

As My Wimsey Takes Me, Episode 12 transcript

[THEME MUSIC: jaunty Bach-esque piano notes played in counterpoint gradually fading in]

CHARIS Hello and welcome to this episode of As My Wimsey Takes Me. I'm Charis Ellison--

SHARON And I'm Sharon Hsu. Today we're picking up our discussion on STRONG POISON. We'll be covering chapter 12 through towards the end of the book, but attempting to stop before we name the whodunnit and talk about the howdunnit. So without further ado, here we go into STRONG POISON once again.

So Charis, we left off last time with Peter admitting to Harriet that he's dreadfully jealous of Philip Boyes. He manages to place, through Miss Climpson, a Cattery agent into Norman Urquhart's office. And here we are at chapter 12, he goes off for Christmas revels at Dukes Denver.

CHARIS Yes. Which I always forget that this book takes place across Christmas. I'm a little bit sorry now that our schedule didn't work out so that we were actually talking about this in December. 'Cause that would have been too perfect. But yeah, in the middle of this case, which I'm sure to Peter feels like just everything is resting on it, like his entire future, literally his entire future, because it's implied that he will go mentally to a very dark place if he's not successful in clearing Harriet's name, he has to go have Christmas with not just his immediate family, but with a bunch of guests!

SHARON Whomst among us cannot relate. [both laugh] It's too perfect.

CHARIS It's a very, it's a very funny chapter, but it's just like, Oh, poor Peter. Oh no. So chapter 12 opens with this great line, which is "Wimsey was accustomed to say when he was an old man and more talkative even than usual, that the recollection of that Christmas at Dukes Denver had haunted him in nightmares, every night regularly, for the following twenty years. But it is possible that he remembered it with advantages."

SHARON It's such an interesting proleptic leap, you know, coming so soon after he's like, Oh, I hope I shan't have to go to that dark place. It's like the narrative is like, don't worry. Peter will live to old age.

CHARIS It's like in THE PRINCESS BRIDE: "The eels don't get her, you know, I'm telling you this cause you look nervous." [chuckling]

SHARON Just wanted you to know! And I feel like it's not often that the books do that. They're often written as though, you know, very immediate to what's happening. They often take

place in the same year that they were being published. So it's a, I don't know, it's a very interesting little aside, I suppose.

CHARIS        Yeah. It almost makes more sense when you think about it in terms of that, when Sayers was originally trying to write this book, you know, she had it in mind for this to be kind of Peter's last hurrah.

SHARON        Yeah.

CHARIS        And so I almost wonder if this is the line that was kind of a leftover from before she realized that that just wasn't going to work out.

SHARON        There was no possible way.

CHARIS        Right. But that it's too good of a line to take out.

SHARON        I do, I like that theory.

CHARIS        And I do, I do just really enjoy that line. "It's possible he remembered it with advantages." [both chuckle]

SHARON        I mean, it is, it's awful! The next several pages you just run down in dialogue and it's one of those... Sayers does that whole Greek chorus thing so well, where it's just like, all these people are talking and just from their dialogue, you're like, Oh, I know *exactly* what kind of person you are.

CHARIS        Yes.

SHARON        And in this case, they're very unpleasant. I, I have to imagine that they're all Gerald and Helen's friends.

CHARIS        Yeah. They're all Gerald and Helen's guests, I suppose, since they're at Dukes Denver. And it's, we've talked a little bit about how this book calls back to other books in the series and this really calls back to CLOUDS OF WITNESS, you know, that, that atmosphere of everyone being at the hunting lodge and, you know, especially that first scene over the breakfast table with Parker, right? Where we're getting a lot of information about the people and about what's going on through dialogue and the difference is that none of these people matter. Like, these aren't players, they're all here to create an atmosphere, I guess, which they do very effectively.

SHARON        Yeah. I love Captain Bates who is like, "I caught Hilda with Philip Boyes' book. And I said, 'Now you send that book straight back to the library. I won't have that muck in the

house." And, and Wimsey is just very innocently like, "Well, if you haven't read it, how did you know what it was like?" "The Express quoted all these filthy paragraphs!"

[both laugh]

CHARIS "It's a good thing we've all read them,' said Wimsey. 'Forewarned is forearmed.' And then the Dowager Duchess has that wonderful line: "'We owe a great debt of gratitude to the press,' said the Dowager Duchess. So kind of them to pick out all the plums for us and save the trouble of reading the books.'" And then she goes on to say that her maid is "a superior girl. So keen on improving her mind, which is more than I can say for most of my friends."

SHARON So she's like, you know, I doubt that my maid is the kind of person who'd read one of those things, but I just love that there's like all this context too, about the social times, right? She says: "No doubt it is all due to free education for the people. And I suspect her in my heart of voting Labour, though I never asked because I don't think it's fair. Besides, if I did, I couldn't very well take any notice of it, could I?" But it's like... you know, free schooling for everyone of all classes is a thing now and educating women is a thing and I'll pick up those threads later on, I think, especially in GAUDY NIGHT, but the dear Duchess! Dowager Duchess.

CHARIS Yes. We don't care so much for the Duchess [SHARON: noooo], because as Helen says immediately after that--she's talking about Harriet Vane and she says "from all accounts, she was just as bad as he was." But that leads into one of the most interesting things that I... like small single lines when Wimsey responds by saying "Dammit, she writes detective stories and in detective stories, virtue is always triumphant. Their purest literature we have--

SHARON Veeerry interesting.

CHARIS Yes. We've talked a lot about Peter and truth and his devotion to truth. We've talked a lot about the role that Peter plays as kind of like the moral center of the stories, you know, that he has the final moral judgment.

SHARON 06:23 Yeah. And that that's very characteristic of detective fiction in general.

CHARIS Right. And I, but I do feel like that's one of the things that make Sayers fairly unique, like not absolutely unique, but in terms of the characters finding justice, just like we talked about recently in THE UNPLEASANTNESS AT THE BELLONA CLUB, that Peter is set up as the moral judge who gets to decide, okay, this is what's serving justice and it's not necessarily what is, you know, it's not due process, it's not justice through the law.

SHARON Right. That law is different from ethics is different from morality,

CHARIS Yeah. Yeah. So I feel like it's subtle, but I feel like this is one of those areas where we see Sayers the theologian kind of on the edges. And you know, we talked a little bit

about how interesting it is when you can kind of look at people's art and it tells you what questions they're asking the universe. And I think that this is one of those areas where we see that bleeding in and a very small way where the question you ask the universes is who gets to decide what's just right? Who makes the decisions, where does morality come from? And those are all things that Sayers asks more explicitly in her later writings when she had kind of moved on from detective fiction and was really focusing her energies on theology and Christian apologetics.

SHARON     Yeah. But I think it's also, you know, we were talking last time about how this is the book where it feels like she really departs from a certain kind of early form after this book. I mean, on the one hand, she returns immediately to this sort of like airtight case, lots of, lots of plots, lots of alibis, lots of timetables. Um, so she does drop it a bit, but in the sense of, we talked about that she starts taking more risks, maybe kind of tugging at the edges, I think, of the detective novel form and seeing what else she can put in there. And I think the increasing thoughtfulness about virtue or about morality that points to her later career just becomes more and more evident.

CHARIS     Right.

SHARON     And I, I wonder if part of it was that freedom of knowing that there was an audience for these books and sort of just being like, okay, it's my sandbox now, you know, I'm going to think about the things I want to think about through these books.

CHARIS     There's a part of me that feels that what makes the difference is that Sayers realized that she could tell a great detective story that was motivated by emotion rather than the plot points, rather than by the moving pieces. That becomes very evident in some of her later books, especially like GAUDY NIGHT and BUSMAN'S HONEYMOON, those books are all about emotions and the detective work is kind of incidental, which is polarizing for some reason.

SHARON     What is the tagline for BUSMAN'S HONEYMOON?

CHARIS     It's "A romance with some detective interruptions."

SHARON     Yeah, exactly. It's not a detective novel with romance. It's the other way around.

CHARIS     My copy is out of reach at the moment.

SHARON     I trust you!

CHARIS     We'll correct it in our show notes if my book paraphrase is too off. And she does say in the introduction to that book, that the idea behind BUSMAN'S HONEYMOON was that some people think that a romance distracts from the detective plot, but for the people having the romance, the investigation is a distraction from what they have going on.

SHARON     Very true.

CHARIS     She's telling these detective stories that center on emotion and that the momentum of the plot comes more from the emotional arcs of the characters, as opposed to fundamentally the investigation itself, which I think is really interesting. And I think, you know, it's a departure from most of her peers who were writing detective fiction at the same time. And I think it makes Sayers a clear departure and kind of step forward to modern thrillers. I'm thinking about Tana French, who I think is one of our greatest thriller mystery writers of the current age and that her books... they're tightly plotted and they have airtight mysteries and they follow all the rules, but what keeps me, at least, turning the pages very quickly is the intensity of the emotion that is going on.

SHARON     Yeah, very much so. So I don't read a bunch of contemporary thrillers or mysteries. I just really like cozy mysteries, but when I was first turned on to Tana French's work...I think I read them out of order too. I think I might've read *THE LIKENESS* first. Cause someone was like, it's like *THE SECRET HISTORY*. And I was like, "Oh, done! Catnip, catnip for me."

And I think at first I was really thrown because the formula is different. It's not like a murder has occurred, and then you gather all the suspects and you question them one by one. So I was a bit like "what is happening?" but then I just got so pulled in by not the plots, because so often it's not even, I feel like there's only a handful of suspects, right? It's not necessarily about eliminating alibis or figuring out the whodunnit. It's just like the deep character portrayals of both the suspects, the detectives, the way that they really fully inhabit a world. Like it's so plausible that these are people who just walk around in the world. And that they're not "Oh, put Suspect A in room B with weapon C. There's nothing mechanical feeling about them. And I totally agree that even though Sayers has maybe more conventional plot formulas that she's building these mysteries around...I mean, I'm sitting here holding *STRONG POISON* and going, this is the third book in which we've had an old lady with a will at the center of a plot, right? Well, she went back to that quite a bit, but each one is different because of what they tell us about *people*.

CHARIS     Yeah. The depth of the character portraits becomes so different from *STRONG POISON* on. And it's not that there wasn't plenty of good character development in the earlier books, but it really gets taken to a new level, which not everyone liked. I know like I'm thinking specifically...I know for a fact that JRR Tolkien... I would have to get up and get down my copy of Tolkien's letters, so I'm paraphrasing a little bit, but if I remember correctly, what he said was that she had written some very good mysteries and then ruined them by introducing Harriet Vane.

SHARON     I don't want to make the Tolkien fans mad at us, *but--*

CHARIS     We can still love Tolkien and think he was very wrong.

SHARON     Yeah. And I'm also like, Oh, okay, she put a woman in her books and like, okay, [sarcastically] *Professor* Tolkien, who's... none of his books pass the Bechdel test, right? Like it's just, *sure, yeah*. Also I'm just mad at him and C.S. Lewis for creating an English literature curriculum that got used for years and years that's just like, [deeply sarcastic] Oh yeah, white, Anglo Saxons are *the best*. So anyway, I have feelings. I'm a massive fan of their work. And also like, you know... they're just kind of problematic..

CHARIS     Yup. You can be a fan of something or someone and still have criticism.

SHARON     Yes. I have some notes. [CHARIS chuckles in the background] I contain multitudes. I could not have studied literature if I couldn't somehow separate the art from the artist.

CHARIS     Yeah.

SHARON     But! Speaking of--

CHARIS     Sorry, I derailed a little bit.

SHARON     It's okay. Uh, look at that change of topic walking by! But speaking of characters and deepening character portraits, we revisit a few people that we've met before in this chapter. We get to see what Freddie Arbuthnot's been doing with himself.

CHARIS     Yes. Which it's so sweet... so for the benefit of our listeners, I'll provide context so that we know where we are, which is that Freddie Arbuthnot is spending Christmas at Dukes Denver. He's one of the guests. And Peter kind of takes him off to have a private conversation because he has asked Freddie to look into the finances of Norman Urquhart, Philip Boyes' cousin.

SHARON     [gasps] Is *that* how you pronounce it? [SHARON had been mispronouncing Urquhart as 'Err-cue-heart,' whereas CHARIS just pronounced it 'Irk-it']

CHARIS     I don't know. That's how they say it in the audiobook.

SHARON     I trust them. It's like when I found out... what is that name that looks like Featherstonehaugh and it's actually pronounced Fan-shaw? And I was like, I don't even, what is English? What is language? [CHARIS laughs for a long time in the background] I'm glad my suffering amuses you.

CHARIS     Oh, it's because I understand. I'm just like, I don't know. I can't even tell you .

SHARON     Right? *Irk-it?* Okay, irk-it. Sorry, listeners, just saying it wrong.

CHARIS But so Miss Murchison, the Cattery agent that was placed in Norman Urquhart's soliciting office, sent a note to Peter that she thought it would be interesting to see if Norman Urquhart had anything to do with the Megatherium trust. Something that had a big noteworthy crash a few years ago with a big financial fallout. And Miss Murchison, because prior to being a member of the Cattery, she was a confidential secretary for a financier, she was just like, I knew something about this person who called for Mr. Urquhart. And so I think that there might be a connection. So she passed that information on to Peter. Peter has gone to Freddie Arbuthnot, the person who is kind of an idiot about everything except for the stock exchange

SHARON Genius at the stock exchange, apparently.

CHARIS Yes. And so Peter asked Freddie to ask around. And so they're having a private conversation where Freddie is relaying what he's learned, which is that Norman Urquhart was definitely involved. But we also find out that Freddie is engaged to Rachel Levy, the daughter of Sir Reuben Levy, who was murdered in WHOSE BODY?, our very first book. And we got a hint at the time that Freddie carried a torch for Rachel Levy. Well, more than a hint, it's stated in Sir Reuben's journal that Freddy wants to marry her. And apparently he's been paying court to her all this time and has gotten her to, or really gotten her mother to agree to their engagement.

SHARON Yes. And it's very sweet. He says, "I rather got round Lady Levy by saying I'd served nearly seven years for Rachel. That was rather smart. Don't you think?" And he's referring to a biblical text wherein Jacob serves the biblical Rachel's father for seven years to marry her. And it's interesting, right? Because Freddie says that the reason it took so long was because he was a Christian and we know from WHOSE BODY? that Lady Levy was Christine Ford. She converted to marry Sir Reuben. So I do think just in those little lines, you kind of get the sense that Lady Levy has been mourning her husband this whole time. She's very determined to uphold the family traditions.

CHARIS You know, we talked a little bit when we were talking about WHOSE BODY? that there was a throwaway line where he [Freddie] says it doesn't matter. As opposed to it being something important--

SHARON To enter a interfaith marriage.

CHARIS Yeah. And knowing that Lady Levy converted, I think it's interesting that we just get this confirmation that she stays converted. She stays dedicated to her adopted faith and continues to raise her daughter in that faith. And continues to want her grandchildren to be raised in it. It's not a matter of changing hats. It's not a matter of going to a different congregation. It's like a very important part of their lives.

SHARON Yeah. And clearly of Lady Levy's identity now, yeah. Right. And Freddy is like, "it's all going to be in the synagogue" I love that he's like, I believe you can, you can come in as

a, not necessarily best man. And Peter says, "Bunter will explain the procedure to me," which I just wrote "dear Bunter." Lots of "dear Bunters" in my marginalia.

I do feel like we have to... there is a little throwaway line of Freddy's here that I'm not very pleased about. Because Peter, before they get into the Rachel Levy is going to become Mrs. Freddy part, Peter's like, you know, are you sure? How did you find out about this [re. Urquhart's involvement in the Megatherium trust]? And Freddie has been talking to someone named Goldberg and Goldberg is a cousin of old Levy's and Freddie says, "all these Jews stick together like leeches. And as a matter of fact, I think it's very fine of them." And I'm just like, ahhhhh, could do without that--

CHARIS        The stereotyping--

SHARON        Yeah, the stereotyping.

CHARIS        The comparison to leeches

SHARON        Mmhmm, that, that metaphor, that visual picture, not great. Um, but you know, good on, good on Freddy for, uh, agreeing to raise his children Jewish and carrying the torch for Rachel all those years.

CHARIS        Yeah.

SHARON        Speaking of torches, do you know where I'm going next? [both laugh]

CHARIS        Yes! I do. I do. I do. One of my favorite bits.

SHARON        Speaking of torches, Peter has a very older brotherly chat with Lady Mary. And it's interesting because there are a couple offhand comments in this book that hint that Peter has been abroad for a little while, maybe between cases?

CHARIS        Which, I need to double check the timeline. I believe that that's actually referring to one of the short stories.

SHARON        I think so. Cause the short stories were published between, right?

CHARIS        Right. And I meant to double check my timeline, but I'll didn't double check my timeline....

SHARON        Wait, is it "The Cave of Ali Baba," where Peter pretends to be dead for several years?



CHARIS Right. Because there's the reference at the very beginning during the trial. Freddy Arbuthnot says something to the dowager like isn't a nice to have old Peter back?

SHARON Yeah. I'm almost positive you're right. 'Cause I know that that book of short stories was published before STRONG POISON.

CHARIS Right. I don't, I don't want to commit myself cause I'm not 100% sure.

SHARON Just do it! Take a risk!

CHARIS All right. Well I'm pretty sure that Peter has been out of the country pretending to be dead for awhile.

SHARON [laughs] As one does.

CHARIS I don't remember quite how long, but it's a *while*.

SHARON It's a year or two, I think? He's taking down a drug gang, right?

CHARIS Right. And he does it in this weird fantastical way, which, if we get a chance to talk about the short stories, there's a lot to unpack with that one.

SHARON Yes. Yeah. So our listeners have been asking us if we plan to do the short stories or the continuations and the answer so far is we don't know. We might be very tired.

CHARIS We're focusing on the novels.

SHARON You know, it may be, I don't know. It may be fun to do it as like a Patreon or something eventually, but...

CHARIS 'Cause I would love to discuss the short stories, but it would be a lot to do them in addition to the novels.

SHARON So stay tuned.

CHARIS Yeah. Let us know if you're interested in the short stories, let us know if you would be interested if we did them as some kind of Patreon type arrangement where we released them as bonus content or, or something, you know, just let us know.

SHARON Yeah, I do love the extra Peter stories and I actually really love the Montague Egg short stories.

CHARIS Yes, oh I love Montague Egg! So yes, listeners, please do let us know if you're interested because we would love to do them. It's just a matter of being able to justify the time commitment really, because we do have to balance this with the rest of our lives.

SHARON Unfortunately,

CHARIS Unfortunately. Oh to be a lady of leisure! Doing this all day.

SHARON Right? There's those little things called jobs that we have to go to. Okay. But uh, back to, yeah. So Peter has been off pretending to be dead. To his credit, I think his mother and Bunter were in on the high jinx.

CHARIS Right. I have a vague idea that Mary was in on it as well.

SHARON I think he told probably his whole family except for Helen. Um, because...

CHARIS [laughing] Because it wouldn't bother Helen!

SHARON Right?! [both laughing]

CHARIS But so Peter has been away, but he has a much warmer relationship with Lady Mary now than he did when we encountered her during CLOUDS OF WITNESS, they have this sweet little chat and it's kind of led into by the narrative saying that Peter... he's working so hard to hide how he feels that he's really kind of overdoing it. And the "Duchess Helen indeed observed rather acidly to the Duke that Peter was surely getting too old to play the buffoon. And it would be better if he took things seriously and settled down," which... oh Helen, you have no idea!

SHARON [laughing] Helen will come to rue those words! Peter wishes! He wishes his own love affair was going off, uh, more smoothly, I suppose. So he decided to take it upon himself to help everyone else so long.

CHARIS Yes. Just being a fairy godmother. But I also, like it says that "Lady Mary Wimsey who had arrived late on Christmas Eve." So like she hasn't been there this whole time. She arrived kind of late and she realizes immediately that something is off with Peter. And it says that "she marched into her brother's bedroom at two o'clock on the morning of Boxing Day, there had been dinner and dancing and charades of the most exhausting kind. Wimsey was sitting thoughtfully over the fire in his dressing gown. 'I say, old Peter,' said Lady Mary, 'you're being a bit fevered aren't you? Anything up?'"

SHARON Yeah. So she sees through it right away. Also this has to be, this has to be an error, right? Because he's her older brother.

CHARIS        Yeah. What does your book say? Does yours say younger?

SHARON        Mine says younger as well, and it never twigged me until just now when you're reading it that--

CHARIS        Right, I noticed that reading it out loud, like wait a second, isn't she...

SHARON        Yeah, it's like the way Miss Climpson's first names switch order between between books.

CHARIS        Yeah. Between Katherine and Alexandra. I do think that that's one of those things where it's just like, the books are always so airtight within themselves, but not always with each other. But yeah. I think that I like that this shows how Mary has grown. I think the events of CLOUDS OF WITNESS kind of shook her loose from trying to play act as different things. And she learned a bit about herself. And so like now she's grown up a bit. She feels a lot more mature. She's changed to the point where she stopped being in her own head.

SHARON        She sees other people now.

CHARIS        Yeah. She sees other people now. I like that quite a bit. And there are some references, you know, Peter says something about how Mary has been busy with the house decorating. So like Mary has been running a business.

SHARON        Which, good for her.

CHARIS        Yes.

SHARON        And she says, "I get rather sick of being aimless, one must do something." So it's nice that her, the thing that she's doing, isn't play acting... being Bolshevik or, or like a damsel in distress or, you know, like she's... she's finding out who she is.

CHARIS        Yeah. But Peter, Peter really deflects. He says, "I say, Mary, do you ever see anything of old Parker these days?"

SHARON        'I've had dinner with him once or twice when I was in town.' *'Have you?'* He's a very decent, smart, reliable homespun, that sort of thing. Not amusing exactly.' And I love that Mary says 'a little solid.' Oh, and then I love that Peter, you know, he's very casually like 'I would just hate for anything upsetting to happen to Parker. He'd take it hard. I mean, it wouldn't be fair to muck about with his feelings' and then, you know, not to give too much away, but three chapters later, he goes to Parker and is like, 'I'd hate for anything to upset Mary. You know, it would just, I don't, I wouldn't want you to be just playing with her and hurting her feelings. She's dreadfully upset.'

CHARIS        Yeah. So, but he's basically, he's basically asking, you know, like, are you and Parker? Yes? A thing? Like Peter says, I'd like him to have fair play. And Mary says, "Well, Peter, I can't very well say yes or no until he asks me!" "Can't you?" And Mary says, "Well, no, not to him. It would upset his ideas of decorum!"

SHARON        So she knows Parker well.

CHARIS        Yes. And skip down a little bit. Mary's said something about the house decorating. And then she says, "I designed these pajamas, by the way. Don't you think they're rather entertaining, but I expect Chief Inspector Parker prefers the old fashioned nightgown. Nevermind. I'll be brave and devoted. Here and now I cast off my pajamas forever." "No, no" Wimsey says, "Not here and now! Respect a brother's feelings! not here. Respect of brother's feelings!" [both laugh]

SHARON        And then he says "Very well. I have to tell my friend Charles Parker that if he will abandon his natural modesty and propose, you will abandon your pajamas and say yes" [both laughing] This book is so funny. Despite all the harrowing bits, the humor just is so good.

CHARIS        Yes. Oh, it's such a, I love that exchange so much. "Not here and *now!*"

SHARON        Yeah. And then they, uh, they're immediately like, Oh, it'll be a dreadful shock for Helen.

CHARIS        And Peter says, "Blast hell and I dare say it won't be the worst shock she'll get." And I think that Mary knows something's up, which I wonder a little bit if the Dowager Duchess has said anything to her. Because she says "Peter, you're plotting something devilish. All right, if you want me to administer the first shock and let her down by degrees, I'll do it. "Yeah. But, uh, I just, I love that whole exchange. So yeah.

SHARON        Even the way it ends, you know, "Lady Mary twisted one arm about his neck and bestowed on him one of her rare sisterly caresses. 'You're a decent, old idiot,' she said. 'You look played out, go to bed.' 'Go to blazes,' said Lord Peter, amiably." They're just, they're so *comfortable* with each other now, I love it!

CHARIS        They have such a good relationship. Yeah.

SHARON        Should we skip ahead a teeny bit and just talk about Peter's conversation with Parker about Mary, and then we can kind of wrap that up.

CHARIS        Yes, yes, yes.

SHARON        Okay.

CHARIS        My other favorite thing.

SHAON        Oh it's so fun! So it's like midway through chapter 15. Peter goes and uh, you know, Parker's been running down this like packet of white powder for him. So he's like, Oh, are you here about that? And Peter says, "'Not this time, it's rather more, a more, er, er, delicate matter. It's about my sister.' Parker started and pushed the report to one side. "About Lady Mary?' 'Er, yes, I understand she's been going about with you, er, dining and all that sort of thing, what?" [laughing] Peter's just--

CHARIS        And Parker, like, Parker's language is so funny. Cause he immediately gets all formal. He's like "Lady Mary has honored me on one or two occasions with her company..."

SHARON        "And I assure you, it is the custom nowadays for women of the highest character to die unchaperoned with their friends." Peter has taken God knows how many women out for dinner, you know, like Parker does not have to explain this to him, but he's just like, Lady Mary, I respect her so much.

CHARIS        Parker's like "I ought not to have presumed." "What did you presume, old thing?" "Nothing to which anyone could object," said Parker hotly. And Parker just immediately assumed that Wimsey is here to tell him to leave Mary alone because Parker just assumes that there's no possible stance for the family to have other than that it's unsuitable.

SHARON        Yeah. He says, "From your point of view, that Lady Mary Wimsey should dine in public restaurants with a policeman..." This is where one of your favorite lines comes in.

CHARIS        Yes! Peter says, "What a perfect Victorian you are, Charles. I should like to keep you in a glass case. Of course you haven't said a word, but what I want to know is why?"

SHARON        "For the last five years or so you have been looking like a demented sheep at my sister and starting like a rabbit whenever her name is mentioned. What do you mean by it? It is not ornamental. It is not exhilarating. You unnerve the poor girl."

CHARIS        "Why not slap the manly thorax and say 'Peter, my dear! old mangle wurzle, I have decided to dig myself into the old family trench and be a brother to you."

SHARON        Oh, it's so funny. Parker, you know, not daring to hope: "Do you, are you asking me" "'I'm asking you your intentions, dammit,' said Wimsey,'And if that's not Victorian enough for you, I don't know what it is!'" It's just, it's the best. And then I love that the very next chapter starts: "To chronicle Lord Peter Wimsey's daily"-- Okay. So, the very end of this scene, Parker says we actually have located the packet of white powder, but unfortunately it's soda bicarbonate. So it's not arsenic. It closes down one of the leads that they were pursuing.

CHARIS Right, because they found out that before he went home to his cousin's house, Philip Boyes stopped in a pub, asked for a drink, and took a dose of something out of a white paper packet, which sounded very promising for the suicide theory. And by an incredible unlikely stroke of luck, they locate this white packet and it turns out that it was nothing more than bicarbonate of soda. So it was just like, Ooh, he took a pill. What was it!. And they hunt all over for it. And then they find out that it was a Tums.

SHARON Exactly, which is deeply unfortunately. So Sir Impey Biggs agrees with me because he observes "very unfortunate." And then [in the next chapter] the narrative says "To chronicle Lord Peter Wimsey's daily life during the ensuing week would be neither kind nor edifying. An enforced inactivity will produce irritable symptoms in the best of men. Nor did the imbecile happiness of Chief Inspector Parker and Lady Mary Wimsey tend to suit him, accompanied as it was by tedious demonstrations of affection for him." I love that. It's like, okay, yes, they got engaged. And now Peter's annoyed that he brought it off because they're loving around him. [both laugh]

CHARIS He's just like bleeeeeegh.

SHARON "The imbecile happiness".

CHARIS Oh, it's so funny.

SHARON Yeah, so we've got two long running relationships wrapped up in this book with Freddie and Rachel Levy and good old Parker and Mary going to tie the knot. So now that we've talked about happy things, uh, back to the case?

CHARIS Back to the case. Well, let's talk about Miss Murchison, which, we're aware of her as the Cattery agent who's been placed in Norman Urquhart's office. Uh, but chapter 13 is when we really get properly introduced to her. We spend some time in her point of view because she comes to see Lord Peter because he's sent for her, and we get this description of her where she says that she's 38 and plain. And she had worked in the same financier's office for 12 years. And then it turned out that he was speculating horribly and everything crashed. And she was suddenly without work at 37.

SHARON I do want to, again, just like put a lampshade on the description of the financier: "The brilliant financier juggled with so many spectacular undertakings. And he was juggling for his life under circumstances of increasing difficulty. As the pace grew faster, he added egg after egg, to those which were already spinning in the air. There's a limit to the number of eggs, which can be spun by human hands one day, an egg slipped and smashed than another. Then a whole omelet of eggs. The juggler fled from the stage and escaped abroad. His chief assistant blew out his brains. The audience booed, the curtain came down and Miss Murchison at 37 was out of a job." It's such a good word picture, I think. And just a little hint that, you know, just it's...

[meaningfully] it's *interesting*, a whole omelet of egg. Anyway, just, I just wanted to note that for, ahem, no reason at all, or, for no reason that will not become apparent in our next episode.

CHARIS        But so then we get a short little history of Miss. Murchison ending up at the Cattery after struggling to find work because you know, she's experienced, she wants to be paid what she's worth. And she finds out that people seem to want their secretaries young and cheap, but she ends up at the Cattery, which is very well suited to her. And she comes to see Peter. He's invited her for tea and Peter kind of insists on actually giving her tea and like chatting with her and not immediately going into business, which is kind of sweet. He's just like, I have invited you for tea and tea you shall have.

SHARON        And he insists on pouring out because he's like, it's not polite to invite someone over and make them do the work. I love how much in the second part of this book... like I always love seeing what Peter gets up to, but I think, you know, he kind of drops out a little bit and we get a long interlude of Miss Murchison securing some evidence. We're going to get a long interlude of Miss. Climpson going and securing some evidence. And I just kind of love these little glimpses into the ways that they detect and kind of the... we've talked before about how Peter sometimes sends Bunter, because there's a class divide that he can't cross, right? There's information or people or places that only Bunter can access. And I think, I think this book really points out that there's a gendered version of that as well, where Peter... Peter kind of has to depend on these women to access places and people that he could just never, without drawing attention to himself, be part of.

CHARIS        Right.

SHARON        Yeah. And yeah, just seeing how clever both Miss Murchison and Miss Climpson are in terms of how they read a room, how sort of observant they are, and the things that they pick up. It's just, it's really delightful.

CHARIS        Yeah. But so, Peter, you know, Peter has decided that he needs to know more about the will of Mrs. Wrayburn--

SHARON        Whom I think we haven't talked about yet. Do you want to give a little background?

CHARIS        Yeah. When we were talking about the first half of the book, we spent more time on other themes and so we didn't talk very much about Norman Urquhart and the Boyes family history. But an important part of the mystery is trying to figure out who could possibly profit by it. That's a main line of investigation that Peter take, because one of the main reasons that people kill other people is for profit. So Peter goes to visit Norman Urquhart, who was Philip Boyes' cousin, the one that he was living with, and who is a solicitor. And you know, he is kind of asking leading questions about like, did Phillip have any money? Did he have expectations of any

money? Norman Urquhart mentions in passing that the only person in the family with any significant amount of money is Mrs. Wrayburn, who's a former actress.

She's now a very elderly lady. And they use the term that she's quite childish, meaning that she has dementia. She's not able to care for herself. She's essentially helpless. And Peter is just like, he's just being nosy. And so he asks whether she might've left something to Boyes and Norman Urquhart says no, because of this family history. And something that really strikes Peter is how Norman Urquhart volunteers a lot of information that Peter doesn't really have any right asking about. Volunteers to show Peter a draft of Mrs. Wrayburn's will, even though that's something that Peter has no right to see, even though it's something that shouldn't be relevant.

SHARON And the draft of the will is very definitive, like "I absolutely do not leave anything to Philip Boyes. And I forbid Norman Urquhart from giving him anything." But Peter notices, mechanically, the narrative tells us that a couple of sort of characteristic things about the typewriter that must've produced the document, where he was like, Oh, there's like... the A is chipped or something like that.

CHARIS Right. And there's... one of the keys is slightly out of alignment, characteristics that would be unique to a specific typewriter.

SHARON And then later on he sees... is it another document that he sees that has the same characteristic?

CHARIS It's the letter from Miss Murchison.

SHARON Right, right, right. Because she types it at the office and sends him this letter and he's like, wait a minute. It's that typewriter!

CHARIS It has the same characteristics!

SHARON Fancy that! He has her find out when the typewriter was purchased and that kind of leads him down this path of what is it about the will that Norman Urquhart doesn't want me to see?

CHARIS Yeah. Because it's like, it's very clear that Norman Urquhart forged the draft of the will that he showed to Peter. And so Peter is just like, for one thing, he could have just pointed out that I have no right to know any of this and refused to show me anything. So he wanted me to see this, which means a reason he wants me to be misled. And so suddenly it's important that Peter find out what the actual will said, because someone's trying to hide something. It must matter.



SHARON And enter Miss Murchison. And so Peter says he's got a little assignment for her. It's going to require maybe some lockpicking, but she doesn't know how to do so, uh, Peter being an enterprising employer is like, Oh, I know just the person to teach you.

CHARIS Yeah. So they go on a little, a little adventure, a little field trip. And he takes her to meet Bill, who used to be known as Blindfold Bill. We get this very funny scene. They arrive in the middle of a gospel meeting. You know, Bill has given up being a thief. He has married and had a little daughter and he's become a teetotaler and uh, very religious in a loud way. And we kind of get this back story that Peter caught Bill robbing his safe and asked him to teach him instead of turning him into the police.

SHARON Of course! Dear Peter.

CHARIS Which led to his conversion, which led to him leading an honest life now. And it's just, it's all very fun. So Miss Murchison gets a lesson in lockpicking.

SHARON And I love that Bill is very, um, you know, he so lovingly... he gives Peter a lock to work on and it's clear that his fingers are still a little itchy, but, uh, he's determined. He's determined.

CHARIS Yeah. He gives Peter a safe door to work on. And Peter's just like, Bill, I don't think this was got honestly, cause it's like, it's obviously been blown off the safe. And Bill's talking about how it's not artistic to--

SHARON Just use gelignite?

CHARIS Yes, 'cause anyone can use gelignite. [both laugh]

And Bill's wife is just like, what does it matter if it's artistic or not artistic? If anyone's going to do such a wicked thing. It's so jolly. It's a jolly little interlude.

SHARON It's a very Dickensian aside, I feel like. And then, Miss Murchison duly armed with the lockpicks is dispatched back to the office and I love this whole interlude where it points out women's work. It points out how women both in this time and in all subsequent times get undervalued in the office.

CHARIS Yes.

SHARON She comes up with this excuse to stay late at the office, which is that she accidentally on purpose leaves out an entire paragraph on the first page of a report that has to go out the next day. And she does this very funny, like, you know, Oh dear me, I'm so sorry. Like, I'm very sorry I'm going to stay late. And it's such a silly mistake. And to the other clerk acts very, very annoyed that she did this because she had somewhere else to be.

And then everybody leaves and she starts searching around and it's just, it's also very clear that Dorothy Sayers worked in offices, you know, from these details, there's this one bit where she has to stand on a chair to look under some files. And the narrative says "The box was heavyish. And the chair (which was of the revolving kind and not the modern type with one spindly leg and a stiffly sprung back, which butts you in the lower spine and keeps you up to your job) wobbled unsteadily." You know, there's no reason for that little tidbit to be in there other than world-building. And other than Sayers must've had a real antipathy for the modern type of chair. [both chuckled] It's just delightful.

CHARIS        Yes. You have Mr. Pond who's always saying like, Oh, things were better in the old days, we worked harder and neatly.

SHARON        These newfangled typewriters that make you careless. And Mr. Pond kind of shows back up halfway through. 'Cause he left something and you know, Miss Murchison very quickly makes up a lie. Oh, I was, you know, I was looking, I was moving all those boxes from the shelves because I thought I saw a mouse and she, you know, gives a nervous giggle. She just knows exactly how to play him.

CHARIS        Yes. And she knows how to play on his sexism, you know? And she does the same with Mr. Urquhart a couple of times as well, where she's like, I know what your expectations are and I'm gonna use that to my advantage to do what I need to do.

SHARON        Which we'll see a little bit later. She actually has a very funny exchange with him in that sense.

And the thing that she discovers is not a will, but a letter from Mrs. Wrayburn about making a will. So--

CHARIS        Right. But there's no copy of, or rather no draft of the will in the box at all.

SHARON        Exactly. But at least now they know that a will existed. So that's the next adventure that Lord Peter sends a Cattery agent off on. And it will be none other than our pal Miss Climpson

CHARIS        Our lovely Miss Climpson.

SHARON        And uh, I think we'll save that for next time, right?

CHARIS        Yeah. Let's save that for next time because I think that Miss Climpson's adventure will take pretty much most of the next episode. If we get into it now we will be here for a long time. You might say an eternity.

SHARON [chuckles] You have that to look forward to readers.

CHARIS I will make puns. You can't stop me. But yeah. Do we have anything else you want to say in closing?

SHARON I think that's kind of it on my end. Was there anything we wanted to pick up from earlier in the book?

CHARIS There's a scene where Peter is, you know, he's really starting to panic that maybe he won't succeed.

SHARON Oh yeah.

CHARIS And you know, he imagines smashing the mirror in his living room and--

SHARON Yeah, it's in chapter 15. So "It was the 30th of December. He still had no plan."

CHARIS So I think that it's interesting. You were pointing out how a lot of the investigation is done by women on Peter's behalf, which means that Peter himself is kind of stuck in this place of inaction. Like there's not much that he can do. He's done just about all the running around and asking questions that he can, and now he's kind of stuck and waiting. And this book has got so many parts that are so funny and the parts with Miss Murchison are fun. And when we get to Miss Climpson's adventure, it can be quite funny, but there is this short scene that kind of lets us in on how Peter is doing, which is not great, not great, not great at all.

And it's here at the beginning of chapter 15 and Peter's very aware that he is running out of time. It says "It was the 30th of December and he still had no plan. The stately volumes on his shelves, rank after rank of saint, historian, poet, philosopher mock his impotence. All that wisdom and all that beauty and they could not show him how to save the woman he imperiously wanted from a sordid death by hanging. And he had thought himself rather clever at that kind of thing." And Peter is... he's so helpless.

SHARON Yeah. It's also... this is like a very very detailed close reading kind of thing. But that line, "they could not show him how to save the woman he imperiously wanted from a sordid death by hanging." I circled that word *imperiously* because I think on first reading, it's like, Oh, he imperiously wants to save her from the sordid death. And then you look closer and it's like, oh no, it's the woman he imperiously *wanted*. And I don't know, there's something there about that word where... like the scene seems to be from Peter's point of view, right? 'Cause he's looking at the bookshelves and it's sort of like the narrative camera tracks with his eyeline. And so it's really interesting to me that he... he even recognizes that the wanting is an imperious one, right? That the, "I see it, I want to have it"... like in CLOUDS OF WITNESS where he sees Mrs. Grimethorpe the first time, and it says like, you know, fifteen centuries of aristocratic breeding rose up... that medieval kind of urge?

CHARIS        And in a later book, there is going to be a moment when he kind of reflects on this early stage of his relationship with Harriet. And he realizes that he approached it the wrong way. That he, that his instinct was to take and have.

SHARON        Yeah. And it's interesting because like that same instinct here... he looks at himself in a mirror and "he saw a fair foolish face with straw colored hair slicked back, a monocle clining incongruously under a ludicrously twitching brow, a chin shaved to perfection. Hairless. Epicene. A rather high collar starched to perfection. A tie elegantly knotted and matching in color the handkerchief which peeped coyly from the breast pocket of an expensive Savile row tailored suit. He snatched up a heavy bronze from the mantle piece, a beautiful thing. Even as he snatched it, his fingers caressed the patina..." Puh-tee-nuh? Puh-tie-nuh?

CHARIS        PAT-in-uh

SHARON        PAT-in-uh! What is language? Okay. "His fingers caressed the patina and the impulse seized him to smash the mirror and smash the face. To break out into great animal howls and gestures. Silly. One could not do that. The inherited inhibitions of twenty civilized centuries tied one hand and foot in bonds of ridicule. What if he did smash the mirror? Nothing would happen. Bunter would come in unmoved and unsurprised. Would sweep up the debris in a dust pan. Would prescribe a hot bath and massage. And next day a new mirror would be ordered because people would come in and ask questions and civilly regret the accidental damage to the old one. And Harriet Vane would still be hanged just the same."

So it's interesting. The "twenty civilized centuries" really stuck out to me. It's like the antidote, or the hand-in-hand thing with the, you know, fifteen centuries of aristocratic breeding of saying you can have anything you want. But that that is counterbalanced with this awareness that Peter has of... but I *can't* have everything I want.

CHARIS        Yeah. Right. Like the idea that you should be able to have everything that you want except emotional freedom. He has that... or he's been raised with that privilege of being like, I want things, then I'm generally able to obtain them, but what I'm not free to do is express my despair.

SHARON        [Or] ask Bunter for a hug. And the way that he gives vent to his feelings is that he goes over and forces Parker to [chuckle] not to marry Lady Mary, but to, you know, to kind of get over his own pride and do the thing. It says--so in the interim, he has this conversation with Miss Climpson about going out to find the will at Mrs. Wrayburn's. Then it says, "Convinced of his own futility, he determined to do what little good lay in his power before retiring to a monastery or to the frozen wastes of the Antarctic. He taxied purposefully round to Scotland Yard and asked for Chief inspector Parker." And then, then we get into their whole conversation that we've already had raptures over.

CHARIS        Yes.

SHARON Oh, poor Peter.

CHARIS Yeah. So, yeah. So that's where, that's where Peter is emotionally and mentally.

SHARON And physically. So, yeah. Tune in next time, listeners, when we'll find out if he succeeds in saving his lady love.

CHARIS Yes. And we will talk about Miss Climpson's adventures with Spiritualism.

SHARON Indeed we shall.

CHARIS In the meantime, you can find us on Twitter and Instagram as @wimseypod, that's Wimsey "w i m s e y." And you can find transcripts and shownotes of our episodes at our website at [asmywimseytakesme.com](http://asmywimseytakesme.com).

SHARON Our logo is by Gabby Vicioso, and our theme music was composed and recorded by Sarah Meholick. If you've enjoyed this episode of As My Wimsey Takes Me, we'd love for you to give us a rating and a review on Apple podcasts or on your podcatcher of choice. And we also hope that you'll tell all your friends who love Dorothy L. Sayers as much as we do.

CHARIS Join us next time for more talking piffle!

[THEME MUSIC plays and gradually fades out]