘When I was a simple farmer, I believe you loved me?’

‘Madly, passionately,’ answered Rose, staggering under his weight.

‘But when I became a bad baronet, you very properly loved Richard instead?’

‘Passionately, madly!’ replied that blameless flower of British womanhood.

‘But if I should turn out not to be a bad baronet after all, how should you love me then?’

‘Madly, passionately!’

‘As before?’

‘Why of course!’

‘Darling!’ groaned Sir Ruthven, gathered his courage, and sang his finale. Rose, keeping a firm grip on him, answered. The jilted Richard stated that he would take the chief bridesmaid, destined for a life of ‘bread and cheese and kisses’. His wicked charm carried over the footlights effortlessly; Phryne

smiled, and Bunji blushed.

‘He’s a rotter,’ she muttered. ‘But a dashed attractive rotter.’

‘Happy the lily when kissed by the bee,’ sang the chorus, and the red and gold curtain came down.

Subsequent and repeated curtain calls revealed no sight of either Sir Ruthven Murgatroyd.

‘You busy tonight, Miss Fisher? We’ve got a bit of a “do” on at my place for poor old Bert, he’ll need a few restorers after facing this lot,’ invited Captain Larkin. ‘Bunji’s coming.’

‘No thanks, Captain, really, have to sup with an old friend,’ said Phryne, suppressing a private predilection for airmen—in any case both her powder and her shot would have been wasted on Hinkle it was well known.

Phryne gathered her cloak around her and walked quickly through the thinning crowds to the stage door. Something stirred in the gloom under the stair, and a man tacked towards her. He was the doorkeeper, a bowed figure in a greatcoat and scarf. He had evidently been keeping out the cold with one of the cheaper forms of tawny port.

‘Yes, Miss?’ Phryne recoiled under a pub-cellar exhalation and said, ‘Can you tell Sir Bernard that Miss Fisher is here?’

‘Erb! Nip up and tell Sir B that Miss Fisher’s ’ere!’

A boy wearing carpet slippers and a dark suit evidently made for a younger brother sauntered for the stairs. His slowness evidently displeased the port-swiller.

‘Get a move on!’ he snarled, and flung a boot. The bare calves flashed upwards and the boy yelped something very derogatory and returned the boot, which bounced and was fielded with a facility that spoke of a cricketing youth.

‘Sorry,’ said the doorman, putting the boot on a shelf in his little box and settling his greatcoat. ‘Cheeky little blighter. Knows I can’t chase ’im. Me bronicals are something crook in this weather, ever since the Somme they been bad. I went as a stretcher bearer—wanted to see what glorious conflict was like, see? Weren’t like the Bard says and that’s a fact.’ He coughed experimentally. ‘Now, Miss, what’s goin’ on in the ’ouse? I reckonise you—you’re Sir B’s friend what’s a detective. What’s been ’appenin’? No one ever tells me anythin’, but I’ve ’ad to call for a doctor and now ’Is Nibs says he wants the cops.’

‘Someone has been poisoning your Sir Ruthvens,’ said Phryne. ‘Who could have done that, do you think?’

‘Plenty of reason for wantin’ Mr Ruddy Copland gone,’ said the man, consideringly. ‘Rude. Difficult. ’Ard to please. Never a good word to throw to a dog and mean as a tick. Nothin’ against Robbie Craven though—nice young lad. But there’s been funny things ’appenin’. Funny even for the Maj, I mean.’

‘What sort of things?’ Phryne leaned against the doorman’s box and drew her cloak closer. It was freezing in the small corridor. ‘Shouldn’t they get you a heater of some sort? It’s cold, no wonder you’re wearing a greatcoat.’

‘Yair. Perishin’. No one cares about a doorkeeper. I was lucky to get this job, though. You’d never believe that me and Sir B is the same age—somethin’ cruel, innit? Known ’im for a long time, I ’ave—I been with G and S since I was a nipper.’

‘I thought you had a London accent,’ said Phryne, wondering why stage-door entrances were invariably so shabby.

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