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The Snapdragon and the C.I.D.

Margery Allingham

‘Murder under the mistletoe – and the man who must have done it couldn’t have done it. That’s my Christmas and I don’t feel merry, thank you very much all the same.’ Superintendent Stanislaus Oates favoured his old friend Mr Albert Campion with a pained smile and sat down in the chair indicated.

It was the afternoon of Christmas Day and Mr Campion, only a trifle more owlish than usual behind his horn-rims, had been fetched down from the children’s party which he was attending at his brother-in-law’s house in Knightsbridge to meet the Superintendent, who had moved heaven and earth to find him.

‘What do you want?’ Mr Campion inquired facetiously. ‘A little pocket conjuring?’

‘I don’t care if you do it swinging from a trapeze. I just want a reasonable explanation.’ Oates was rattled. His dyspeptic face with the perpetually sad expression was slightly flushed and not with festivity. He plunged into his story.

‘About eleven last night a crook called Sampson was found shot dead in the back of a car in a garage under a small drinking club in Alcatraz Mews, named the Humdinger. A large bunch of mistletoe which had been lying on the front seat ready to be driven home, had been placed on top of the body partially hiding it – which was why it hadn’t been found before. The gun, fitted with a silencer, but wiped of prints, was found under the front seat. The dead man was recognised at once by the owner of the car, who is also the owner of the club. He was her current boyfriend. She is quite a well-known West End character called “Girlski”. What did you say?’

‘I said “Oe-er”,’ murmured Mr Campion. ‘One of the Eumenides, no doubt?’

‘No.’ Oates spoke innocently. ‘She’s not a Greek. Don’t worry about her. Just keep your mind on the facts. She knows, as we do, that the only person who wanted to kill Sampson is a nasty little snake called Krait. He has been out of circulation for the best of reasons. Sampson turned Queen’s evidence against him in a matter concerning a conspiracy to rob Her Majesty’s mails, and when he was released last Tuesday he came out breathing retribution.’

‘Not the Christmas spirit,’ said Mr Campion inanely.

‘That is exactly what *we* thought,’ Oates agreed. ‘So about five o’clock yesterday afternoon two of our chaps, hearing that he was at the Humdinger, where he might have been

expected to make trouble, dropped along there and brought him in “to help our inquiries” and he’s been in ever since. Well, now. We have at least a dozen reasonably sober witnesses to prove that Krait did not meet Sampson at the club. Sampson had been there earlier in the afternoon but he left about a quarter to four saying he’d got to do some shopping but promising to return. Fifteen minutes or so later Krait came in and stayed there in full view of Girlski and the customers until our ministering angels turned up and collected him. Now what do you say?’

‘Too easy.’ Mr Campion was suspicious. ‘Krait killed Sampson just before he came in himself. The two met in the dusk outside the club. Krait forced Sampson into the garage and possibly into the car and shot him out of hand. With the way the traffic has been lately he’d hardly have attracted attention had he used a mortar let alone a gun with a silencer. He wiped the weapon, chucked it in the car, threw the mistletoe over the corpse and went up to Girlski and the rest to renew old acquaintance and establish an alibi. Your chaps, arriving when they did, must have appeared welcome.’

Oates nodded. ‘We thought that. That *is* what happened. That is why this morning’s development has set me gibbering. We have now two unimpeachable witnesses who swear that the dead man was in Chipperwood West at six last evening delivering some Christmas purchases he had made on behalf of a neighbour. That is a whole hour after Krait was put under arrest. The assumption is that Sampson returned to Alcatraz Mews some time later in the evening and was killed by someone else – which I do not believe. Unfortunately the Chipperwood West witnesses are not the

kind of people we are going to shake. One of them is a friend of yours. She asked our Inspector if he knew you because you were “so good at crime and all that nonsense”.’

‘Good Heavens!’ Mr Campion spoke piously as the explanation of the Superintendent’s unlikely visitation was made plain to him. ‘I don’t think I know Chipperwood West.’

‘It’s a suburb which is becoming fashionable. Have you ever heard of Lady Larradine?’

‘Old Lady ’ell?’ Mr Campion let the joke of his salad days escape without being noticed by either of them. ‘I don’t believe it. She must be dead by this time!’

‘There’s a type of woman who never dies before you do,’ said Oates with apparent sincerity. ‘She’s quite a dragon I understand from our Inspector. However, she isn’t the actual witness. There are two of them. Brigadier Brose is one. Ever heard of him?’

‘I don’t think I have.’

‘My information is that you’d remember him if you’d met him. We’ll find out. I’m taking you with me, Campion. I hope you don’t mind?’

‘My sister will hate it. I’m due to be Father Christmas in about an hour.’

‘I can’t help that.’ Oates was adamant. ‘If a bunch of silly crooks want to get spiteful at the festive season someone must do the homework. Come and play Father Christmas with me. It’s your last chance. I’m retiring in the summer.’

He continued in the same vein as they sat in the back of a police car threading their way through the deserted Christmas streets, where the lamps were growing bright in the dusk.

‘I’ve had bad luck lately,’ he said seriously. ‘Too much. It won’t help my memoirs if I go out in a blaze of no-enthusiasm.’

‘You’re thinking of the Phaeton robbery,’ Mr Champion suggested. ‘What are you calling the memoirs? *Man-Eaters of the Yard?*’

Oates’s mild old eyes brightened, but not greatly. ‘Something of the kind,’ he admitted. ‘But no one could be blamed for not solving that blessed Phaeton business. Everyone concerned was bonkers. A silly old musical star, for thirty years the widow of an eccentric Duke, steps out into her London garden one autumn morning leaving the street door wide open and all her most valuable jewellery, collected from strongrooms all over the country, lying in a brown paper parcel on her bureau in the first room off the hall. Her excuse was that she was just going to take it to the Bond Street auctioneers and was carrying it herself for safety! The thief was equally mental to lift it.’

‘It wasn’t saleable?’

‘Saleable! It couldn’t even be broken up. The stuff is just about as well known as the Crown Jewels. Great big enamels which the old Duke had collected at great expense. No fence would stay in the same room with them, yet, of course, they are worth the earth, as every newspaper has told us at length ever since they were pinched!’

‘He didn’t get anything else either, did he?’

‘He was a madman.’ Oates dismissed him with contempt. ‘All he gained was the old lady’s housekeeping money for a couple of months which was in her handbag – about a hundred and fifty quid – and the other two items which

were on the same shelf, a soapstone monkey and a plated paper-knife. He simply wandered in, took the first things he happened to see and wandered out again. Any sneak thief, tramp or casual snapper-upper could have done it, and who gets blamed? Me!

He looked so woebegone that Mr Champion changed the subject hastily. 'Where are we going?' he inquired. 'To call on her ladyship? Do I understand that at the age of one hundred and forty-six or whatever it is she is cohabiting with a Brig? Which war?'

'I can't tell you,' Oates was literal as usual. 'It could be the South African. They're all in a nice residential hotel. It's the sort of place that is very popular with the older members of the landed gentry just now.'

'When you say "landed" you mean as in Fish?'

'Roughly, yes. Elderly people, living on capital. About forty of them. This place used to be called "The Haven" and has now been taken over by two ex-society widows and renamed "The Ccraven" with two Cs. It's a select hotel-cum-Old-Ducks' Home for "Mother's Friends". You know the sort of place?'

'I can envisage it. Don't say your murdered chum from the Humdinger lived there too?'

'No, he lived in a more modest outfit whose garden backs on to the Ccraven's grounds. The Brigadier and one of the other residents, a Mr Charlie Taunton, who has become a bosom friend of his, were in the habit of talking to Sampson over the wall. Taunton is a lazy man who seldom goes out and has little money but he very much wanted to get some gifts for his fellow guests – something in the nature of little

jokes from the chain stores, I understand – but he dreaded the exertion of shopping for them and Sampson appears to have offered to get him some little items wholesale and to deliver them by six o'clock on Christmas Eve in time for him to package them up and hand them to Lady Larradine, who was dressing the tree at seven.'

'And you say that Sampson actually did this?' Mr Campion sounded bewildered.

'Both old gentlemen swear to it. They insist they went down to the wall at six and Sampson handed the parcel over as arranged. My Inspector is an experienced man and he doesn't think we shall shake either of them.'

'That leaves Krait with a complete alibi. How did these Chipperwood witnesses hear of Sampson's death?'

'Routine. The local police called at Sampson's home address this morning to report the death only to discover the place closed. The landlady and her family are away for the holiday and Sampson himself was due to spend it with Girlski. The police stamped about a bit no doubt, making sure of all this, and in the course of their investigations they were seen and hailed by the two old boys in the other garden. The two were shocked to hear that their kind acquaintance was dead and volunteered the information that he was with them at six.'

Mr Campion looked blank. 'Perhaps they don't keep the same hours as anybody else,' he suggested. 'Old people can be highly eccentric.'

Oates shook his head. 'We thought of that. My Inspector, who came down the moment the local police reported, insists that they are perfectly normal and quite positive. Moreover,

they had the purchases. He saw the packages already on the tree. Lady Larradine pointed them out to him when she asked after you. She'll be delighted to see you, Campion.'

'I can hardly wait!'

'You don't have to,' said Oates grimly as they pulled up before a huge Edwardian villa. 'It's all yours.'

'My dear boy! You haven't aged any more than I have!' Lady Larradine's tremendous voice, one of her chief terrors as he recollected, echoed over the crowded first-floor room where she received them. There she stood in an outmoded but glittering evening gown looking as always, exactly like a spray-flecked seal. 'I knew you'd come,' she bellowed. 'As soon as you got my oblique little SOS. How do you like our little hideout? Isn't it *fun*! Moira Spryg-Fysher and Janice Poole-Poole wanted something to do so we all put our pennies in it and here we are!'

'Almost too marvellous,' murmured Mr Campion in all sincerity. 'We really want a word with Brigadier Brose and Mr Taunton.'

'Of course you do and so you shall! We're all waiting for the Christmas tree. Everybody will be there for that in about ten minutes in the drawing-room. My dear, when we came they were calling it the Residents' Lounge!'

Superintendent Oates remained grave. He was startled to discover that the Dragon was not only fierce but also wily. The news that her apparently casual mention of Mr Campion to the Inspector had been a ruse to get hold of him shocked the innocent policeman. He retaliated by insisting that he must see the witnesses at once. Lady Larradine silenced him with a friendly roar. 'My dear man, you can't.

They've gone for a walk. I always turn men out of the house after Christmas luncheon. They'll soon be back. The Brigadier won't miss his Tree! Ah. Here's Fiona. This is Janice Poole-Poole's daughter, Albert. Isn't she a pretty girl?'

Mr Campion saw Miss Poole-Poole with relief, knowing of old that Oates was susceptible to the type. The newcomer was young and lovely, and even her back-combed hair-do and the fact that she appeared to have painted herself two black eyes failed to spoil the exquisite smile she bestowed on the helpless officer.

'Fabulous to have you really here,' she said and sounded as if she really meant it. While he was still recovering, Lady Larradine led him to the window.

'You can't see it because it's pitch dark,' she said, 'but out there, down the garden, there's a wall and it was over it that the Brigadier and Mr Taunton spoke to Mr Sampson at six o'clock last night. No one liked the man Sampson. I think poor Mr Taunton was almost afraid of him. Certainly he seems to have died very untidily!'

'But he did buy Mr Taunton's Christmas gifts for him?'

The dragon lifted a webby eyelid. 'You have already been told that. At six last night Mr Taunton and the Brigadier went to meet him to get the box. I got them into their mufflers so I know! I had the packing paper ready too, for Mr Taunton to take up to his room ... Rather a small one on the third floor.' She lowered her voice to reduce it to the volume of distant traffic. 'Not many pennies but a dear little man!'

'Did you see these presents, Ma'am?'

'Not before they were wrapped! That would have spoiled the surprise!'

‘I shall have to see them.’ There was a mulish note in the Superintendent’s voice which the lady was too experienced to ignore. ‘I’ve thought how to do that without upsetting anybody,’ she said brightly. ‘The Brigadier and I will cut the presents from the Tree and Fiona will be handing them round. All Mr Taunton’s little gifts are in the very distinctive black and gold paper I bought from Millie’s Boutique and so, Fiona, you must give every package in gold and black paper not to the person to whom it is addressed but to the Superintendent. Can you do that, dear?’

Miss Poole-Poole seemed to feel the task difficult but not impossible, and the trusting smile she gave Oates cut short his objections like the sun melting frost.

‘Splendid!’ The Dragon’s roar was hearty. ‘Give me your arm, Superintendent. You shall take me down.’

As the procession reached the hall it ran into the Brigadier himself. He was a large, pink man, affable enough, but of a martial type and he bristled at the Superintendent. ‘Extraordinary time to do your business – middle of Christmas Day!’ he said after acknowledging the introductions.

Oates inquired if he had enjoyed his walk.

‘Talk?’ said the Brigadier. ‘I’ve not been talking. I’ve been asleep in the card-room. Where’s old Taunton?’

‘He went for a walk, Athole dear,’ bellowed the Dragon gaily.

‘So he did. You sent him! Poor feller.’

As the old soldier led the way to the open door of the drawing-room it occurred to both the visitors that the secret of Lady Larradine’s undoubted attraction for him lay in the fact that he could hear *her* if no one else. The discovery cast

a new light altogether on the story of the encounter with Sampson in the garden.

Meanwhile they had entered the drawing-room and the party had begun. As Mr Campion glanced at the company, ranged in a full circle round a magnificent tree loaded with gifts and sparkling like a waterfall, he saw face after familiar face. They were old acquaintances of the dizzy nineteen-thirties whom he had mourned as gone forever when he thought of them at all. Yet here they all were, not only alive but released by great age from many of the restraints of convention. He noticed that every type of head-gear from night-cap to tiara was being sported with fine individualistic enthusiasm. But Lady Larradine gave him no time to look about. She proceeded with her task immediately.

Each guest had been provided with a small invalid table beside his armchair, and Oates, reluctant but wax in Fiona's hands, was no exception. He found himself seated between a mountain in flannel and a wraith in mauve mink, waiting his turn with the same beady-eyed avidity.

Christmas tree procedure at the Ccraven proved to be well organised. The Dragon did little work herself. Armed with a swagger stick, she merely prodded parcel after parcel hanging amid the boughs, while the task of detaching them was performed by the Brigadier, who handed them to Fiona. Either to add to the excitement or perhaps to muffle any unfortunate comment on gifts received by the uninhibited company, jolly Christmas music was played throughout, and under cover of the noise Mr Campion was able to tackle his hostess.

'Where is Taunton?' he whispered.

‘Such a nice little man. Most presentable but just a little teenyweeny bit dishonest.’ Lady Larradine ignored his question but continued to put him in the picture at speed, whilst supervising the Tree at the same time. ‘Fifty-seven convictions, I believe, but only small ones. I only got it all out of him last week. Shattering! He’d been so *useful* amusing the Brigadier. When he came he looked like a lost soul with no luggage, but after no time at all he settled in perfectly.’ She paused and stabbed at a ball of coloured cellophane with her stick before returning to her startled guest.

‘Albert, I am terribly afraid poor Mr Taunton took that dreadful jewellery of Maisie Phaeton’s. It appears to have been entirely her fault. He was merely wandering past her house, feeling in need of care and attention. The door was wide open and he found himself inside, picking up a few odds and ends. When he discovered from all that fuss in the newspapers what it was he had got hold of – how well known it was, I mean – he was quite horrified and had to hide. And where better than here with us where he never had to go out?’

‘Where indeed!’ Mr Campion dared not glance across the room to where the Superintendent was unwrapping his black and gold parcels. ‘Where is he now?’

‘Of course, I hadn’t the faintest idea what was worrying the man until he confessed,’ the Dragon went on stonily. ‘Then I realised that something would have to be done at once to protect everybody. The wretch had hidden all that frightful stuff in our tool shed for three months, not daring to keep it in the house, and to make matters worse, the impossible person at the end of the garden, Mr Sampson,

had recognised him and *would* keep speaking. Apparently people in the – er – underworld all know each other just as those of us in – er – other closed circles do.’

Mr Campion, whose hair was standing on end, had a moment of inspiration. ‘This absurd rigmarole about Taunton getting Sampson to buy him some Christmas gifts wholesale was your idea!’ he said accusingly.

The Dragon stared. ‘It seemed the best way of getting Maisie’s jewellery back to her without any one person being solely involved,’ she said frankly. ‘I knew we should all recognise the things the moment we saw them, and I was certain that after a lot of argument we should decide to pack them up and send them round to her. But, if there *was* any repercussion, we should *all* be in it (quite a formidable array, dear) and the blame could be traced to Mr Sampson if absolutely necessary. You see, the Brigadier is convinced that Sampson *was* there last night. Mr Taunton very cleverly left him on the lawn and went behind the tool shed and came back with the box.’

‘How completely immoral!’

The Dragon had the grace to look embarrassed. ‘I don’t think the Sampson angle would ever have arisen,’ she said. ‘But if it had, Sampson was quite a terrible person. Almost a blackmailer. Utterly dishonest and inconsiderate. Think how he has spoiled everything and endangered us all by getting himself killed on the one afternoon when we said he was here, so that the police were brought in. Just the one thing I was trying to avoid. When the Inspector appeared this morning I was so upset I thought of you!’

In his not unnatural alarm Mr Campion so far forgot himself as to touch her sleeve. ‘Where is Taunton now?’

The Dragon threshed her train. 'Really, boy! What a fidget you are! If you must know, I gave him his Christmas present – every penny I had in cash for he was broke again, he told me – and sent him for a nice long walk after lunch. Having seen the Inspector here this morning he was glad to go.' She paused and a gentle gleam came into her hooded eyes. 'If that Superintendent has the stupidity to try to find him when Maisie has her monstrosities back none of us will be able to identify him I'm afraid. And there's another thing. If the Brigadier should be forced to give evidence I am sure he will stick to his guns about Mr Sampson being down the garden here at six o'clock last night. He believes he was. That would mean that someone very wicked would have to go unpunished, wouldn't it? Sampson was a terrible person but no one should have killed him.'

Mr Champion was silenced. He glanced fearfully across the room.

The Superintendent was seated at his table wearing the strained yet slap-happy expression of a man with concussion. On his left was a pile of black and gilt wrappings, on his right a rajah's ransom in somewhat specialised form. From where he stood Mr Champion could see two examples amid the rest: a breastplate in gold, pearl and enamel in the shape of a unicorn in a garden and an item which looked like a plover's egg in tourmaline encased in a ducal coronet. There was also a soapstone monkey and a silver paper-knife.

Much later that evening Mr Champion and the Superintendent drove quietly back to headquarters. Oates had a large cardboard box on his knee. He clasped it tenderly.

He had been silent for a long time when a thought occurred to him.

‘Why did they take him into the house in the first place?’ he said. ‘An elderly crook looking lost! No luggage!’

Mr Campion’s pale eyes flickered behind his spectacles.

‘Don’t forget the Duchess’s housekeeping money,’ he murmured. ‘I should think he offered one of the widows who really run that place the first three months’ payment in cash, wouldn’t you? That must be an impressive phenomenon in that sort of business, I fancy.’

Oates caught his breath and fell silent once more until presently he burst out again.

‘Those people! That woman!’ he exploded. ‘When they were younger they led me a pretty dance – losing things or getting themselves swindled. But now they’re old they take the blessed biscuit! Do you see how she’s tied my hands, Campion?’

Mr Campion tried not to grin.

‘Snapdragons are just permissible at Christmas,’ he said. ‘Handled with extreme caution, they burn very few fingers it seems to me.’ He tapped the cardboard box. ‘And some of them provide a few plums for retiring coppers, don’t they, Superintendent?’