

# Away with the Fairies

A Phryne Fisher Mystery

Kerry Greenwood

Poisoned Pen Press



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*This book is dedicated to my dearest twin, Jenny Pausacker.  
With thanks as always to A.W.G., J.S.L.G., A.D.P.,  
D.L.J.G., J.P. and S.T. They know who they are...  
And to Jenny Darling, proprietor of Wee Nooke.*



The strong subject, notwithstanding the efforts against him, survives and acquires fresh vigour. The people again cherish their sovereign, and the plotters have wrought their own overthrow.

Hexagram 23: Po  
*The I Ching Book of Changes*



# Chapter One

*In concealment of illumination, it is beneficial to be upright in difficulty.*

Hexagram 36: Ming I  
*The I Ching Book of Changes*

‘Drat,’ said Mercy Porter, balancing the tray on a concrete cherub as she tugged at the latch on the Garden Apartment gate. ‘Damn,’ she said aloud as her fingernail snagged and broke. She nudged the gate open with her knee, marking her white apron—clean on that morning, and she had to do her own washing—with moss. As there were really no other expletives she could use aloud without imminent danger of the sack, she bit her lip and steadied the tray.

There had to be something else she could do for a living in this modern year of 1928, she thought, stepping carefully along the paved path through a forest of brightly painted stone figures. I hate all this useless rubbish. Why fill up a garden with statues instead of plants? That gnome with the fishing rod is always out to ladder my stockings.

She avoided the fishing gnome, ascended three stone steps and knocked at the pink door of the Garden Apartment. That Miss Lavender always went crook if her tea was cold, and the

delay in the kitchen while the cook had been telling the grocer's boy about her hay fever had made Mercy ten minutes late. The tea would be stewed if she didn't get it on the table quick smart, and then there'd be hell to pay.

The door remained shut. Mercy put the tray down on a convenient bird table and plied the fancy brass knocker in the shape of the Lincoln Imp hard enough to jar that demonic person's teeth out. The garden was silent and soggy on this wet, sullen morning. The blows of the knocker seemed to echo through the house.

The pink door swung open. Not like Miss Lavender not to lock her door. Mercy went in, tray first, kicking the door shut behind her, and turned sharp left into the sitting room of Wee Nooke. Miss Lavender had caused this name to be painted up over the door in letters of a pink which blushed for its presumption. The apartment, which had once been a gardener's shed before being extensively rebuilt, was overwhelmingly decorated and smelt, as always, of a potpourri of perfumes. Lavender, rose, almond blossom, talcum powder and a slight under-hint of gin. Mercy sneezed and wondered if hay fever was catching. Where was the old chook, anyway?

The tenant of the house was sitting at the table with her back to the maid.

'Miss Lavender?' asked Mercy. 'I've brought your breakfast. Nice hot tea,' she added encouragingly, pushing a music box with a fairy doll dressed in bright red gauze on top across the table and setting the tray down with a thump.

Miss Lavender did not move. She sat alarmingly still with her head bowed into her clasped hands as though she was praying. When Mercy, who had seven breakfasts still to distribute, touched Miss Lavender's shoulder, she slid sideways with a peculiarly boneless wriggle and fell to the floor. Her face was perfectly blue (which clashed dreadfully with her pink garments) and she was, Mercy was sure, extremely dead.

Mercy made it to the door and screamed for help before she fainted.



Phryne Fisher had dined the night before with Jane and Ruth, her thirteen-year-old adoptive daughters, a couple of wharfies called Bert and Cec, a policeman called Hugh Collins, her maid and companion Dorothy (Dot) Williams, a small humble dog called Molly because she looked like one, and the cat, Ember. This had constituted a reasonably merry party. A huge and delicious dinner had been cooked by Mrs. Butler and served by Mr. Butler. Much champagne had been consumed and the matter of the robbery from the Dean's safe thoroughly thrashed out. Other stories from her trip to Sydney had not been told except in a severely edited form. She had distributed the presents—a wristwatch each for Hugh, Bert and Cec, a crocodile handbag for Dot, a book on anatomy for Jane and, for the sensible Ruth, *Plats Nouveaux* by the celebrated chef M Paul Reboux, which might have the double benefit of tickling Ruth's palate and improving her French. Phryne hoped that she would not find his disrespectful comments on champagne too inflammatory. Phryne had never meant to acquire daughters. But, since the rescue of Jane from a nasty destination and the removal of Ruth from domestic slavery, they had adorned her household. Though they had also introduced Molly. Her dependants and friends were all well and gratifyingly delighted that she had returned from Sydney and still loved them. And she did.

She loved them even more this morning because the girls were at school, Dot had gone for a bracing early walk, the animals were in the kitchen (the butcher's boy had just called) and Hugh, Bert and Cec had gone home to their several virtuous couches. Therefore Phryne was breakfasting alone, which was the way she felt breakfast ought to be taken. Phryne had never woken up wondering who or where she was, though in her Apache French phase she had been a little in the dark about who was reposing beside her. She felt that the day should not be bounced in on with rude energy, but carefully and delicately seduced into being, and children and animals were sadly impervious to reason on this matter.

She sipped another sip of aromatic coffee, forked in her last mouthful of perfectly prepared *omelette aux fines herbes*, and prepared for the exquisite pleasure of lighting the first gasper of the day.

She had just fixed the cigarette in its long ivory holder and raised the lighter to ignite it when the doorbell rang.

'Damn,' said Phryne. She lit the cigarette anyway. But at least she was now properly awake, and the day, though soggy, appeared to have been aired. Who could be at the door? Too early for the post. A delivery? They usually went to the kitchen door. A visitor? No one knew that she was back as yet. An announcement would soon appear in social notes in *Table Talk*, of course, along the lines of 'The Hon. Miss Phryne Fisher has returned from her sojourn in Sydney to the delight of all her many admirers.' Then, no doubt, she would have callers.

Phryne avoided the undesirables by warning Mr. Butler in advance that she was never at home to bores. He seemed to have a remarkable ability to weed them out at the door. When taxed with this, he replied magisterially that years of work at a gentleman's club had given him a certain facility. Phryne could only smile and approve.

Footsteps sounded in the hall. Mr. Butler was admitting someone, taking their coat and umbrella and ushering them into the small parlour. Phryne blew a smoke ring and waited. Mr. Butler appeared.

'Detective Inspector Robinson, Miss Fisher,' he announced, in tones more fitting to the breaking of news of the tragic death of a near relative.

'I wonder how he knew I was back? Please clear away, Mr. B, and bring me some more coffee and some tea for the Detective Inspector. I'll ask him if he'd like some breakfast,' she added. 'You know how he likes Mrs. B's cuisine.'

'Yes, Miss Fisher,' said Mr. Butler, bowing a little at this appreciation of Mrs. Butler's skill. He carried the detritus of the feast out to the kitchen while Phryne went to find her favourite policeman.

He was sitting on a cane chair, staring into the depths of a bowl of irises as though it might contain the answer to the question which was dragging his brows together. He was an unmemorable, subfusc man, with mid brown hair and mid brown eyes. Phryne had learned early in their acquaintance that if she looked away from Jack Robinson, she could not envisage his face. It was a very useful attribute for a policeman, and she supposed that his wife had some mnemonic which recalled him to mind. Or possibly he was tattooed with his name and address. Phryne tore her mind away from an indelicate speculation on where this information might be placed, and coughed to announce her presence. Robinson looked up from the irises. They had obviously not been informative. He looked stricken.

‘Jack, dear, how very nice to see you!’ she exclaimed, putting out both hands to draw him to his feet. ‘Do come in and have some tea. Or perhaps some breakfast?’

‘Just tea, thank you,’ he answered. Phryne was wearing a cherry red dressing gown and a Spanish shawl of far too many colours. Robinson had always admired her adamant refusal to wear pastels. The Spanish shawl, embroidered in red and blue and gold, dazzled his eye and provided a nice splotch of colour in the sea-green, sea-blue decor. Phryne herself looked well. Her holiday had agreed with her, it seemed. She looked even more like a Dutch doll than usual: pink cheeks, bright green eyes, shiny black hair cut in a cap.

‘You’re looking fine, Miss Fisher,’ he said with an effort. ‘Decided not to stay in the city by the bay, then?’

‘Too fast,’ said Phryne, fanning herself with a corner of the shawl. ‘Too busy and too, too hot. I have decided that I don’t like the tropics. Come along,’ she said, leading the detective out of the front room and into her own parlour, cool as the inside of a seashell. The table bore a fresh pot of coffee and a Chelsea teapot shaped like a thatched cottage with matching milk jug, sugar basin and cups and saucers. Phryne loved this set because the cups were big enough for a reasonable amount of coffee, and Mrs. Butler doted on the design.

It seemed to affect Jack Robinson. He winced.

‘Whatever is the matter, Jack, dear?’ asked Phryne. ‘Rheumatism or aesthetic twinges?’

‘Probably the latter, Miss Fisher. Not that I’m saying anything against your teapot, though, if it’s got tea in it. I’m parched.’

‘It certainly has. But say the word and I’ll have it transferred into my new Art Moderne silver pot—perfectly bare, just a shape.’

‘No, no, please. It’s real pretty and that sugar basin in the shape of a haystack is nice. It’s just that I’ve been out to a suspicious death this morning and I’m a bit sensitive on...er...’

‘Porcelain which is just too, too cunning for words?’ asked Phryne, pouring.

‘Er...’

‘Overdosed on what the Americans call “cute”?’

‘Just that. You never saw such stuff. Thanks.’ The room was silent except for the soft, soothing noise of a policeman absorbing tea. Phryne was intrigued. Jack Robinson had a habit of quoting Shakespeare, who he considered a good working poet with a word for every situation, but she had never suspected him of being at all precious. And that Chelsea set was worth a small fortune. It was one of the few things that Phryne had retained from her childhood. The only reason her father hadn’t sold it in his indigent days had been that Phryne herself had hidden one of the cups, delighted by the country scene on the side and the fluted edging. Then her father had succeeded to the title, acquired a large fortune (his grandfather had married an American heiress) and had given the set to Phryne with a fine generous flourish. She had restored the missing cup, which tripled its value. Who was Jack Robinson to object to her Chelsea china?

The third draught seemed to have restored some life to the wasted frame of this unappreciative officer of the law. He set the empty cup down gently into its parent saucer. Phryne was slightly mollified.

‘Now, if you’ll not object to my pipe...’ he hinted. Phryne waved a pink-tipped finger. Her cigarette holder described a perfect ellipse.

‘Light up, and I’m warning you, Jack, dear, if you don’t tell me what this is all about fairly soon, I’ll self-combust.’

‘Heard of an authoress called Marcella Lavender? Also known as Rosebud Peachblossom?’

Phryne stifled a giggle. ‘No, never. I’m sure I’d remember the name if I’d ever heard it before,’ she told Robinson. ‘What does she write?’

‘Books for kids,’ said Robinson. ‘Fairies. You know. Little naked flying creatures.’

‘Usually seen over rather good botanical drawings. Yes, I know the kind of thing. I had a flower fairy alphabet when I was small, but I grew out of it rather quickly. A is for Appleblossom, B is for Buttercup...’ Jack Robinson was nodding his head gloomily. ‘That was one of hers?’

‘Yes. She did masses of them. And her cottage is crammed with pictures of fairies—no, you really have to see it, Phryne. You won’t believe it.’

Phryne noted that Jack had relaxed enough to call her Phryne, which was all to the good.

‘And...’ she prompted.

‘Well, the cook’s assistant took her her breakfast this morning and found the door unlocked and the authoress dead as a doornail. Just keeled over at the table.’

‘Oh? And what makes this a suspicious death?’

‘Nothing in the dying of it. Police surgeon says she died of respiratory failure consequent on possible thrombosis of the pulmonary artery. She was as blue as a cornflower,’ added Jack Robinson, waxing unexpectedly poetic. ‘With pink splotches.’

‘Oh.’

‘But he’ll know more after the autopsy. Thing is, you see, she’d been to see us. Getting threatening letters. Someone threw a brick through her window. Felt she was being followed. Last week she was almost run down by a car. Just managed to jump out of the way in time. No damage except a fright and a pair of ruined stockings. No description of the car and no witnesses. Nothing much we could do.’

'So you thought she was a dotty old lady,' said Phryne gently.

'Yes, well, yes. We get a lot of complaints from people who have a few kangaroos loose in the top paddock.' Jack's stubby finger circled near his ear.

'Away, in fact,' said Phryne, 'with the fairies?'

Jack grimaced at the comment. 'Persecution complex, that's what they call it. Lots of people have it. And they're dead convincing.'

'Until you let them talk some more,' said Phryne, addressing the flower-filled grate. She did not want to look at Robinson, who would never forgive himself if he broke down in front of a woman. 'Then it comes out, whatever it is. I was on a train once with a perfectly charming old gentleman who was telling me all about the genealogy of the local gentry and I thought he was quite sane until he informed me that he was the illegitimate son of Queen Victoria and thus the rightful ruler of England. I had to call him "Your Majesty" for five stations until I could manage to transfer into a Ladies Only carriage. Nice man, though. He conferred an earldom on my first-born son.'

'You're right,' said Robinson. 'And even though she was real irritating, she wasn't insane. I took her through the story several times. She showed me the notes. She might have written 'em herself, of course.'

'How did she come to see you, Jack? Poison pen letters aren't your usual fare.'

'No, well, she was a distant relative of the Chief, and he put her onto me. I did what I should have done,' said Robinson miserably. 'I sent a constable around to examine the house, I told the foot patrol to walk past and see that all was well twice a night, I told her to call me if she got any more notes, and I told her she wasn't in any real danger. I can hear my own voice saying it. "These poison pen writers sound nasty but they never actually hurt anyone," I said.'

'But it's true,' said Phryne. 'They usually don't.'

'Not true this time,' said Jack Robinson, puffing at his pipe.

‘But she died of a pulmonary thrombosis,’ said Phryne.

‘Maybe,’ said Robinson. ‘Maybe she was frightened to death. You should have seen her face.’

‘No, I shouldn’t, not so soon after breakfast. What do you want me to do, Jack?’

‘Come with me and have a look at her apartment. I never saw a place so...so...feminine. I reckon you’d get a lot more out of it than I have.’

‘Being female,’ agreed Phryne.

‘I’m not feeling too good about this,’ said Robinson, in case Phryne hadn’t noticed. ‘I did all the required things, of course, but I really never took her seriously. I never believed her. Now she’s dead...’

‘You’re feeling guilty,’ diagnosed Phryne.

‘I did what I could,’ said Robinson stubbornly. ‘I couldn’t have done any more. Not with no witnesses. But I feel like I owe it to the old chook to at least take a close look at her death. Might be nothing in it. Probably isn’t. But...’

Phryne decided that Robinson in his present mood could occupy the next couple of hours in going round and round in logical circles. Phryne had other things to do. Arrange some parties. Visit a dressmaker. Find out when her lover Lin Chung was expected home from his silk-buying trip to Shanghai. His last letter had mentioned the name of the ship *SS Gold Mountain*. Odd name for a ship. Phryne wondered if it had lost something in the translation. This would involve a visit to that alarming old woman, Lin Chung’s grandmother. The matriarch of the Lin family lived in a house on Little Bourke Street and, although she accepted the relationship as inevitable, she approved of Phryne in the same way she approved of cholera morbis. Interviews with her were always testing.

Mrs. Lin could wait. Phryne poured the detective another cup.

‘I’ll just get dressed,’ she said, patting him lightly in passing. ‘What sort of day is it?’

‘Wet but not cold,’ said Jack Robinson, already reviving under Phryne’s influence. He watched, with affection, the red robe and Spanish shawl flick past him on their way up the stairs and he drank the tea.

## Chapter Two

*Concealment of illumination in a basket is beneficial if correct.*

Hexagram 36: Ming I  
*The I Ching Book of Changes*

The landlady greeted Phryne at the wrought iron gate in a rough-cast wall which would have kept out an invading army. She held out a distracted hand which had a small, pink feathered bundle in it, then almost dropped the dead bird in an attempt to transfer it to her other hand so that she could take Phryne's.

'The Hon. Miss Fisher, this is Mrs. Needham,' said Jack Robinson. 'I'll take that, Mrs. Needham. Miss Lavender's bird, was it?'

'Yes, poor little thing, as soon as his mistress went away he must have just piped a little song and then he died. He was on the floor with her. Well, they know, don't they?' said Mrs. Needham, fixing Phryne with the meaningful look of the true believer. 'Animals always know, don't they?'

'Indeed,' murmured Phryne. Something was snuffling at her heel. Looking at Mrs. Needham, Phryne was prepared to bet that it would be a small, spoiled, insanitary and probably neurotic dog, possibly a Pekingese. She was also prepared to discourage it privily if it showed signs of scrabbling at her silk stockings.

Mrs. Needham wore a severe shade of mauve, the colour of Victorian half-mourning. She was about sixty. Her hair had not been shorn in the modern fashion but was secured in a bun which was showing signs of fraying at the edges. Her hands were cold and her nose red, signs of emotion or a defective liver—or possibly hay fever, as her cardigan pockets were bulging with handkerchiefs. She led the way through a small reception room redolent of beeswax furniture polish and into a corridor which opened into a square garden.

The old house had been divided into apartments quite recently. There were still traces of the builders' occupation: a few drops of paint on the path, a lost stencil lurking in the agapanthus, and a faint but pursuing scent of wet stonework, or was that emanating from the cellar? It had been a big, solid, Victorian house with room for a family of eleven children and twenty servants. Impossible to keep up in these parlous times, when servants would rather work in the pickle factory and most women of high social class knew how to avoid having eleven offspring, or any at all.

'I inherited the big house when the old Mistress died,' said Mrs. Needham. 'I was with her at the end.' She closed her eyes in the conventional gesture of pious devotion. 'Terribly old she was, no children of her own, and all the grandnephews were killed in the Great War, and her only nephew, too. Captain, he was. So she left it to me,' said Mrs. Needham with an undercurrent of smugness. Probably against spirited opposition from the rest of the family, Phryne guessed, who hadn't bothered to visit their aged relative while she was alive but became remarkably gerontophilic when she was dead.

'There was a bit of money, so I had it divided into apartments. Serviced apartments,' she emphasised, taking out a wet hankie and sneezing. 'Of course they can do their own cooking, if they wish. But luckily Cook wanted to stay, and I only need a few girls part-time to clean and so on. The gardener left, retired to live with his daughter, so I made his accommodation into the Garden Apartment and Miss Lavender thought it was so beautiful! The

first time she saw it she clasped her hands together and told me she'd never live anywhere else in the world.'

Phryne reflected that Miss Lavender had kept her promise, but said nothing. The big house was a respectable and probably expensive place to live. The apartments would be of a reasonable size, not like these modern hatboxes with no room to swing even a very cooperative mouse, and by the scent of lunch preparing, the food would be good. Miss Needham mentioned the rent and Phryne heard Jack Robinson gasp.

'How long had Miss Lavender been here?' she asked quickly, to cover the sound. Miss Needham, however, had heard it.

'I'm sure that it's a reasonable rate, Detective Inspector, considering the service. Miss Lavender never had any complaints. She lived here from the first. Almost a year I've been open. And now a thing like this has to happen. Poor Miss Lavender! She never told me that she had a weak heart.'

'This is a very nice sunken garden,' said Phryne appreciatively. It had been laid out by someone who had seen the Boboli Gardens in Florence, or at least pictures of them. There was a fountain made of a series of shallow dishes which tinkled into a pool where fat goldfish swam under the waterlilies at their approach. The concrete walls had been limewashed and set with Della Robbia plaques in blue and white. Marigolds grew all around the edges of a very neat square of lawn. White painted birdbaths and raised pedestals bore lobelia and nasturtiums. There were cane garden seats under awnings made of natural canvas. One cumquat tree rose from a terracotta pot and two bay trees flanked the entrance to the house. Very clean, very Tuscan. One looked for the Medici crest. Someone had devoted a lot of time and care to it.

'Pretty,' approved Phryne.

'Yes. Bit bare, though, don't you find? Mr. Bell in number six asked me if I'd mind if he 'potted about in it'—well, gentlemen have their fancies. I said I didn't mind. The other ladies and gentlemen seem to find it soothing. They have little picnics out here when the weather is suitable. But Miss Lavender was

responsible for this,' she said proudly, taking them along a path which wound far more than necessary and was entirely lined with brightly painted stone gnomes in a variety of poses.

Something was still snuffling at Phryne's heel, and now she felt the warning nip of teeth. Without looking round, she gave a sharp shove with her foot, and was rewarded with a yelp.

'Oh dear, I seem to have trodden on your dog,' said Phryne, as Mrs. Needham scooped up a snuffling, affronted, fat, mangy Pekingese which immediately bit her on the finger.

'He's upset, isn't he?' crooned Mrs. Needham. 'Poor little Ping. Did the lady stand on you? Poor Ping!'

Phryne was suddenly very sorry for Mrs. Needham, a sentiment which would have astounded the lady. She said to Ping, 'I apologise, Ping,' and got in a faster than light pat before the dog's reflexes had recovered enough from the insult to snap at her. Mrs. Needham seemed mollified but carried the creature with her as she led the way up the stone gnome path to the open door of a cottage which called itself Wee Nooke.

Phryne closed her eyes briefly. No wonder Jack Robinson had winced at a Chelsea tea set. Here was 'cute' in unbearable profusion. The apartment was small. It had a table in the bow window, overlooking the sunken garden. There was a sitting area with furniture piled with magazines and what looked like proofs. Behind that was a small kitchen and a smaller bathroom. A flight of highly polished wooden stairs led, presumably, to a bedroom above.

And every surface, horizontal or vertical, was covered in fairies. Bits which could not have fairies painted, embroidered, embossed, stencilled, hung or depicted on carpet were painted a peculiarly penetrating shade of fuschia pink. Puppet fairies hung from the ceiling. Gauze wings brushed the wall in the breeze from the open door, sounding like moths. The air was heavy with the scents of rose, lavender, almond blossom, and was that gin, perhaps?

'Thanks very much, Mrs. Needham,' said Jack Robinson. 'Now we'll be a while, so perhaps we could see you on the way out?'

‘Very well, Detective Inspector.’ She was still a little stiff with a policeman who had dared to comment on her perfectly reasonable charges. ‘Oh, I’d forgotten—what about Bluebird?’

‘I’ll take care of him,’ said Jack Robinson.

‘Bluebird?’ asked Phryne, when Ping had been carried regally away. ‘I thought it was pink.’

‘Probably named after Maeterlinck’s book *The Blue Bird*,’ commented Robinson. ‘Very popular with sentimental people, I’m told. Well, Phryne? What do you think?’

‘Why don’t you go out and find a suitable spot to inter Bluebird, and leave me here?’ suggested Phryne. The policeman’s presence was offending the extreme femininity of the room. He couldn’t have been more out of place if he’d been an eight foot prizefighter smoking a cigar. Phryne sat down at the table where the previous tenant had been found dead, and looked at the room.

Fairies everywhere, yes, admitted. More pink than the mind could comfortably cope with, yes. Idly, Phryne wound up the musical box on the desk. It was surmounted by a celluloid fairy doll dressed in bright red gauze. It tinkled a tune which Phryne suspected was called ‘Fairy Bells’ and the fairy twirled around on her perch. The machinery gave a gasping wrench and died, leaving the fairy in mid-pirouette. Even the musical box missed its mistress, apparently. Very, very ornamental, if you liked that kind of thing. But underneath the tinsel, there lay the real woman. Who had she been, this Miss Lavender? Someone who really enjoyed ‘Fairy Bells’?

A woman with a good business, that was clear.

Phryne saw paintings in all stages, from preliminary sketch to varnished and ready to frame, and in all forms, each carefully labelled and piled into neat stacks. Underneath a wicker chair (pink) was a supply of brown paper, packing labels, cardboard and string. And, of course, pink tissue paper for the initial covering. A large pink-lidded basket disclosed water colours, brushes, paper and prepared stretchers. The desk drawers contained headed paper (pink) and a neat rose-coloured folder full of clipped bills, despatch notes, invoices and orders. Things

were booming in the fairy business, it appeared. Phryne took a pink notepad and scribbled down some figures.

Good, but not good enough, not for Mrs. Needham's charges. Miss Lavender must have had some other source of income. Bank statements revealed that she was paid quite a solid amount every month from 'Marshall and Co.' Now what did Marshall and Co. do?

Further investigation revealed that Marshall and Co. had been paying Miss Lavender this sum every month for the whole length of her tenancy, and possibly before. The Commonwealth Bank, which the departed might have patronised because it had a women's banking room, reported that Miss Lavender drew cheques to Mrs. Needham and to Cash for her own expenses, and had a balance of two hundred and seventy-five pounds eight shillings and threepence as at the end of the last calendar year.

A nice round sum, thought Phryne. Saving for her old age, possibly. She got up and inspected the kitchen. The bench was clean and dry and the sink looked unused. The rubbish bin contained several envelopes, an orange rind, some brown wrapping and string and a crumpled letter.

"'You bitch you bitch I'll finish you you bitch,'" said Phryne aloud. 'Not very informative. Common typing paper and—of course—not considerate enough to include a return address or a name. And you can't get fingerprints off paper. I'll have to have a look at the one which the deceased gave to Jack.'

Phryne stuck the letter in her pocket and looked into the bathroom. A small wash-place blushing with rosy tiles and even a pink WC. The bathroom cabinet contained aspirin, a prescription bottle of codeine marked 'For severe headaches' and the usual toiletries. Miss Lavender had had headaches. But a headache hadn't killed her. Phryne noted the name of the prescribing doctor and continued.

Upstairs was a surprise. It wasn't pink.

The bed was neatly made—had Miss Lavender not slept there, or did she make her own bed? It was covered with a spread of a quiet fawn shade. The brown and blue Persian carpet was

patterned with small intricate lozenges. There were no decorations except for a few framed pictures of Highland scenes which had probably come with the apartment. Next to the bed was a polished mahogany box containing letters in various hands, all in slit envelopes with notes scribbled on them. A stenographer's notebook and pencil lay on the bedside table beside a pile of mystery novels, a work of devotion and a half-empty glass of water. Beside that was a silver salver bearing an almost empty bottle of gin, a bottle in which tonic water had gone flat, a glass and a sliced lemon. That explained the faint under-scent of alcohol. Miss Lavender liked a private snootful, that was plain.

Phryne prowled. The relief to the eye of this quiet, respectable room, obviously inhabited by a woman of means and sober taste, was remarkable.

The wardrobe door was open. Phryne ran her hands through the respectable clothes, emptying pockets and handbags and wishing she had Dot with her. Dot was good at searching. Phryne piled all the crumpled handkerchiefs, bus tickets and chocolate wrappers into the mahogany box and carried it downstairs with her. There she was assaulted afresh by fairies, and swore that if one ever fluttered through her window one night she would swat it flat with considerable pleasure.

She stood at the door, watching Jack Robinson sitting at his ease on a cane chair, talking to a Latin lover sort of young man in flannel bags and a gardening apron. She turned back to look once more at Miss Lavender's room. There was something glaringly wrong, and it itched at her consciousness. Fairies, indeed, they were enough to confuse the senses, and she had explained the scents—gin upstairs and oil sleeves over every lightbulb downstairs. The desk with its musical box, the piles of paintings ready to despatch, a large pink fairy puppet hanging from the staircase...

No. She couldn't pin it down. Perhaps the letters would enlighten her.

As Phryne approached Jack Robinson rose and introduced the darkish, youngish man. 'The Hon. Phryne Fisher, Mr. Bell. I was just telling him how much I like his garden.'

‘Yes, it’s splendid,’ agreed Phryne warmly. ‘Very Italian. Boboli Gardens, hmm?’

Mr. Bell ducked his head modestly. ‘I like pottering about,’ he said, as if confessing to a dreadful sin. ‘So peaceful, gardens.’ He lifted his face to the light and Phryne saw a puckered scar from a burn which rose from under his collar and disfigured his olive-skinned jaw and cheek. ‘After the war I went travelling. Just me. And when I came to Florence I fell ill. When I started to recover they took me every day to the Boboli. When I saw this sunken garden here I couldn’t resist it.’

‘You were a flier,’ said Phryne gently. She had seen such burns before.

‘Once,’ said Mr. Bell. ‘Now I do a little stockbroking and a little antique trading and mow the grass.’

‘And that’s enough?’ murmured Phryne.

‘It has to be.’ He looked away from her and coughed. Then swallowed and went on in a louder, hasty voice, ‘Now, you wanted to ask me some questions, eh, Miss Fisher? How did I get on with Miss Lavender? I fought ferociously to keep her rotten gnomes out of my garden, but otherwise I had nothing to do with her.’

‘Did you quarrel with her recently?’ asked Phryne.

‘No, she gave up on the gnomes months ago. Mrs. Needham told her that she could have the path up to Wee Nooke and I had the sunken garden and that was that. She seemed to accept it. You’d never know from looking at her that she had such rotten taste, you know. Quiet sort of woman, nicely dressed. But you never know with people.’

‘No,’ said Phryne curiously. ‘You never do. Who else lives here?’

‘There’s nine apartments,’ said Mr. Bell, relaxing a little. ‘I live in number six, over there. The building is a hollow square, you see. Main flats at the front, others down the sides. My door gives onto the garden. In five, right at the back behind me, is Mr. Carroll. Something in the city, I believe. Goes out to boozy parties with his friends until all hours. Past me there’s Mrs.’

Needham's apartment. In front of her, in seven, there's Mr. and Mrs. Opie and their child. Quite a nice child. Doesn't hurt the flowers. He's old money, I believe. They quarrel a lot. Ask them about Miss Lavender!

'Why?' asked Jack Robinson.

'They didn't like her,' said Mr. Bell, suddenly becoming reticent. He was more nervous than seemed appropriate. 'On the other side, behind the Garden Apartment, there's Miss Gallagher and Miss Grigg in four. They're journalists. Work for a magazine called *Women's Choice*. Old-style suffragettes, that's them, though don't tell them I said that, please. Three is old Professor Keith and his niece. He's retired. Nice old stick. Knows a lot about plants. Two is Mrs. Gould, a widow. She's just moved in so I don't know much about her. Brought a lot of rather good furniture with her and a small painting of Venice which made my mouth water. I'd swear it was a Canaletto. School of, at least. And one is Mr. and Mrs. Hewland. Keep themselves to themselves. Very religious. Anything else?' He gave Jack Robinson a cheeky grin.

'I'm sure you've got lots of mulching to do,' said Robinson gravely. 'Always a lot to do in the garden at this time of year, Mr. Bell.'

'Right you are,' said Mr. Bell, and moved away. He glanced back at the box which Phryne held under her arm. He seemed about to ask something, then bit his lip and turned away, ostentatiously busying himself with clipping back some importunate nasturtiums. He took with him his smell of fear.

'You've spoken to all the inhabitants, have you, Jack, dear?' asked Phryne, sitting down cosily next to the policeman on his cane lounge chair and lighting a gasper. It had seemed like sacrilege to smoke in Miss Lavender's apartment.

'Constable's doing it now,' he said. 'I'll get the reports in due course. I don't for a moment suppose that anyone will have noticed anything.'

'I wonder how one gets to the tennis court?' asked Phryne.

'What?' Jack Robinson was drowsing in the shade. Now he opened his eyes wide. Miss Fisher had a talent for non-sequitur.

‘Well, there’s no gate in this garden, it ends in the wall and one wouldn’t want to go out into the street in one’s tennis clothes, not in a respectable place like this, with a church on the corner. Stiff letters would be written to the municipal council.’

‘I didn’t think about it,’ murmured Jack Robinson.

‘There’s a couple of players coming back now,’ said Phryne. ‘Let’s watch.’

Two slim, flannel-clad figures were strolling across the lawn towards the garden wall. Just when it seemed that they were intending to climb over, they vanished, to reappear some minutes later in the walkway beside the main house.

‘There’s a tunnel,’ said Robinson.

‘Which means that, assuming someone came in and killed Miss Lavender by some means, they could have just wandered in through the tennis court and wandered out the same way,’ observed Phryne.

‘So it does,’ agreed Jack Robinson, dolefully. ‘That neat wire fence around the court wouldn’t keep out a determined cat. Just like I always say, Phryne. People put up a wall, a portcullis and a ferocious dog at their front door, and protect the back with a sign saying “Please do not burgle this house.” I don’t know. It’s enough to make a policeman discouraged. You know what thieves say, don’t you? When charged, they say, “He shouldn’t have left the keys in,” or “They shouldn’t have left the door unlocked,” and I have to agree. Well, I’d better give Mrs. Needham the speech about “Securing Your Home from Robbers” and she’ll tell me that they are all nice people around here and would never think of doing such a thing.’

‘Off you go,’ said Phryne. ‘And watch out for that Pekingese. It bites.’

‘Of course it does,’ said Robinson, gloomily.

He plodded away. Phryne breathed in the scent of new-mown grass and allowed her mind to stray. Peking. Ping. Where was Lin Chung? On the sea? Even now returning with a large supply of new silks and stories to tell? The newspapers had not been encouraging about the situation in China since the death of Sun

Yat Sen, Father of his People. Generalissimo Chiang Kai Shek had managed to hold on to some cities, but the Japanese were in Manchuria, the Russians were threatening at several points, and the rest of China had reverted to the rule of the warlords, which it always did lacking a strong central government. Palaces had been sacked. Foreign delegations had been assailed, some besieged, and most were leaving, withdrawing into treaty harbours or across to Hong Kong, taking away the last independent witnesses of slaughter and tyranny. Nuns had been murdered. Hundreds of people had been killed and thousands were fleeing across the face of that huge continent, seeking safety and a small plot in which to grow some rice.

Not an unreasonable quest, but perhaps impossible. And somewhere in that slew of refuge-seekers, murderers, looters and soldiers was the irreplaceable Lin Chung. It was not a comforting thought. He was certainly Chinese by race, but he had been brought up in the West. How current was his slang? How reliable were his relatives? And where was SS *Gold Mountain*? Phryne had failed to find it in the shipping lists. It looked like she really was going to have to seek an audience with Madame Lin.

She might have decided that it was time Lin married a suitable girl and sent him to the Four Counties to contract for a nice unspoiled virgin cousin. Probably, Phryne thought vengefully, with bound feet. That would make sure she didn't develop any life independent of Madame Lin.

'Pretty lady!' announced a voice at Phryne's knee. She opened her eyes.

A small child in a sailor hat which had extinguished all its features like a candle-snuffer was presenting her with a paper bag. Phryne took it gingerly.

'Three toffees,' said the child. It might have been male or female. The eyes were very bright. A small hand lay on Phryne's skirt like a pink, sticky starfish.

'Yes,' Phryne agreed. 'There are three.'

'Two for me,' said the child. 'One for you.'

'How kind,' said Phryne, managing to break off a corner of a toffee and putting it in her mouth. The taste of brittle Eton toffee brought back her own youth with a rush.

'What's your name?' she asked.

'Wendy Opie,' said the sailor hat proudly. 'What's your name?'

'Miss Fisher,' said Phryne.

'Pretty lady,' commented Wendy dispassionately. 'Pretty hat.'

'You are wearing a very stylish one yourself,' Phryne returned the compliment.

'Goes with my sailor suit,' said Wendy. She turned around slowly so that Phryne could admire the full beauty of the costume.

Matters were developing nicely when a harassed woman ran round the corner and grabbed Wendy, sweeping the child clean off her feet. Wendy, startled out of her composure, began to cry.

'You bad girl, Mummy's been so worried!' said Mrs. Opie into the wailing face. 'I told you to stay and play quietly and I'd take you for a walk myself!'

'But the garden door was open and I followed a bird and he came here and I met Miss Fisher,' Wendy pointed out. Her tears had been stemmed as soon as the initial shock was over. The child obviously felt that she had right on her side.

'I do beg your pardon,' said Mrs. Opie, putting Wendy down and tucking a strand of pale hair back behind her ear, from which it instantly slid loose again. 'I'm Helen Opie. I was especially busy this morning and then when I looked around Wendy wasn't there and I've been searching all along the road for her. She usually goes out the house door. I didn't realise that the garden door was open. I hope she hasn't been bothering you.'

'Of course not,' soothed Phryne, who had caught a glitter of emotion from Wendy which told her that the door hadn't been open until Wendy had found a way to open it.

'Isn't it terrible about Miss Lavender?' said Mrs. Opie, sagging down on the bench. 'You can go and look at the fishes, Wendy.'

The alacrity with which the child obeyed told Phryne that her reason, or one of her reasons, for escaping from her mother

was to go and look at the fish. Mrs. Opie swatted at her dusty apron. She was a thin woman with prominent grey eyes and hair which would never hold a bobby pin. She had shingled it out of desperation but it was still always falling into her face.

‘So, have you decided to take the apartment?’ asked Mrs. Opie artlessly. ‘It’s a bit overdecorated but you can always have it done in something more stylish.’

‘I haven’t decided,’ said Phryne. Mrs. Opie was sitting right next to Miss Lavender’s box of letters, which was open. One hand was trailing, dropping to the edge. Phryne made a suitable comment about the weather. Mrs. Opie replied conventionally, never taking her eyes off Phryne.

Miss Fisher was endowed with excellent peripheral vision. She could see Wendy leaning over the lower basin, trailing her fingers in the water. She could also see Helen Opie’s fingers as they savoured the chocolate papers and the envelopes, seeking the right one.

There was a splash behind her, but Helen Opie did not react. The moment poised on a knife’s edge. Would retrieving a letter or saving the life of her daughter win?

It was rather a disappointment when Mr. Bell shouted at Helen to get a move on before the child hurt his fish. The hand recoiled, empty, and Helen Opie jumped to her feet with appropriate exclamations of dismay and retrieved her offspring, dripping wet.

As Mrs. Opie bore Wendy away from a watery grave, Phryne saw a smile of perfect satisfaction on the child’s face, and nothing but blank despair on her mother’s.