

Death at Victoria Dock

A Phryne Fisher Mystery

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To Susan Tonkin

'A Daniel come to judgement! Yea, a Daniel!
O wise young judge, how I do honour thee!'

—William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*

THANKS

To A. W. Greenwood for gunnery, love, and stories

To Stephen D'Arcy for milieu slang

To my beautiful sister Janet for lending her countenance to
Phryne Fisher

Chapter One

'What passing bells for these who die as cattle?'

Wilfred Owen,
'Anthem for Doomed Youth'

The windscreen shattered. Only then did Phryne Fisher realize that the stinging hum which she had heard above the roar of the Hispano-Suiza's engine was not the mosquito she had taken it for. The windscreen broke into a thousand shards and showered her with razor-sharp fragments. She jammed on the huge car's brakes, and it rolled to a stop. She brushed glass from her driving goggles and pulled them off.

Someone was shooting at her. Even in this year of 1928, with its notable industrial unrest and mounting fears of economic disaster, this was too much. She leaned forward and punched out the remaining windscreen with a small, hard, leather-clad fist. A bitter night. Where was she?

The Victoria Dock gates loomed. She peered through the ruined glass but could see and hear little. Two dark figures were running across the road, barely fifty feet away. One fired at her again. The bullet pinged off the wing of the car, ricocheting into the wall of the docks. They had reached the Gas Works' wall and

were scaling it by the time Phryne found her Beretta and leapt from the car, sighting carefully over her arm.

She lowered her aim. Too far away and too late. The figures scrambled up over the red-brick barrier and were gone. Phryne swore, thrust the gun into her pocket and carefully removed her coat, shaking it. She then turned her attention to the car, picking out what glass she could see and sweeping with her gloved hands so it would be safe for her to continue her journey at least as far as the nearest police station. Gang wars in Melbourne? It seemed unlikely. Surely the watchman at the gate had seen something. He at least could call the cops.

It was as she turned toward the lighted gates that she realized that there had been a third actor in this drama, though he was not taking much interest in the proceedings. He was lying on the unforgiving tarmac of the dock approach road and was bleeding like a tap.

'Hell's bells!' exclaimed Phryne, wondering if there were any more gunmen lurking. 'And it was such a pleasant evening up till now. What a target I make in these lights.'

She was dressed in loose trousers, boots, cloche, a cream silk shirt and a red fox-fur coat, a distractingly fashionable figure to be falling to her knees beside a dying man under the flaring acetylene torch that lit the Victoria Dock apron.

She pulled off her coat, lest it be stained, and slid a silk-clad arm under the figure, whom she could now see was a very young man with a shock of uncut tow-coloured hair, muddied from the road. His head lolled on her shoulder; under her exploring hands his body felt broken. There was massive damage to his ribs. They were spongy under her fingers, and a hole in his neck the size of a crown piece was pumping blood.

She ripped off both gloves, rolled them, and stuffed them into the wound. A hand grasped at her arm, weakening even as it closed, and blue eyes flickered open.

'Lie still,' she urged. 'You are hurt. Someone shot you, and damn near shot me, too. Who was it?'

The head shook, the lips moved. He was clad in a workman's collarless blue shirt, and what had been a respectable grey serge suit before he had taken to dying in it. Phryne's knees were wet and grated on gravel. She shifted a little. There was a gold ring in his ear and a blue tattoo on his collarbone. A capital A in a circle.

'Do you speak English?' He mumbled in a tongue which Phryne could not even identify.

'Tu jaspines ti Francais, mon pauvre?'

The dying man gave a faint laugh at the bold milieu slang produced by this stylish woman. He replied with the Parisian for 'too right'.

'Comme de juste, Auguste.'

He blinked, winced and said, '*J'dois clamecer.*' That was underworld for 'kick the bucket'. It was evident that he was going to die.

'Tu parles, Charles,' Phryne agreed.

It was a high-boned, Slavic face. The chin had never been shaved. He was paling to a tallow. His whole body was slackening into death. He drew dreadful, blood-filled breath and said quite clearly, '*Ma mère est à Riga,*' retched, and died.

Phryne held him close as blood fountained from his lungs and flooded her shirt. Then she freed a hand, closed his eyes, and laid him gently down. A foolish courtesy, she thought, as she lowered his head, cradling it in her hand, for no roughness could hurt him now. He looked heart-breakingly young—no more than seventeen.

She creaked to her feet. Where was that watchman?

There was a guard at the dock gate. He had turned his chair to face the other way, as doubtless he had been all along. He was gazing down the river as though he was momentarily expecting the *Sirius* to dock.

'Hey!' shouted Phryne. 'You there!'

He did not move. Phryne picked up her coat and went to the window. She reached in with a bloody hand and shook the guard by the shoulder.

'Wake up, cretin! There's been a murder, and the Trust won't like a corpse in front of their nice clean gates.'

The guard turned and received what he later claimed to be the shock of his life. Facing him in the blue light was a thin woman in a black hat, green eyes blazing in a face of chalk. Her pale shirt was soaked in blood. Her hand, as she clutched him, left a bloody mark on his clean shirt. Her eyes were as cold as St Elmo's Fire, and he was momentarily afraid that she was intending to bite him with those white teeth which were bared between colourless lips.

'Yes, Miss?' he faltered, drawing away from her touch.

'Call the cops. There has been a murder. I suppose that you didn't see anything?'

'Nothing.' He wound up the telephone. 'I saw nothing at all, Miss. My eyes ain't what they used to be. And it's dark.'

'On the contrary, it's light.'

'Well, I didn't see anything, anyway. Russell Street? 'Sme, Tom, at the Vic. Dock. We got a murder. Send someone down, willya? No, I ain't joking. If I was joking, you'd be laughing. Come quick.'

'You come out of there,' demanded Phryne, and he obeyed. Phryne thrust the coat into his arms.

'Hold that!' she ordered, and he clutched at the fur.

Unable to bear the cold sogginess of clotting blood on her skin, Phryne tore the silk shirt bodily away from the seam in one swift, brutal movement. The astonished Tom saw revealed blood-blotched breasts as pale as good china. She wiped her hands on the remains of the shirt and then dabbed at her body, then she tied the silky remnants into a knot and threw them down, turning her back, so he could help her into the coat. She snuggled deep into the comforting fur.

'You've got a drink, haven't you? Always a bottle of something confiscated at a dock gate. Give it to me.'

He reached into his cubicle and handed her a bottle of Napoleon brandy, part of a recently exposed smuggling attempt. He boggled as she tore out the cork and took a deep swig.

‘Well now, that’s better,’ said Phryne. ‘Suppose I go and have a look at my poor car. You’d better stay here. There might be more things abroad in the night which you shouldn’t see.’

Phryne walked past the dead young man without looking at him, and climbed back into her car. It was cold and the wind was blowing straight through both Phryne and the upholstery.

I wish I had my gloves, she thought. I’d be warmer in a snowdrift! She remembered where her gloves were and decided that she did not really want them.

‘Riga?’ she said aloud. ‘What about Riga? Centre of resistance to the Tsar, full of police informers and spies and Bolsheviks, that’s what they told me in Paris. Letts had something to do with the Siege of Sidney Street. There had been a shootout and they had all been killed. Before my time, of course. I was only nine when it happened, and in Australia, but I heard about it later, in Paris. Lots of Bolsheviks in Paris.’

She could not recall anything else about Riga, except that it was the capital of Latvia. At last there came the clang of a bell, and a police car slammed to a halt in front of the Hispano-Suiza.

Two officers leapt out and approached the guard, who pointed to Phryne. Phryne pointed to the corpse.

‘Blimey!’ exclaimed one. ‘He’s been shot! Did you do this, Miss?’

Phryne choked back a laugh.

‘Would I still be here if I had? Two men, running. They went over the Gas Works’ wall. I was passing and they shot out my windscreen, so I stopped. I tried to help the young man, but he died.’

‘Who are you, Miss?’

‘My card,’ said Phryne, and produced it. The policeman took it into the light to read.

‘The Hon. Phryne Fisher,’ he said, slowly. ‘221B The Esplanade, St Kilda. Investigations. Were you investigating anything, Miss?’

‘No, I was just passing. I was coming back from taking Alice Moore, the artist, home to Williamstown. We had been to dinner

at the Explorers' Club. Someone shot at me and the windscreen shattered. I stopped and found this poor fellow dying.'

'Well, Miss, there ain't nothing you can do for him now. I ain't seen anyone deader for years. Perhaps you'd like to go home. My sergeant will come and see you in the morning.'

'Do you know the...dead man?'

The elder policeman looked down into the calm, white face.

'No, Miss, I ain't seen him before. Very young to have got himself into something that killed him. I suppose you didn't see anything, Tom? No? I didn't think you would have. Only man I know with one-way eyes. One day, Tom, your time will come, and then, my son, I'll be delighted to take your statement. You ain't seen him before, Miss?'

'Never.'

'Well, that's all we need tonight. These your gloves, Miss? Ah, and your, er, shirt? I see. You all right to get home?'

'I think so,' said Phryne, feeling cold and a little shaky.

'I tell you what, Miss, I'll lend you my constable here. He don't like dead bodies above half. You go home with the young lady, Collins, and make sure that she gets there all right, then ask Johnson at St Kilda to give you a ride back into the city and some breakfast. Bitter night to be standing round the dock gates, Miss. You'll be fine with young Collins. I'll clean up here and make my report.'

Phryne started the engine, thankful that she had a self starter for use in emergencies. The great engine caught and roared. She took off the brake and allowed the car to roll back so that she could steer around the police wagon, and headed for St Kilda. The young constable, seemingly shocked by what must have been his first corpse, sat stiffly beside her.

After a ride of unexampled legality by Phryne, who could not see very well with the wind in her face, Constable Collins helped her to alight from the car, and assisted her up the steps to the front door. There he knocked an official double knock.

Mr Butler snatched the door open as if he had been hiding behind it.

‘Oh, Miss Fisher!’ he exclaimed. ‘An accident?’

‘A murder,’ observed the young officer. Phryne grabbed the policeman’s arm.

‘Come in and get warm, at least,’ she urged. ‘You have been very kind and your sergeant told you to look after me, so don’t argue,’ she added, handing him over to Mrs Butler. Mrs Butler took him into the kitchen and planted him in front of the electric fire, where he began alternatively to shiver and to steam.

Mr Butler drew Phryne into her own parlour, which was warm and scented with roses. She gave a sigh of relief when she heard the door shut out the surprising night.

‘Take the car to be fixed first thing, Mr B.,’ Phryne said, and leaned on his arm. ‘Red upholstery. I want it done immediately.’

Dot came running as Phryne lowered herself into an armchair and tore off her hat.

‘Miss! What happened? Can I take your coat?’

‘No, not until you fetch me a clean blouse. Go and run me a very hot bath with pine salts, Dot, do.’

Dot ran upstairs and set the bath in order, poured in salts with a lavish hand, and ran down again with a velvet blouson top of Russian cut in Phryne’s favourite shade of moss green. She found her mistress staring into the fire and shivering in the fur coat.

Phryne stood up and shed the coat, revealing that she was naked to the waist underneath it, and pulled on the velvet blouse, relishing the silky feel against her skin.

‘Did someone attack you, Miss?’ asked Dot, feeling a gentle Christian pity for the poor assailant, but worried only by the extent of the bloodstain. She hoped that Phryne hadn’t killed him.

‘No, Dot, I was passing the docks and someone shot out my windscreen and shot at me, too. They presumably meant to kill the young man I found lying on the pavement. It was horrible, Dot. He was wrong under my hands; the bullets had smashed his ribs. He died. He was only a boy and a pretty boy at that. You know how I feel about pretty boys—there aren’t enough of them in the world as it is—we can’t have people wantonly

removing them. And I need new upholstery in the car. Someone is going to pay for that.'

'I think that Mr Bert and Mr Cec ought to know,' said Dot. 'Being the docks and all.'

'Do you? I expect that you are right.'

Phryne stared into the fire, rubbed her hands together, and noted that they were stained to the wrist with rusty red. She shuddered.

'First, a bath. I'm feeling soiled. Too much contact with cold reality, I think.'

'Should be ready by now, Miss.'

Dot followed Phryne up the stairs with a glass of port. Dot's father had sworn by port for shock.

Phryne drank the port with less respect than it deserved and threw off her clothes. Dot found that the knees of the silk trousers were wet and stained with blood and wondered what had become of Phryne's shirt. Phryne soaked and scrubbed until her pale body was as red as flame and all of the blood had been scoured off her matchless person. She sat cleaning her fingernails and listening to Dot bewailing the ruin of her clothes.

'You can't wear these trousers again, Miss, but the coat can go to the furrier tomorrow and it should be all right. I can clean your boots, I think. Are you scratched at all?'

Dot had just found some small stains inside the coat. Phryne looked down at her body. She hadn't noticed any pain.

'Now you mention it, Dot, I have got a few small glass cuts. Nothing to bother about. Just find the sticking plaster. Another item on the account,' she added, stepping out of the bath.

'Account, Miss?' Dot sounded puzzled.

'Yes, an account. Someone is going to pay it in full. Get me a nightdress and my thick gown, Dot. I'm going downstairs again. That constable must have thawed by now.'

Phryne took her place at the fire and was confronted by Mrs Butler bearing a steaming glass of whisky toddy on a tray.

'Oh, no, Mrs B., I really don't like toddy.'

‘Try a taste, Miss. It’s my mother’s recipe and it’s defrosting that young constable real good. We were worried about you, Miss,’ said Mrs Butler. Phryne took the glass and tried a sip. It was warm, and Phryne was still cold. Mrs Butler beamed.

‘You drink that up, Miss. I’ve got some chicken broth heating at this very moment. You’ve had a shock—can’t have you catching the megrims.’

‘I don’t think that we have the megrims any more, Mrs B.’

‘You watch a murder and then go to bed on an empty stomach and megrims you will have. Soup in ten minutes,’ said Mrs Butler, and nodded to her husband, who hovered nervously at the door.

‘She’ll be fine,’ she said quietly. ‘Nerves of steel. Why don’t you have a sup of my toddy too? It’s been a long night.’

Dot, Mrs Butler, Mr Butler and the young policeman all had another glass of toddy on the strength of it. It began to rain again.

Phryne sat in her parlour and thought about the young man’s last words. ‘My mother is in Riga.’ Latvia. The Russian revolution and the Houndsditch massacre. When had that all happened? The year 9, or thereabouts.

The cuts on her body, inflicted by the flying glass, began to make themselves felt. There would certainly be a reckoning. For Phryne’s scratches, the ruin of her clothes, the damage to her car, and the theft of life from a beautiful young man with a gold ring in his ear and a blue tattoo on his neck.

Chapter Two

*“Zounds! I was never so bethumped with words
Since first I called my brother’s father “dad”.*

William Shakespeare, *King John*

Phryne seemed only to have slept for a moment when she was roused by Dot bearing a tray of Greek coffee strong enough to stand a spoon up in. Phryne dragged herself out of the seductive embrace of her feather pillows and groaned.

‘What time is it?’

‘Ten o’clock, Miss, and a fine spring day,’ replied Dot, with what Phryne considered to be offensive cheeriness. The coffee was, however, good, and the sunlight was streaming in through the window. Phryne decided to forgive Dot and essay a little breakfast after she had taken a painfully brisk shower and rubbed herself awake.

‘That nice young constable is coming at eleven, Miss, and I thought you’d prefer rolls and marmalade today.’

Phryne thought she detected a blush on her maid’s cheek, but it might have been the sun. She smiled, accepted the tray, and broke and buttered her roll in amiable silence.

She had dreamed with painful sharpness about the dead young man and the sogginess of his broken body under her

hands. Black coffee and cold water were taking the edge off the memory but she still felt that she owed him a life, having officiated over his death.

‘What is his name, Dot? The constable, I mean.’

‘Hugh, Miss...I mean Constable Collins, Miss.’

It definitely *was* a blush, no doubt of it. Phryne restrained herself from making any of the seven risqué warnings that came to mind and asked, ‘How long did he stay last night?’

‘Only about another hour, Miss. He was cold. That was the first body he had ever seen and he was a bit shook up. We were sitting in the kitchen. He just wanted someone to talk to.’

Dot was evidently unaware of the number of sinful activities which could take place in a kitchen. Phryne smiled affectionately.

‘He was lucky to have had you to talk to, then. I thought he was a pleasant young man, too.’

And so was the dead one who rose before Phryne’s eyes, blond hair darkening with spilt blood. Phryne took more coffee.

‘Well, we shall see,’ said Dot obscurely. ‘What shall you wear today, Miss? It’s a lovely day.’

‘I was never so glad to see spring,’ agreed Phryne. ‘It was as cold as the...it was very cold last night. And today up pops the sun as though it hasn’t been sulking for months. Odd climate. What does one wear to interview policemen?’

‘The linen suit, Miss, and the velvet top?’

‘No, find me the Chanel—no, a dress. Something light and springy—the azure one and a light wrap. That Kashmir shawl, and the silver shoes. I am feeling like a siren, today.’

Dot, who associated sirens with loud warning noises, looked askance as she found the clothes.

‘You know...a mermaid. I shall go for a walk on the foreshore as soon as I can, so find the straw with the grassy ribbons. Blast! There goes the phone. I hope it isn’t that idiot Jack Leonard. Did he call again last night, Dot?’

‘Yes, Miss,’ said Dot, emerging from the wardrobe with the hat. ‘Three times.’

'I don't know why the man doesn't give up. Lord knows I haven't encouraged him. He just isn't my type.'

Phryne dressed quickly, a skill learned in many a cold Montmartre studio, and was dusting her admirable nose with *Fleurs de Riz* powder when Dot came back.

'A client, Miss, a Mr Waddington-Forsythe. Wants to see you urgently on a private matter.'

'Did you tell him that I don't touch matrimonial work?'

'Yes, Miss. He said it isn't that.'

'Oh, well, tell him to come at two. I am going to walk by the sea today no matter what is disturbing the upper class.'

'You know him, Miss?'

'I have met him. Businessman, terribly rich, awfully boring, with a young and pretty wife who has no brains at all.'

Dot retreated. She sometimes found her mistress to be alarmingly outspoken.

Phryne surveyed herself in the glass. A thin, heart-shaped face, with grey-green eyes set wide apart, eyebrows carefully etched, a small nose, and a round, determined chin. She painted her mouth carefully, then blotted off the lipstick. She brushed her black hair hard; shiny and cut in a neat cap, two ends swinging onto her cheeks. She wondered, briefly, if she was beautiful, decided she was and blew a kiss to her reflection before going downstairs to meet Dot's nice policeman.

He was waiting for her, still looking shocked and tired, as though he had not slept. Phryne called for more coffee and sat down on the sofa, where the sun was streaming in through the window, making the patterns on the turkish rug dance.

'Would you tell me, Miss, in your own words, what happened last night?'

Because he looked so wan, Phryne refrained from snapping that her own words were the only ones she had and obliged with a full, closely observed account of the previous evening's events. He wrote it down in his notebook, frowning heavily with conscientious effort, and shut the notebook.

'So you didn't get a look at the young man, Miss?'

‘Which one?’

‘The man who ran away.’

‘There were two, aren’t you listening? No, I did not get a good look at them and I would not know them again. All I can say is that they were not unusually tall or short, and they had the expected complement of legs and arms. Have some coffee. You don’t, if you will forgive the observation, look well.’

Constable Collins drank his coffee, which was powerful, and essayed a smile.

‘I admire your courage, Miss,’ he said slowly. ‘You didn’t turn a hair.’

‘Oh, yes I did, the whole thing was shocking. I don’t like being shot at. And he was a very pretty young man. Has he been identified yet?’

‘No, Miss. Nothing in his pockets but a handbill for the Latvian club. My chief says that I’ve got to find out more about them. I’m new to this, I don’t know where to start.’

‘You are training to be a detective, are you not?’ Phryne smiled. He was rather a lamb. She could see why Dot liked him. His guileless brown eyes and frank, open countenance like a *Boy’s Own* adventure hero would serve him well when he became a detective and acquired some elementary cunning.

Phryne found and lit a gasper and leaned back in her chair.

‘What I think would help is, first, a little research. Find out if the club has ever had any trouble with the police—that will be in your own records. Then go along to their next public meeting with a young lady as disguise. Do you have a young lady?’

The constable looked aside, blushing slightly.

‘No, Miss. Though, perhaps...I might ask...’

‘An admirable idea. The Latvians are Catholic. Can you fit in? They might have prayers or some sort of service. It is always so humiliating to be standing up when everyone else is sitting down.’

‘That’s all right, Miss, I’m a Catholic too. I can manage that. But what if the meeting is in their language?’

‘It won’t be, or it wouldn’t be a public meeting. Find out when the next meeting is and then you can come here and...’

‘Ask Miss Williams? Do you think she would mind?’

‘I’m sure she wouldn’t mind being asked,’ temporized Phryne, not willing to compromise Dot ahead of time. ‘No woman minds being *asked*. Good. That’s a start. You might look among missing sailors for the dead man.’

‘Why sailors, Miss?’

The constable was evidently willing to sit at Phryne’s feet and absorb her wisdom, a situation she found both novel and refreshing in a policeman.

‘Did you look at him? No, never mind. He had a gold ring in his ear. Sailors get them when they cross the Line. And there was a tattoo on his neck. An A in a circle, done in blue. That must mean something. Find out what it means.’

‘Could this be a Camorra, Miss?’ he asked, excitedly.

‘No, a Camorra is Italian and I assure you that Latvia is a long way from Italy. They simply would not know what to say to one another. Though their methods seem to be similar. It could be anything—could merely be of personal significance. Perhaps his sweetheart is called Anna. Will that do to be going on with?’

‘Yes, Miss, thank you. I’ll suggest the meeting to my chief, I’m sure he’ll agree.’

‘Who is your chief?’

‘Detective-Sergeant Carroll, Miss. He has charge of a lot of things that happen on the wharves.’

‘And have you been with him long?’

‘Six months, Miss. He’s a bit gruff. Throws things, sometimes. But he’s a great thief catcher.’

‘This is your first murder, isn’t it, Constable?’

‘Yes, Miss, and I don’t know how I’ll ever get used to it.’

‘Take it day by day,’ advised Phryne. ‘Is that all you want of me? If so, I’m going for a walk.’

She stood up, directed Mr Butler to refuse all calls, and escorted the young constable to the door.

‘We shall see you soon,’ she said smoothly, and accompanied him into the street. There was a cool wind blowing straight off the sea. The sun shone down. Phryne donned her straw hat, flung her shawl around her shoulders and walked across the road to the breezy foreshore, where she walked for an hour, breathing deeply, thinking of nothing at all.

She returned in time for a light salad lunch and broke the wrapping on a new notebook. She always opened a new one for each case. Being Phryne’s, they were silk bound and her fountain pen contained ink of particular blackness. This notebook she headed ‘Waddington-Forsythe’ and looked up from her desk as Mr Butler showed a tall, elderly man into the room.

He was thin, pale, and stooping, with weak pale eyes and a cropped head of silver hair. She put his age at sixty-five and his profession as something that took him to his office before sunrise and kept him there until dark. However, the carriage had authority and his voice was rich and deep.

‘Miss Fisher? Kind of you to see me. I have a...particular problem which...I hope...you may be able...’

Phryne interrupted.

‘Why not just tell me about it, eh? If I can’t help, I’ll not take the case. And my discretion,’ she added with a touch of steel in the tone of voice, ‘is absolute.’

‘Oh, indeed. Well.’

There he stalled again. Phryne offered him a drink, which he accepted, complimenting her on the excellence of her whisky, and then finally unburdened his mind.

‘My daughter has vanished,’ he said bluntly. ‘She has been missing for three days.’

‘Good God, man, have you not gone to the police?’

‘No,’ he blushed, painfully. Phryne kept talking. If she had to wait for Mr Waddington-Forsythe to get to the point she would be there all day, and she fancied a seat in the garden and a gin-and-tonic while the sun was still shining.

‘Just nod when I reach the right scandal. She has run away with a lover? No? She has run away because of a quarrel at

home? Yes. And the quarrel was about something that goes to your credit?’

The head paused, then did not nod. Phryne was good at charades.

‘Not your credit, but someone’s credit? Your wife? Yes.’

Phryne was glad that she had not had to enumerate all the other things which could cause young women to run away from home, such as molestation, rape, drug addiction or white slavery, and was thankful that she might be spared the usual sordid rummage through the brothels in Gertrude Street.

‘So, she ran away because she had a quarrel with you about your wife? When was this?’

The stiff lips moved.

‘Three nights ago—that is, Wednesday. She was violently opposed to my re-marriage, Miss Fisher. She is fourteen and... she was very fond of her mother who died when she was seven. She did not understand about Christine, and Christine did not take to her, either. They have never got on. Then on Wednesday she said that I never loved her, that I was blind as a bat, that Christine was...I cannot repeat what she said about her...’

He was about to break down and cry, Phryne saw, and a man of this type would never recover from the shame if she allowed this to happen. She slapped open the notebook and took up her pen.

‘Her name, please?’

The old man pulled himself together.

‘Alicia May Waddington-Forsythe. She is fourteen years old, born on the 12th of August nineteen-fourteen. I wonder if it was the war? It seems to have had a terrible effect on the world, Miss Fisher.’

Miss Fisher agreed that the Great War had had a terrible effect on the world. She thrust back memories of desolated battlefields rotting with corpses as seen when she had been an ambulance driver with Queen Alexandra’s Volunteers—she had run away from school at sixteen to do so—and concentrated on her client.

‘She was wearing her school uniform, and she took some things with her...my wife will know what she took. She is as concerned as I am, Miss Fisher.’

‘What school does she go to?’

‘The Presbyterian Ladies College.’

Phryne brightened. Her two adoptive daughters went to that school. They were both clever and observant and might have something to say about Alicia. The September holidays were almost upon them. As sources of information they would be admirable.

‘Good. And at what time did she leave?’

‘Five in the afternoon. She flew upstairs in a fury, then I just never saw her again. Paul...’

‘Paul?’

‘My son...she is his twin sister. There is supposed to be a sympathy between twins but these have been fighting since they were born, it seems. He said that she pushed past him and let herself out the back door at five and no one has seen her since.’

‘What is the composition of your household, Mr Waddington-Forsythe?’

‘Just myself, Christine, Paul and three live-in servants. A small establishment. We are undertaking renovations to the house. My wife is expecting, you see, and she felt that she would like a nursery.’

The beam of paternal vanity which crossed the elderly lined face was striking.

I expect he thinks that it is a marvellous thing to sire a child at his age, Phryne commented cynically to herself. Look at the poor fish, grinning as though he’s done something out-of-the-way clever. Aloud, she said, ‘Quite. So there are workmen and such in and out of the house all day. Perhaps your daughter might have struck up a friendship with one of them?’

‘Impossible!’ declared Mr Waddington-Forsythe. ‘They are all quite common men. They could have no attraction for a girl of Alicia’s refinement.’

Phryne, who had loved some uncommonly common men, especially in London and in Paris, was not minded to attempt to explain what could attract a refined girl to a sweaty, tanned,

muscular labouring boy with cement in his hair. In any case she felt unequal to the task.

‘I will come to your house, Mr Waddington-Forsythe, and speak to your wife and Paul. Then perhaps I might ask the school. Who is her closest friend there?’

‘Christine will know,’ muttered the old man. ‘I had nothing to do with them, you understand. All that young women of that age appear to be able to do in terms of social intercourse is to hide their faces and giggle.’

‘Quite,’ agreed Phryne, reflecting that among her multifarious faults as a maiden, giggling was not one of them. ‘This afternoon, then, about four o’clock?’

‘I thought that you might come back with me at once, Miss Fisher, if that would not be too inconvenient. I am very worried about Alicia.’

‘Then you should call the police. Finding runaways is their job.’

‘Not in this case.’

‘No relatives? No one to whom she might have gone?’

‘No. I have telephoned her aunt, with whom she did not get along, and she is not there. There is no one else that either Christine or myself know about. I cannot think where she is. Really, Miss Fisher, you are my last hope.’

‘All right, then.’ Phryne lit a gasper, observed horror on Mr Waddington-Forsythe’s countenance, and ignored it. ‘She ran out of the house, pushing past her twin Paul, at five o’clock on Wednesday, and you have not seen hide nor hair since. She took some clothes and she has not gone to her aunt’s. Has she any money?’

‘It is quite likely that she has, now I come to think of it. She had her quarter’s allowance. She can’t have spent it all yet, I only gave it to her last week.’

‘How much is that?’

‘Ten pounds, Miss Fisher. Children are a great expense, especially girls. They must have the latest clothes and see the newest film.’

‘Did she go to many films?’ Phryne was trying to get a grasp on the character of the girl. So far she was shadowy in the extreme.

‘No, actually, she didn’t. Spent a lot of time at church. St Peter’s, Eastern Hill, you know. She sang in the choir and was very active in the Girls’ Brigade and the Band of Hope. Always went to both services on Sunday. Christine thinks that it is a phase. Wanted to enter a sisterhood a few months ago. I put my foot down about that.’

‘Which sisterhood?’

‘The Anglican Sisters of Charity, in Eltham, or some such place. I daresay that they do a lot of good, and it’s an excellent way to dispose of surplus women—better than having them meddling about in nursing or trying to go into parliament—but not for my daughter. I expect her to make a good marriage.’

‘Did you enquire of the sisterhood? Was Alicia there?’

‘Pack of scheming women,’ commented Mr Waddington-Forsythe. ‘Said that “Miss Waddington-Forsythe was not there.” When I tried to persuade the confounded Mother Superior, or whatever idiotic title they give themselves, to tell me where she might be she said that it was time for matins and rang off. But Alicia was happy with the sisters. Or so I believe.’

‘So she might still go there,’ said Phryne, very gently because she was restraining an urge to bean this Victorian relic with a lampstand. Mr Waddington-Forsythe scowled.

‘Yes, it’s possible. I’m coming to you, Miss Fisher, because the detective who was my first choice said that you could manage this job under the constraints which I have been obliged to apply to it. He refused to touch it and said that only the police can catch runaways, and if the Anglican Sisterhood was involved then he had an urgent appointment in China. Damn the man! I believe that he was afraid of them.’

Phryne butted out her cigarette and lit another one, which she did not want, solely to annoy her client. What an unprepossessing thing, she thought, to see the upjumped social-climbing middle class in terror of its position. Poor girl. Religious mania may have seemed positively sane by comparison.

'All right. I'll come with you now.'

'You'll take the case?'

'One week. If I don't find her within the week, Mr Waddington-Forsythe, then you will hand the case over to the police, with my notes as to the progress of my investigations. That is my constraint. Do you accept?'

'I accept,' he said, promptly. 'My car is outside, Miss Fisher.'



The ride, in a chauffeured Bentley, was comfortable. Mr Waddington-Forsythe did not speak. The chauffeur handed Phryne out in the grounds of an extensive Victorian mansion. Three storeys, plus a series of attics; pillared portico and every window gleaming. One side of the house was disfigured by the skeletal beginnings of a new wing, evidently to be built in the most modern style, matching the existing structure in no respect whatsoever. It was curved, like the wing of a bird, and seemed to be constructed mostly of concrete. Several workmen were in view, doing important things with plumb lines.

'Renovations? I'd say that you were building a new house, Mr Waddington-Forsythe.' This name was going to be a problem, Phryne thought. Perhaps she could get away with calling him 'sir'. He might like that and it would cut down the wear and tear on her vocal cords.

'Yes, Miss Fisher, it is an entirely original design by the most fashionable architect. Sir Adrian Griffith was kind enough to say that he found it most striking.'

Phryne agreed. Striking it certainly was. And if the new wife wanted to make an eyesore out of an honest old house, it was not her business. She felt about modern art as she felt about Baroque additions to Gothic churches. The only time that it looked good was in a building built for it.

A butler of some magnificence opened the front door for the master and led Phryne into an opulent hall, high-ceilinged and gilded, to which someone had added a black glass floor and a hatstand composed of lengths of chromium pipe. Phryne gave

up her hat and wrap and was taken into an entirely modern parlour to meet the lady of the house.

Christine Waddington-Forsythe was twenty-five at the most and very pretty, in a large-eyed, frightened-doe way. She was quite evidently about five months pregnant and was dressed in a loose, white wrapper. Her long fingers pleated the edge of this nervously. Sitting beside her on the copper sofa was a scowling boy. He was extravagantly beautiful, having curly blond hair, blue eyes, and a face which Raphael, or perhaps Botticelli, would have sold their grandmothers to paint.. He struck Phryne still in her steps and silenced her in the middle of her polite greeting with a loud, 'Well, are you going to find her?'

'I hope so, indeed. My name is Phryne Fisher. Are you Paul?'

'The Honourable Phryne Fisher,' Mr Waddington-Forsythe put in his oar. The boy's angelic face creased further.

'Well, Miss Honourable Phryne Fisher, are you going to find her?'

'I shall try.'

Phryne sat down collectedly and lit a gasper. Mrs Waddington-Forsythe looked ready to faint, but the boy suddenly grinned and got up, unfolding an unexpected length of leg clad in tennis flannels.

'I'll find you an ashtray,' he offered.

'Show me her room,' suggested Phryne, following up her advantage. The boy blanched, steadied himself, and looked at his stepmother.

'I'll take Miss Fisher up, Paul,' she said, easily. Her husband laid a hand on her arm.

'No, no, m'dear, you must not fatigue yourself. Paul will do very well.'

With an agonized backward glance, Paul led the way up the stairs, along a carpeted corridor and indicated a closed door.

'In here?'

He nodded, swallowing hard.

'Just wait for me, then.'

Phryne opened the door and entered a small but well-appointed room. There was a wardrobe with school uniforms and Sunday dresses, a sufficiency of underclothes and sports clothes and a selection of shoes. The girl had not cared particularly for her appearance. Phryne found no make-up, not even a clandestine pot of rouge, powder, or a hidden tube of lipstick. There were religious prints on the walls, the largest being a Grünewald crucifixion, an odd adornment for a girl's room. Phryne stared for a while at the painting, which hung directly below the maidenly white bed, presumably so that Alicia could see it all the time. Green, tortured, leprous, twisted in agony, the fingers and toes curled around the piercing nails, it was gruesome; more gruesome even than real death. The painter had inflicted on this suffering, crippled body all the plagues of the world. Doubtless as a metaphor for all sins, Phryne thought, shuddering as though a goose had danced a whole quadrille upon her grave. She turned to the books.

All works of devotion: a bible, a prayer book. Phryne held them up by the spine, one by one, and shook them, garnering a harvest of little cards, devotional stamps and pressed flowers. Nothing in the girl's own writing but a copy of the Ten Commandments, which had been printed on a card, doubtless for easy reference. Next to 'Honour thy Father and thy Mother' she had written, 'so difficult. I don't want to fall into sin but I *can't*'. The *can't* had been underscored so hard that the pencil had torn through the surface of the paper.

No letters, no diary. Her school books revealed that she was a middle-of-the-road student with an interest in Latin and Music, and it appeared that she played chess. Some chess problems had been carefully copied out and solved, one with three exclamation marks.

Her violin was still in its case. Phryne took it out and plucked a string: mellow, delicate, sad. It was an expensive instrument and she replaced it with care, having searched the case.

She heard a thud in the corridor and opened the door. The exquisite Paul had heard the voice of the violin and had fainted.

Phryne left him where he was and continued her search. She tapped the walls, looking for a hiding place. A girl of this religiosity would certainly have kept a diary, if only to remind herself of her righteous struggle against sin. The walls were solid Victorian panelling, the floor was covered by a carpet which had been nailed down all round, and there was no space in the window-seat, which was full of woollens. Phryne took each jumper out and shook it, but there was nothing there. She must have taken her diary with her. So. Paul should be recovering and she went out to see how he was.

He was sitting groggily on the floor and she extended a strong hand to pull him to his feet. He came up swiftly into her arms and for a moment their faces were very close. The rosebud mouth opened and moistened; Phryne thought that he was going to kiss her, and wondered what she should do.

Fortunately for her virtue, the moment passed. The body which had clung close released itself; Phryne wondered if she had been imagining things. Could there be such a depth of sensuality in a young boy?

‘There. A little overcome, eh? Were you very fond of your sister?’ Wrong question. He stiffened and pulled away from her embrace.

‘No. Interfering little busybody, always poking her nose in, with her damned religion. Thought she was better than anyone, she did. But I don’t like her being missing.’

He led the way down the stairs, where Phryne conducted a brief conversation with Christine, who spoke in a weakening whisper.

‘She took her swimming bag and a change of clothes. That’s all that I could find missing.’

‘And you have no idea where she has gone?’

‘Not unless she is with the sisterhood. She had enough money to get to Eltham, but they say she isn’t there.’

‘Are you worried about her?’

‘Of course.’

'Was she the sort of girl who was, well, easily deceived? Would she get into a stranger's car, for instance?'

'No. Not if it was a man. She was very...shy.'

'She didn't like boys?'

'Not at all.'

'And who was her best friend at school?'

'I'm sure I don't know, Miss Fisher. She never confided in me.'

'And what about her diary?'

The gentle eyes, lids drooping with weariness, suddenly flashed. Phryne had Mrs Waddington-Forsythe's full attention.

'Her diary? Oh yes. I suppose she took it with her. Now I really must go and lie down, Miss Fisher. My doctor says that I must rest for three hours every afternoon. If you will excuse me?'

Phryne watched her glide listlessly away, and faced the old man and the boy. They were both staring after the retreating drapery.

'I'll report in a week,' said Phryne. She walked out of the house, and was driven with care back to her own house.