The Attenbury Emeralds

By Jill Paton Walsh and Dorothy L. Sayers
A Presumption of Death

By Dorothy L. Sayers and Jill Paton Walsh
Thrones, Dominations

Detective Stories by Jill Paton Walsh
The Wyndham Case
A Piece of Justice
Debts of Dishonour
The Bad Quarto

Detective Stories by Dorothy L. Sayers
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Clouds of Witness
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Strong Poison
Unnatural Death
The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club
Whose Body?

JILL PATON WALSH

The Attenbury Emeralds

based on the characters of
Dorothy L. Sayers

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For Judith Vidal-Hall,
With gratitude for many years of friendship

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As always my debt to my husband is beyond acknowledgement and I offer him my heartfelt thanks.

JPW October 2009

THE CHARACTERS

(in order of appearance)

Lord Peter Wimsey
Harriet, Lady Peter Wimsey, née Harriet Vane: his wife
Arthur Abcock, Earl of Attenbury: a recently deceased peer
Mervyn Bunter: Lord Peter's manservant
Honoria, Dowager Duchess of Denver: Lord Peter's mother
Lady Charlotte Abcock: daughter of Lord Attenbury
Gerald, Duke of Denver: Lord Peter's brother
Helen, Duchess of Denver: the Duke's wife
Roland, Lord Abcock: eldest son of the Earl of Attenbury
Bredon Wimsey: Lord Peter Wimsey's eldest son
Peter Bunter: son of Mervyn Bunter
Hope Bunter: wife of Mervyn Bunter
Paul Wimsey: middle son of Lord Peter Wimsey
Roger Wimsey: youngest son of Lord Peter Wimsey
Claire, Lady Attenbury: wife of the Earl of Attenbury
Lady Diana Abcock: her middle daughter
Lady Ottalie Abcock: her youngest daughter

Captain Ansel: an army friend of Lord Abcock, guest at Fennybrook Hall
Mrs Ansel: his wife
Mrs Sylvester-Quicke: guest at Fennybrook Hall
Miss Amaranth Sylvester-Quicke: her daughter
Reginald Northerby: Lady Charlotte's fiancé
Freddy Arbuthnot: guest at Fennybrook Hall
Sir Algernon Pender: guest at Fennybrook Hall
Lady Pender: his wife
Mrs Ethel DuBerris: a widow, guest at Fennybrook Hall
Ada DuBerris: her daughter
Inspector Sugg: a policeman from Scotland Yard
Nandine Osmanthus: an emissary from the Maharaja of Sinorabad
Mr Whitehead: an employee of Cavenor's Bank
William DuBerris: deceased nephew of Lady Attenbury and husband of Mrs DuBerris
Jeannette: Lady Charlotte's maid
Sarah: Lady Attenbury's maid
Sergeant Charles Parker: a policeman from Scotland Yard
Harris: Lord Attenbury's butler
Salcombe Hardy: a journalist
Constable Johnson: a policeman
Mr Handley: a pawnbroker
Mr Handley's son: who unexpectedly inherits his father's business
The Marquess of Writtle: husband of Lady Diana Abcock
The Lord Chancellor

Sir Impey Biggs: a distinguished barrister
Mrs Prout: a cleaner at the House of Lords
Edward Abcock, Lord Attenbury: grandson and heir of Arthur, Lord Attenbury; son of Lord Abcock
Mr Snader: a director of Cavenor's Bank
Mr Tipotenios: a mysterious stranger
Mr Orson: an employee of Cavenor's Bank
Miss Pevenor: a historian of jewellery
Lady Sylvia Abcock: widow of Roland, Lord Abcock
Frank Morney: husband of Lady Charlotte Abcock
Captain Rannerson: owner of the horse Red Fort
Lady Mary Parker: wife of Commander Charles Parker of Scotland Yard and sister of Lord Peter Wimsey
Verity Abcock: daughter of Lord Abcock and Lady Sylvia Abcock
Lily: an ayah
Joyce and Susie: workers at the Coventry Street mortuary in 1941
Mrs Trapps: cook in the London House
Rita Patel: volunteer at the mortuary
Mrs Smith: a visitor to the mortuary
Miss Smith: her daughter
The Maharaja of Sinorabad
Franklin: maid to the Dowager Duchess of Denver
Thomas: butler at Duke's Denver
Dr Fakenham: physician to Duke's Denver
Cornelia Vanderhuysen: American friend of the Dowager Duchess
Jim Jackson: gardener at Duke's Denver
Bob: another gardener

James Vaud: a London detective inspector
Mr Van der Helm: a retired insurance valuer
Mr Bird: a retired insurance company owner
Mrs Farley: housekeeper at Duke's Denver

I

'Peter?' said Lady Peter Wimsey to her lord. 'What were the Attenbury emeralds?'

Lord Peter Wimsey lowered *The Times*, and contemplated his wife across the breakfast table.

'Socking great jewels,' he said. 'Enormous hereditary baubles of incommensurable value. Not to everyone's liking. Why do you ask?'

'Your name is mentioned in connection with them, in this piece I'm reading about Lord Attenbury.'

'Old chap died last week. That was my first case.'

'I didn't know you read obituaries, Peter. You must be getting old.'

'Not at all. I am merely lining us up for the best that is yet to be. But in fact it is our Bunter who actually peruses the newsprint for the dear departed. He brings me the pages on anyone he thinks I should know about. Not knowing who is dead leaves one mortally out of touch.'

'You are sixty, Peter. What is so terrible about that? By the way, I thought your first case was the Attenbury *diamonds*.'

'The emeralds came before the diamonds. Attenbury had a positive treasury of nice jewels. The emeralds were

very fine – Mughal or something. When they went missing there was uproar.'

'When was this?'

'Before the flood: 1921.'

'Talking of floods, it's pouring outside,' said Harriet, looking at the rainwashed panes of the breakfast-room windows. 'I shan't be walking to the London Library unless it leaves off. Tell me about these socking great baubles.'

'Haven't I told you about them already, in all the long years of talk we have had together?'

'I don't believe so. Have you time to tell me now?'

'I talk far too much already. You shouldn't encourage me, Harriet.'

'Shouldn't I? I thought encouragement was part of the help and comfort that the one ought to have of the other.'

'Does help and comfort extend to collusion in each other's vices?'

'You needn't tell me if you don't want to,' said Harriet to this, regarding it as a deliberate red herring.

'Oh, naturally I want to. Rather fun, recounting one's triumphs to an admiring audience. It's a very long story, but I shall fortify myself with the thought that you asked for it.'

'I did. But I didn't contract to be admiring. That depends on the tale.'

'I have been warned. It's undoubtedly a problem with being married to a detective story writer that one runs the gauntlet of literary criticism when giving an account of oneself. And the most germane question is: is Bunter

busy? Because I think explaining all this to you might entail considerable assistance from him.'

'When is Bunter not busy? This morning he intends, I believe, to devote himself to dusting books.'

Lord Peter folded his copy of *The Times*, and laid it on the table. 'A man may dust books while listening, or while talking. We shall join him in the library.'

'Bunter, where do I start on all this?' Peter asked, once the project was explained, he and Harriet were settled in deep armchairs either side of the fire, and Bunter was on the library steps, at a remove both horizontally and vertically, but within comfortable earshot.

'You might need to explain, my lord, that the occasion in question was your first foray into polite society after the war.'

'Oh, quite, Bunter. Not fair at all to expect you to describe my pitiful state to Harriet. Well, Harriet, you see . . .'

To Harriet's amazement, Peter's voice shifted register, and a sombre expression clouded his face.

'Peter, if this distresses you, don't. Skip the hard bit.'

Peter recovered himself and continued. 'You know, of course, that I had a sort of nervous collapse after the war. I went home to Bredon Hall, and cowered in my bedroom and wouldn't come out. Mother was distraught. Then Bunter showed up, and got me out of it. He drew the curtains, and carried in breakfast, and found the flat in Piccadilly, and got me down there to set me up as a man about town. Everything tickety-boo. I'm sure Mother will

have told you all that long since, even if I haven't. Only as you know all too well, it wasn't entirely over. I have had relapses. Back then I couldn't relapse exactly, because I hadn't really recovered. I felt like a lot of broken glass in a parcel. Must've been hellish for Bunter.'

'I seem to remember your mother telling me some story about Bunter overcome with emotion because you had sent away the damned eggs and demanded sausages. Rather incredible, really, but I always believe a dowager duchess.'

'Expound, Bunter,' said Peter.

'The difficulty about breakfasts, my lady, was that it entailed giving orders. And his lordship in a nervous state associated giving orders with the immediate death of those who obeyed them. The real responsibility for the orders belonged to the generals who made the battle plans, and in the ranks we all knew that very well. But just the same it fell to the young men who were our immediate captains to give us the orders to our faces. And it was they who saw the consequences in blood and guts. All too often they shared the fate of their men. We didn't blame them. But his lordship was among those who blamed themselves.'

'That really must have made him difficult to work for,' said Harriet.

'It was a challenge, certainly, my lady,' admitted Bunter, blowing gently on the top of the book in his hand to dislodge a miniature cloud of dust.

'But by the time I knew him he had got over it,' continued Harriet. 'I don't remember seeing him having any difficulty in giving you orders in recent years.'

Bunter replaced the book in the run, turned round and sat down atop the library steps. 'But back in 1921 his lordship was very shaky, my lady. We had established a gentle routine for life in town – morning rides in Rotten Row, a few concerts, haunting the book auctions, that sort of thing. And at any moment when boredom or anxiety threatened we went suddenly abroad. Travel is very soothing to a nervous temperament. But his lordship had not resumed the sort of life in society that a man of his rank was expected to lead. He couldn't stand even the rumble of the trains on the Underground Railway, because it evoked the sound of artillery, so we felt it would be better not to attend any shooting parties. I had been hoping for some time that a suitable house-party would occur, at which we could, so to speak, try the temperature of the water.'

'What an extraordinary metaphor, Bunter!' said Lord Peter. 'The temperature of the water at a house-party is always lukewarm, by the time it has been carried upstairs by a hard-pressed servant and left outside the bedroom door in an enamel jug.'

'Begging your pardon, my lord, but I always saw to your hot water myself, and I do not recall any complaints about it at the time.'

'Heavens, Bunter, indeed not! I must be remembering occasions before you entered my service. That vanished world my brother and all seniors talk so fondly about. When wealth and empire were in unchallenged glory, and to save which my generation were sent to die wholesale in the mud of Flanders. I wasn't the only one,' he added, 'to find the peace hard to get used to.'

'That's an odd way of putting it, Peter,' said Harriet, contemplating her husband with a thoughtful expression. 'I can see that horrible flashbacks to the trenches might have undermined you. Might have haunted you. But the peace itself?'

'The peace meant coming home,' Peter said, 'finding oneself mixing with those who had stayed at home all along. Listening to old gentlemen at the club, who had waved the flag as eagerly as anyone when their own prosperity was in danger, complaining once the danger was past about ex-servicemen who according to them thought far too much of themselves and what they had done. Reading in the press about unemployment and poverty facing returning soldiers, and employers grumbling about being asked to have a mere 5 per cent of their workforce recruited from ex-servicemen.'

Harriet said, 'I remember a visit to London when there was a man on crutches selling matches in the street. My mother gave me a penny, and said, "Run across and give this to the soldier, Harry, but don't take his matches." I shook my head when he offered me the matches, and he smiled. My mother said when I went back to her side, "They're not allowed to beg, but they are allowed to sell things." I remember that very clearly, but I'm afraid most of it passed me by.'

'You were just a girl, after all,' said Lord Peter, smiling at his wife, 'and a swot, I imagine. What were you doing in 1921?'

'Head down over my books preparing for Oxford entrance exams,' said Harriet. 'I think, you know, that it's just as well I didn't meet you then, Peter.'

'You'd have been a breath of fresh air compared to the girls I did meet. And you never know, you might have liked me. Wasn't it my frivolity that put you off for years? I hadn't yet got into the way of frivolity so much then.'

'Is that true, Bunter?' asked Harriet, affecting doubt.

'His lordship never perpetrates falsehoods, my lady,' said Bunter, straight-faced.

He descended the library steps, moved them one bay along, and gave his attention to the next column of books.

'Bunter, do get down from that thing, and face forward somewhere. Come and sit down and tell Harriet properly about those lost years.'

'Yes, my lord,' said Bunter stiffly, doing as he was asked.

'Well, come along then, your most excellent opinion, if you please.'

When Bunter hesitated, Harriet said gently, 'How did *you* find the peace, Bunter?'

'It was very easy for me, my lady. I had escaped serious injury. I had a job for the asking, and it was a well-paid position with all found. Many of those I had served with, especially the seriously injured, came home to a cold welcome, and were soon forgotten. People turned away from mention of the war as from talk of a plague. His lordship's sort of people threw themselves into pleasure-seeking and fun. My sort had longer memories.'

'The awful fact was,' Peter put in, 'that all that suffering and death had produced a world that was just the same as before. It wasn't any safer; it wasn't any fairer; there were no greater liberties or chances of happiness for civilised mankind.'

'Working men were beginning to toy with Bolshevism,' said Bunter. 'And it was hard to blame them.'

'The very same people,' Peter added, 'who were refusing to employ a one-armed soldier, or who were trying to drive down miners' wages, were horrified at a rise of Bolshevism, mostly because of the massacre of the Romanovs. Well, because the Russian royals were disappeared, supposed dead.'

'I remember Richard King in the *Tatler*,' said Bunter, 'opining that the mass of men will gladly sacrifice themselves for the realisation of a better world, but would never again be willing to sacrifice themselves merely to preserve the old one.'

At which both his employers objected at once.

Peter: 'Even you, Bunter, cannot expect me to believe that you have remembered that verbatim for something like thirty years!'

Harriet: 'In the *Tatler*, Bunter? Surely not!'

Bunter met both sallies with aplomb. 'It happens, my lord, my lady, that I began to keep a commonplace book at that time. I was so struck by those words of Richard King that I cut out his article, and pasted it on to the first page of the book. My eye lights on it again every time I open it to make a new insertion.'

'Worsted again,' said Peter. 'I should have realised long ago that it is useless to argue with you.'

Bunter acknowledged this apology with a brief nod of the head.

'Uneasy times,' said Peter. 'There was a coal strike that spring – quickly over, but with hindsight it was rumbling

towards the General Strike. And what Bunter calls my sort of people were carrying on like the Edwardians become hysterical. Dancing, dressing up, getting presented at court, throwing huge parties, racing, gambling, prancing off to the French Riviera or Chamonix, chasing foxes, shooting grouse . . . I was supposed to be a good sport, and join in. It seemed meaningless to me. I found my station in life was dust and ashes in my mouth. I might have been all right with a decently useful job.'

'Couldn't you just have gone and got one?' asked Harriet.

'Of course I could. I was just too callow to think of it. I think I went for months with no better purpose in life than trying not to disappoint Bunter. If he made breakfast, I ought to eat breakfast. If he thought I needed a new suit, I ought to order one, and so forth. If he kept showing me catalogues of book sales, I ought to collect books.'

'If I may say so, my lord,' said Bunter, 'I believe the book-collecting was entirely your idea. I have been your lordship's apprentice in anything to do with books.'

Harriet looked from one of them to the other. They were both struggling to conceal emotion. Whatever had she stirred up? Should she have guessed that the emeralds would open old wounds in this way?

'You see, Harriet,' said Peter, 'that if my life was a stream of meaningless trivia, I was affronting Bunter. He was far too good a fellow to be a servant to a witless fool. I could just about manage to do what Bunter appeared to expect I might do, but I knew, really, that I was frittering both of us.'

'I shouldn't think Bunter saw it that way,' said Harriet. 'I imagine he saw you as a decently useful job. I hope we aren't making you uncomfortable, Bunter,' she added.

'Not unusually so, my lady,' said Bunter gravely.

His remark brought a brief blush to Harriet's face. All three of them laughed.

'So as Bunter was saying,' Peter continued, 'he and my mother between them – that's right, isn't it, Bunter? – were on the lookout for a suitable occasion, a kind of coming-out for me, when I might show my face in public again, and try to behave normally. And they chose the Abcock engagement party. A party to present Lady Charlotte Abcock's fiancé to Lord Attenbury's circle.'

'Abcock is the Attenbury family surname, my lady,' said Bunter helpfully.

'Thank you, Bunter,' said Harriet. She thought wryly that she would find all that easier to remember and understand if she had ever been able to take it entirely seriously.

'It seemed just the right sort of occasion,' said Bunter, 'with only one drawback. It wasn't very large, but on the other hand large enough to seem like being in society. The Earl of Attenbury's family were long-established friends of the Wimsey family. The event was not in the shooting season. His lordship had been at school with Lord Abcock – Roland, the Attenburys' eldest son – and had known the eldest daughter as a girl. Fennybrook Hall, the Attenburys' seat in Suffolk, was not a taxing journey from London, as I supposed. I thought we would go by train, my lady. I had not anticipated that his lordship

would insist on driving us, a circumstance that certainly made the journey memorable.'

'That I can well imagine,' said Harriet sympathetically. 'What was the drawback?'

'Oh, just that brother Gerald, and my dear sister-in-law Helen were among the guests,' said Peter.

'1921,' said Harriet thoughtfully. 'Surely Helen was not yet the full-blown Helen of more recent years?'

'Much the same, if a little less strident,' said Peter.

'In the event, my lady, another drawback emerged when we had already accepted the invitation, and it was too late to withdraw,' said Bunter. 'The family decided to get their jewels out of the bank for the occasion, and the press became aware of it. There was a great deal of most unwelcome publicity about it, and it seemed likely that the party would be besieged.'

'I have never been able to see the point of jewels so valuable that they have to be kept in the bank,' said Harriet.

'The thing about such possessions is that their owners don't really regard them as personal property,' said Peter. 'They are part of the patrimony of the eldest sons. They go with the title, like the estates and family seat. Unlike the estates and the family seat, however, they can be entailed to go down the line of daughters. They are a family responsibility. Nobody wants to be the one during whose tenure they were lost, stolen or strayed.'

'The Attenbury emeralds were, or rather are, in the strict sense heirlooms, my lady,' said Bunter.

'Yes,' said Harriet doubtfully, 'but it must greatly limit the enjoyment they can give.'

'You married me wearing Delagardie earrings,' said Peter mildly.

'That was to please your mother,' Harriet said. 'She had been so kind to me; and she thought they would look good with that golden dress.'

'She was right,' said Peter, smiling.

'My mind was on other things that day,' said Harriet, 'but I wouldn't normally like to wear something that wasn't really mine, but only on loan from history. It would be like going to the ball in a hired gown.' Not for the first time she felt thankful that Peter was the younger son. She glanced at the blazing ruby in her engagement ring. That was completely hers.

'On the other hand,' said Peter, smiling – he must have seen that glance – 'it lends occasions some éclat when everyone puts on their glory only now and then.'

'Many families solve the difficulty by having paste replicas made for less august occasions,' said Bunter.

'And the Attenburys had done exactly that,' said Peter, 'which added to the complexity. But, Bunter, we're getting ahead of ourselves. Time we took the King of Heart's advice: begin at the beginning, go on till you get to the end and then stop. That last is the most difficult, isn't it, Harriet?'

'Rough hewing our ends being easier than divinely shaping them, you mean? We seem to me to be having difficulty beginning at all,' she said.