

And the Walls Came Tumbling Down

Billy White

I do not wish to startle you, dear reader, but the story I am about to tell you is highly unusual.

It is you and you alone whom I am addressing. One need not be an internationally renowned police detective, as I am, to realise that the fourth wall is being broken. Nay, it is not merely being broken; it is being destroyed utterly. The technique is not new, of course: it has been used everywhere from *Don Quixote* to the traditional Christmas pantomime. Indeed, it is possible that the Author of this piece has endowed me, his creation, with the ability to speak to you in this way because he has been watching too much *Fleabag*. Whatever the case may be, I am all too aware of my status as a purely fictional character, and of the fact that it is only in your imagination, dear reader, that I truly exist. Therefore, please bear with me.

My name is Marcus Reynolds. As stated previously, I am a police detective. The press has described me as ‘the Shakespeare of deduction’, a soubriquet which, though obsequious, I confess I find flattering. My most celebrated cases include ‘The Theft of the Somerset Sapphires’, ‘The Scandal of the Three Garters’ and ‘The Chocolate Mousse Adventure’. I cannot, alas, relate these stories here, primarily because the Author has not yet deigned to write them. It seems that he, like me, prefers to focus on the case at hand. And by jingo, what a case it is.

The case in question is of the murder of Lord Humphrey Woodburn, sixty-seven years old, a member of the landed gentry and one of the wealthiest men in England (for it almost goes without saying that it is in this green and pleasant land that this story takes place). On the morning of 12th April 1934 his Lordship’s corpse was discovered in his study, which was locked from the inside. The only key to the room was found in Woodburn’s trouser pocket. Even more puzzling was the cause of the lord’s death: he had been viciously bludgeoned with a copy of Marshall W. Taylor’s *A Collection of Revival Hymns and Plantation Melodies* – a book which his Lordship, who had been a committed atheist, had reportedly never owned. It was an enigmatic situation indeed, and I was asked to investigate it even before the post-mortem

examination had taken place. I arrived at the family's ancestral home, Woodburn Hall, the following afternoon.

For a while, the case perplexed even my intellect. At no point, however, did I doubt that I would eventually discover the truth – after all, what kind of an Author would write a whodunit in which the mystery was never solved? Sure enough, a thorough examination of the facts led me to the solution. It was certainly a fascinating one, and yet I had mixed feelings about it. On the one hand, it made the twist ending of 'The Chocolate Mousse Adventure' appear positively *passé* by comparison. On the other, however, it seemed perhaps a little too easy, too appropriate for this kind of story. I shall leave you, dear reader, to decide for yourself, but if you are dissatisfied, kindly forgive the Author. He is, after all, young – not yet twenty-six.

This being a short story, I, or rather the Author, shall omit the details of my investigation and describe merely its climactic scene. At this moment, I am standing in the library of Woodburn Hall, about to reveal the murderer's identity to his Lordship's widow, daughter, two sons and a number of his servants. I am also accompanied by police superintendents Jennings and Ford, whom I trust with my life. I smile pleasantly at my audience and begin.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' I say gently, 'first allow me to express my deepest sympathies in the wake of such a bestial crime. The loss of loved one is never easy to bear, but it is an even greater tragedy to have a friend or relative taken before their time by an act of premeditated violence. The only succour I am able to offer is that I have discovered why and by whom Lord Woodburn was killed. I regret to say, however, that his murderer is here among us, in this very room.'

There are stereotypical murmurs of shock and anticipation. The Author, no doubt enjoying teasing his readers, takes a moment to compose the next sentence, and so do I.

'There is no further reason to delay,' I announce. I focus my attention on Jacob, Lord Woodburn's younger son, a quiet, bespectacled man who has inherited his father's scholarly nature but not much of his money. (The will has already been read out.) Before I reveal all, I briefly consider the secret the Author has allowed me to know, and I am forced to inwardly admit that, without his intervention, the case would never have been solved.

'Lord Woodburn was a lifelong atheist and fierce critic of organised religion,' I say evenly. 'He must have been embarrassed, therefore, to discover that one wall of his study concealed a priest hole – a hiding place for Catholic clergymen built during times of persecution under

Queen Elizabeth the First. His Lordship kept the existence of the hole a secret for no other reason than that he found it a source of shame.'

The shocked murmurs grow louder. Superintendent Jennings nods. 'It's true,' he declares definitively. 'When Detective Reynolds has finished, you can go upstairs and see the hole for yourselves.'

'Jacob, however, learnt his father's secret,' I continue. 'It preoccupied his thoughts to the point where, at dinner the evening before the murder took place, he absent-mindedly whistled an old African-American spiritual, the refrain of which runs thus:

*Joshua fought the battle of Jericho,
Jericho, Jericho,
Joshua fought the battle of Jericho,
And the walls came tumbling down.'*

Lord Woodburn's daughter gasps. She clearly recalls the event. I begin speaking directly to Jacob. 'You were thinking, no doubt, of the wall in the study which could itself come down at a firm push from the person inside the hole. Your father heard the tune and made the connection instantly. To confirm his suspicions, he rushed out after dinner to a nearby bookshop, where he purchased *A Collection of Revival Hymns and Plantation Melodies* – a book which contained the song, and which became the murder weapon.

The study was locked, but you, Jacob, had had a duplicate key manufactured some time ago." I hold up the key for all to see. "I discovered it hidden beneath your unusually large mattress. You slipped into the study and hid yourself in the priest hole. As soon as your father returned to the study, he sat down, intending to read the hymnal. He never had the chance. You leapt out of the hole, seized the book – and I need say no more.'

There is a silence which a poorer Author than mine would describe as 'deafening'. Then Jacob bursts into raucous laughter. 'This is absurd!' he cries. 'My father may have had a secret room in his study, and I may have been whistling an old negro song, but what does that prove? Nothing! And you have not even attempted to provide a *motive* for my doing any of this.'

'I must say, Detective, this story of yours does have a few gaps in it,' mutters Superintendent Ford, a decent but rather gruff man. 'How, for example, did Jacob know about the hole in the first place?'

'I admit, my dear Ford, that that detail remains a mystery to me,' I reply. 'But murder mysteries are very difficult stories to write. Even the best are not completely watertight.'

‘What on earth do you mean?’ demands Jacob. I detect a note of panic in his voice. Now is the moment of truth.

‘Jacob Woodburn, I want to reassure you that you are not alone,’ I tell him. ‘I have had something revealed to me our mutual creator. You, like me, are aware that you are a character in a work of fiction. You knew about the priest hole because the Author told you about it. This is also why it is not necessary to establish your motive for the crime. You killed your father because the Author decided that you would do so. Everyone in this story, including you, are the Author’s puppets. You and I are merely puppets who can see the strings. And you will confess to Lord Woodburn’s murder because the Author has ordained that this, too, is what will happen.’

A single tear appears in Jacob’s left eye, and he breaks. ‘You’re right!’ he wails. ‘I killed my father, I confess it. But you got one thing wrong, Detective. I *did* have a motive for killing him. When I beat his head in with that book, it was the one time in my life I truly felt free. But the Author planned that too, didn’t he?’ He weeps. ‘And all because he’s been watching too much bloody *Fleabag*.’

This is where the story ends, dear reader, because – alas – this piece has reached its designated word limit. I cannot, therefore, reveal the reactions of the Woodburn family to my revelation. Yet my police colleagues have Jacob’s confession, and that should be enough to convict him. And, despite my unorthodox way of doing so, I have solved the case. A case which will go down in literary history as being the greatest of Marcus Reynolds’s illustrious career. Thank you for reading it. Adieu.