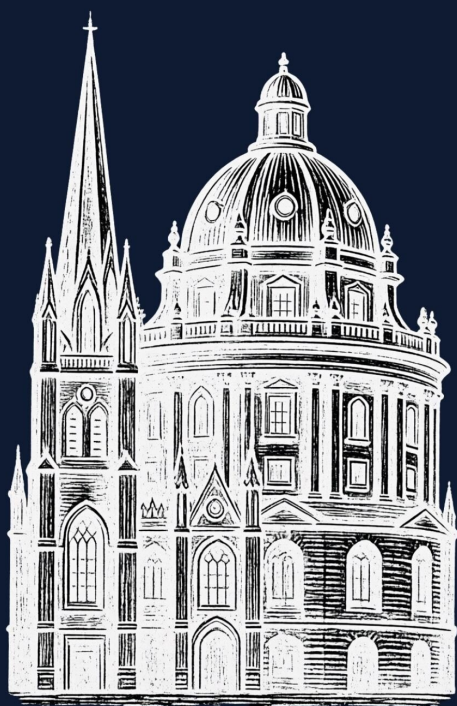


AG BARNETT'S MYSTERY SINGLES

1920's - Case No.5

The Motor House



FANE & BLACKWOOD



AG BARNETT

The Motor House

Kitty's letter had said that Mrs Lyle would be delighted to have her for the weekend, and was very much looking forward to meeting her. Nell had spent the train journey from Oxford trying to work out which part of that sentence was least likely to be true.

Hartfield Park was red brick, Jacobean, and freezing. Three wings around a courtyard, a gravel drive a mile long, and a draught in every corridor that moved through the house like a resident ghost. Nell was shown to a bedroom on the first floor where the wallpaper was peeling from the cornice and the radiator made a sound like someone stepping on a cat. Sylvia Fanshawe had the Blue Room, at the far end of the east wing. The best guest room and the coldest, being furthest from the kitchens.

Gerald Lyle was fifty-eight and thin-faced, and stood when Nell entered and, halfway through, looked as though he had forgotten why he was getting up. His wife Vivienne was forty-nine, handsome in a sharp way, and barely spoke at tea. She certainly didn't give any indication that she was delighted to see Nell. The nephew, Piers, was twenty-six, fair-haired, and had the sort of good looks that worked best when nobody was asking difficult questions. He had driven from London in a borrowed motor car and was already on his second whisky by half past four. Nell put him down as the kind of

guest who borrowed motor cars and personalities and did not always remember to return either.

The fourth guest was Mrs Sylvia Fanshawe. Fifty-one, grey-haired, well-dressed. She had known Gerald a long time. "Since his brother was alive," she told Nell at tea, as though she had said it many times before.

Dinner was civil for approximately forty minutes.

Gerald had been talking about the house. Repairs, the cost of repairs, and the impossibility of repairs. Vivienne set down her glass.

"You might mention the will, Gerald. Since everyone will know soon enough."

The table went quiet.

"This is not the time," Gerald said.

"When is the time? You have altered your will to leave everything to your nephew and nothing to me. A two-hundred-pound annuity and the use of the house. After all I've given this family."

"Vivienne."

"You have taken everything from me." She said it without raising her voice, which was worse.

Gerald pushed back his chair. "I shall sleep in the workshop tonight." He stood. "I apologise for the disturbance."

He left through the courtyard door. The cold air came in

and went out and he was gone.

Nobody spoke for a moment.

After dinner, Nell walked to the courtyard for air. She stood by the stone wall and looked at the motor house at the far end, its doors shut. The workshop adjoined it, a low stone building with a single window, and a thin light was visible inside. Gerald settling in.

As she turned to go in, she saw Sylvia coming around the far side of the courtyard, wrapped in a coat.

"Just taking the air," Sylvia said, and smiled. "The house is insufferably overheated, don't you think?"

The house was freezing. Nell smiled back and said nothing.

* * *

Gerald Lyle was dead by Saturday morning.

Mrs Dawes, the housekeeper, found him at half past seven. He was lying on the camp bed in the workshop, fully clothed, under a blanket. His skin was bright pink. The room smelled of fumes. A rubber hose had been connected to the Bentley's exhaust pipe in the motor house and fed under the warped connecting door into the workshop. The engine had run until the tank emptied.

The police sent a sergeant from Oxford. His name was Caldwell. He was thorough, slow, and determined to be impressed by nobody. Nell gave her statement in four

minutes. She was a guest, a family friend's youngest daughter, visiting from Oxford. Caldwell wrote this down, looked at her as though she were a very small piece of furniture that he didn't need and was just making the room untidy, and moved on.

She sat in the morning room and let the house talk around her.

Vivienne came in first. She had not been crying. Her eyes were dry, her mouth a flat line, grief trailing well behind the anger.

"He changed his will," she said. "I found the solicitor's letter three days ago. Piers gets everything. I get a pittance and the use of a house I have never liked." She looked out of the window. "I took my chloral at ten o'clock and I slept until Mrs Dawes woke me. I didn't hear a thing. I never do."

"I'm sorry," Nell said.

"Don't be. He wasn't."

Piers was in the billiard room, sitting in an armchair with yesterday's glass still beside him. He looked as though the morning had arrived several hours earlier than he liked it to.

"Uncle Gerald told me at tea that I'd have the money when he was dead and not before," he said. "Told me to try to deserve it. I had no idea what he meant." He rubbed his eyes. "I handed the sergeant a letter from a man named Rennie. I owe him a hundred and forty pounds.

Gambling. I hoped it would demonstrate my innocence rather than them finding it themselves." He met her eyes. "I know how it looks. The debts, the will, the inheritance, but I didn't know about the will. I didn't know I was in it."

"What did you do after dinner?"

"Drank. Here, alone, until midnight. Then went to bed in my clothes."

Sylvia Fanshawe was in the sitting room, writing letters. She set down her pen when Nell came in.

"How are you bearing up?" Nell said.

"Oh you know." Sylvia's hand went to the letter in front of her, smoothing a crease that wasn't there. "As one does, I suppose." A silence stretched a beat too long. "I have known Gerald since 1919. Since his brother came back from France in a box and Gerald took it upon himself to look after everyone his brother left behind." Her voice caught. "He was not a perfect man. But he was a kind one."

"Did you hear anything last night?"

"The stable clock woke me at one. I took an aspirin for a headache and slept through the rest. I'm afraid I'm not much help."

Nell nodded. Something about this bothered her, a faint wrong note she could not yet place. She said nothing and moved on.

Sergeant Caldwell was building his case around Vivienne. The will, the argument, the public declaration of fury. A strong case. A comfortable one.

The gardener, Tull, confirmed that the rubber hose had been cut from the garden hose in his shed. A jubilee clip from his tool box had been used to secure it to the exhaust pipe. The shed was unlocked. "Anyone could have gone in," Tull said. He added, unprompted, "I didn't."

The shed itself stood at the far corner of the courtyard, past the stable block, the long way round from the terrace.

Nell walked through the boot room. She had learned, in the past year, to walk through rooms the way Fane had once walked through them. Slowly, looking at everything, touching nothing. Somewhere beyond the passage the grandfather clock in the hall struck the half hour, its sharp chime crisp this close to the stairs. The galoshes on the rack caught her eye. A pair of women's galoshes, neatly placed, with damp soles and fine gravel on the rubber. Mrs Dawes had dried all outdoor shoes on Friday evening. It had not rained on Friday night.

The gravel was from the courtyard.

She looked at the boot room door. The inside handle had a faint dark smear. She touched it. Her fingertip came away with a trace that smelled of engines.

Someone with oil on their hands had opened this door after the handles were cleaned. The boot room opened onto the courtyard. The courtyard led to the motor house. The motor house connected to the workshop where

Gerald had been sleeping.

* * *

The false solution was forming around her like weather. Vivienne had the rage and the motive. Piers had the debts and the inheritance. One of them must have done it.

But Vivienne had taken chloral. Mrs Dawes confirmed the bottle, the measuring glass, the routine. A woman under chloral does not dress, cross a frosty courtyard, connect a hose to an exhaust pipe, and return to bed without leaving any trace of disruption.

And Piers had not known about the will. Gerald's remark was literal, not cruel. "You will have the money when I am dead" was a promise to a beneficiary, delivered clumsily, and Piers had spent the evening drinking alone because he thought he had been refused.

On her way to pack, Nell walked past the stable block. She stopped. The clock face was visible through the open upper door. The hands read twenty past four. Her watch said half past eleven.

She found Tull in the kitchen garden.

"The stable clock. When did it stop?"

"November." He straightened from his cabbages.

"Mechanism jammed. I told Mr Lyle I'd see to it. Never got round."

Nell stood very still in the cold January garden.

Sylvia Fanshawe had said she heard the stable clock strike one. The clock had not struck anything since November.

* * *

Fane was in the study. The fire was nearly out and the room was cold and the circle of lamplight on his desk illuminated papers he had not been reading. He looked up when she came through the door.

"You're back early," he said. "I expected a telegram."

"Someone is dead." She dropped her coat on the chair and sat on the edge of his desk, which she knew he disliked and did anyway. "Gerald Lyle. Carbon monoxide. A hose from the Bentley's exhaust into the workshop where he was sleeping."

"I assume from your demeanour that you do not believe it was suicide. Suspects?"

"Three." She pushed her hair back. "His wife, Vivienne. He changed his will. She gets nothing. She told him at dinner, in front of everyone, that he had taken everything from her. She takes chloral every night and says she was unconscious."

"Confirmed?"

"The housekeeper saw the bottle and glass on her bedside table."

"Next."

"His nephew, Piers. Twenty-six. Gambling debts. A

hundred and forty pounds to a man who is threatening him. Gerald told him at tea that he'd have the money when Gerald was dead. Sounds like a motive. But Piers didn't know he was in the will. The remark was a promise, not a taunt."

Fane's hands were still on the arms of his chair. Thinking, not dismissing. "And the third."

"Mrs Sylvia Fanshawe. Old family friend. Widow. Known Gerald a long time. She was at dinner and stepped out to the courtyard afterwards."

"Mrs Fanshawe," Fane said. "Go on."

"She stepped out to the courtyard at nine o'clock on Friday evening. She said the house was overheated, which it wasn't. She'd come around the far side, she told me, the same corner, I realised afterwards, where the gardener's shed stands, past the stable block. The hose and jubilee clip used for the murder came from there."

"What else?"

"Her galoshes. Mrs Dawes dried all outdoor shoes on Friday evening. On Saturday morning, Mrs Fanshawe's galoshes were damp, with courtyard gravel on the soles. It did not rain on Friday night. The damp came from frost. Someone wore those galoshes across the courtyard after midnight."

"And the boot room door?"

"Oil on the inside handle. Engine oil. The handles were cleaned on Friday afternoon."

Fane's consonants had begun to sharpen. Nell knew the sound. She waited.

"What is it that has really caused this excitement in you?" he said.

"She said she heard the stable clock strike one. It stopped in November. The gardener confirmed it."

Fane looked at the ceiling. Then at the dead fire. Then at Nell.

"Which clock at Hartfield Park strikes the hours?"

"The grandfather clock. In the main hall."

"Audible from where?"

Nell closed her eyes and rebuilt the house. The entrance hall. The staircase. The servants' staircase descending from the first floor to the boot room passage. "The ground floor. The hall, the passages, the servants' staircase." She opened her eyes. "Not from the first floor. Not from the east wing."

"Mrs Fanshawe's room?"

"The Blue Room. First floor, east wing. Two closed doors and a landing between her and the hall."

One finger tapped the chair arm. Precisely.

"She did not hear the stable clock, because it has been broken for two months. She did not hear the grandfather clock from her bedroom, because her bedroom is too far away." He paused. "She heard the grandfather clock from

the servants' staircase. At one o'clock in the morning. Because that is where she was."

The room was silent.

"The servants' staircase leads to the boot room," Nell said.

"Which leads to the courtyard. Which leads to the motor house." He looked at her. "She took the hose and the jubilee clip during her evening walk. She hid them in the boot room. She waited until the house was asleep. She went down the servants' staircase, put on her galoshes, crossed the courtyard, connected the hose, started the engine, and came back. She left oil on the door handle and frost on her galoshes and a clock in her statement that broke it."

"But why? She seemed genuinely fond of him."

"You will find the answer in her writing desk." His voice was flat, precise. "Money. Some arrangement of Gerald's that was about to change, and would have ruined her if it did. Have Caldwell read her correspondence."

Nell stared at him. "You cannot know that from what I told you."

"A walk past the gardener's shed at nine when she had no business there. A clock she could not have heard from her bedroom. Oil on a door handle she should not have touched, and galoshes wet at midnight. The motive will be in her papers."

The door opened. Mrs Latch came in with a tray. Two cups, a pot, and a plate of biscuits that looked as though

they had survived something.

"You've not eaten," she said to Fane.

"I have been occupied."

"You've been sitting in a chair." She set down the tray.

"Same as yesterday." She looked at Nell. "Is he being useful or just talking?"

"Both," Nell said.

"That's new." Mrs Latch straightened the tray, moved a book that was bothering no one, and left. The door closed behind her with a firmness that was, in its own way, the last word on the subject.

Nell picked up a biscuit. It was not good. She ate it anyway.

"The clock," she said. "Of all things."

"It is always a small thing," Fane said. "The truth and the lie sit very close together, and the wrong detail crosses the gap. She heard a clock from the staircase, and in her statement she needed it to be a clock she could have heard from her bedroom. She named the stable clock and did not know it had been broken since November." He paused. "Most people are not undone by grand errors. They are undone by clocks that have stopped and galoshes that are damp and door handles that nobody thinks to wipe."

Nell looked at the fire. It had gone out. Neither of them had noticed.

"I'll tell the sergeant," she said.

"Anonymously."

"Obviously."

She stood and took her coat from the chair. At the door, she stopped.

"She was kind to me," Nell said. "At the house. She asked what I was reading."

Fane looked at her. The sharp pale eyes, softened by nothing.

"Yes," he said. "She would have been."

Nell closed the door behind her and walked through the cold garden to the back gate, and the gate shut with its familiar sound, and the house behind her was quiet again except for a man in a chair who had solved a murder without leaving his study, and a housekeeper who was already relighting the fire because nobody else was going to.

* * *

Mrs Sylvia Fanshawe was arrested on Monday 17th January 1927 at her flat in Kensington. She was charged with the murder of Mr Gerald Lyle. A letter from Gerald to Sylvia, found in the writing desk of the Blue Room, confirmed the collapse of the trust and the proposed reduction in terms. The stable clock was repaired in the spring. Vivienne Lyle contested the will and won a

settlement that gave her the house outright. Piers Lyle paid his gambling debts with money borrowed from an aunt on his mother's side, at a rate of interest his uncle would have called imprudent and his bookmaker called a miracle. An anonymous letter to Sergeant Caldwell, posted from Oxford in a hand the sergeant did not recognise, directed his attention to the galoshes, the boot room door handle, and the clock. He was subsequently commended for thorough police work and accepted the commendation without correction.