



This is not the story of a murder case. It might well have been, which gives me a funny feeling when I think how close we came to disaster. But it *is* the story of a mystery, a very puzzling and dramatic one, that the Detective Society solved during a most important wedding.

The Detective Society, of course, is Daisy Wells and me, Hazel Wong. We are fourth formers at Deepdean School for Girls – though lately we have felt much more like detectives than schoolgirls, for only two days ago we were still in Cambridge, where we solved our fifth murder.

The wedding was Daisy's uncle Felix's, and it took place on New Year's Day 1936, in London, at the St Pancras Registry Office. It was the first English wedding I had ever been to, and I was rather surprised at how different it was from the weddings I have read about in books. Story weddings have clouds of tulle and yards of satin, bridesmaids with posies and Kate Greenaway

dresses, and the voices of angelic choirs echoing off vaulted church ceilings. Uncle Felix and Miss Livedon's wedding turned out to be nothing like that at all.

Daisy's great-aunt, Aunt Eustacia, was shocked when Uncle Felix and Miss Livedon came to visit us at St Lucy's College in Cambridge and told us their plans. 'What are you thinking?' she said to Miss Livedon. 'A wedding without a white dress! With hardly any guests! On a simply ridiculous day of the year! If that nephew of mine is forcing you into this—'

'He certainly is not,' said Miss Livedon cheerfully. 'We've discussed it thoroughly. Neither of us are interested in making a fuss. We simply want to be married, and New Year's Day is the perfect day for a quiet ceremony. No one is paying attention. And as for the dress, I spend my life wearing the most ridiculous costumes, so it's perfectly reasonable for me to want to look sensible and like myself on my wedding day. I will wear my blue skirt suit, and Daisy and Hazel can tie blue ribbons round dresses that they already have. We shall all match nicely.'

Aunt Eustacia huffed furiously and stalked off back down the chilly college corridor to her office.

'I don't know what she's so upset about,' said Daisy. 'It isn't as though *she's* ever been married! She's perfectly no-nonsense and unconventional usually.'

I wondered if that was part of the reason. I was also scretly rather pleased that Daisy and I had escaped

being dressed up like dolls. Daisy is a vision in lace, but I simply look as though I'm pretending.

There was only one thing I was worried about. 'But what about the cake?' I asked Daisy on our last night in Cambridge as we pulled our white dresses from our cases and laid them out for the St Lucy's maid to iron. The cake is a very important part of English book weddings, and I quite desperately wanted to taste one in real life.

'Of course there will be cake,' said Daisy. 'It simply isn't a wedding without cake, Hazel.'

We drove down to London on New Year's Day, bowling through the countryside in Uncle Felix's silver rocket car. It was so cold that breathing gave me a tingle in my throat and I had to tuck my hands into my warm winter coat. We left Cambridge when all the light in the sky was still an orange and blue glow at the very far horizon, and we drove through the sunrise, light sparkling off the snow on the soft hills around us.

Daisy was snuggled down next to me, her nose in the fur of her coat, and Aunt Eustacia was crammed in beside her. Miss Livedon sat in the front, with Daisy's brother Bertie next to her, and Uncle Felix drove. As we came into London the winter sun was on my face and I could hear church bells ringing out. I felt myself smiling.

As the car stopped outside the registry office, Aunt Eustacia and Miss Livedon got out and made their way

towards the building, with Bertie following behind them. But as we began to climb out of the car, Uncle Felix turned to us.

‘Daisy, Hazel,’ he said. ‘One moment, please. I have a job for you.’

‘Collecting a bouquet, I suppose,’ said Daisy witheringly. ‘You know Miss Livedon doesn’t have one? Really, Uncle Felix, you haven’t put any thought into this wedding at *all*.’

‘The maid of honour is bringing the bouquet with her shortly, Daisy,’ said Uncle Felix. ‘And don’t be so impertinent, otherwise I shan’t give you this special job at all.’ His voice had dropped, and he was leaning towards us seriously. I realized with a jump that this might be detective business.

‘Don’t you threaten us like that!’ cried Daisy. ‘Hazel, tell him that we’re up to it!’

‘Please, we’re listening,’ I said rather awkwardly to Uncle Felix. He is so very blond and grand that I am always a little nervous about speaking familiarly to him. ‘Er, what do you want us to do?’

‘I need you to look out for someone,’ said Uncle Felix. I could feel Daisy’s ears perk up.

‘Or rather, I want to you ensure that a *particular person* is not allowed to come anywhere near the registry office. They must not enter the building, and they must certainly

not come into the room where the ceremony is being held. If they do, there will be terrible consequences.'

'What consequences?' breathed Daisy.

'None of your business, nosy niece,' said Uncle Felix, grinning.

'What do they look like?' I asked. I was imagining a shadowy figure, a man in a bowler hat and suit.

'A woman,' said Uncle Felix. My shadowy man evaporated. 'About fifty – that is, older than me, younger than Aunt E.'

'*Everyone's* younger than Aunt E,' said Daisy.

'Rude,' said Uncle Felix. 'Don't let her hear you say that. Anyway, this woman is tall, grey-haired and big-nosed. She will most likely be carrying a large handbag. If you see her, you must come and find me immediately, do you understand?'

'No!' said Daisy at once. 'I don't understand at all. Who is this woman? Why don't you want her about? Is she a spy? What if she's in disguise?'

'You don't need to know any of that to do the job,' said Uncle Felix, screwing his monocle tighter into his eye to stop himself smiling. 'And I trust you to see through any disguise. Do you accept?'

'Of course we do!' cried Daisy.

She seized my arm and dragged me out of the car so that the sleeve of my coat twisted. 'Ouch!' I cried.

‘Hazel, be quiet. We are going to be detectives!’
hissed Daisy.

I sighed.

The registry office was a handsome yellow-stone building with a set of steps leading to a wide stone archway. The steps were dusted with snow and scattered freshly with white petals.

‘That’s from the last wedding,’ said Daisy to me knowledgeably. ‘Registry offices have lots every day. Oh, who’s that woman?’

She was glaring over my shoulder at someone coming down the street towards us. I turned and looked. It was a woman – but I did not think it could be the person we were supposed to warn Uncle Felix about. She was younger than fifty, almost the same age as Miss Livedon (though I am never sure what age I think Miss Livedon is exactly; she can look older or younger depending on how she is dressed), and she was of medium height, with a thin face and a long thin nose holding up a pair of black spectacles. She was wearing a smart pink skirt suit and a little hat and holding a bouquet of red roses and yellow lilies, and she waved enthusiastically.

‘Lucy!’ she cried. ‘Hallo!’

Miss Livedon, standing halfway up the steps brushing dust from her own skirt suit, which was a beautiful bright blue with a red silk blouse underneath, threw

up her hands and gave a most un-Miss Livedonish cry of delight.

‘Ethel!’ she shouted. ‘Ethel!’ And she leaped towards the woman, her smart red high heels striking the stone steps. The two embraced, laughing. ‘You haven’t changed a bit!’ cried Miss Livedon.

‘Of course I have,’ said the woman called Ethel. ‘So have you. But – oh, I should still know you anywhere!’

‘Felix, everyone – this is Ethel Baker,’ said Miss Livedon, turning to us with her arm round Ethel’s waist. ‘We met at school, *years* ago. Oh, dear old Headington Grammar!’

‘School friends!’ said Daisy.

‘Yes, don’t be so suspicious, Daisy,’ said Uncle Felix. ‘Ethel is Lucy’s maid of honour. I should think you’d have guessed that from the flowers.’

Daisy turned red. She hates to be out-detected by anyone.

I was staring at Ethel and Miss Livedon with a very odd feeling in my stomach. *School friends* is what Daisy and I are. I cannot imagine, now that I know her, ever being without her – but might it happen, anyway, once we are old and grown up? I thought about being married then, and decided that I could not imagine Daisy ever marrying anyone.

Uncle Felix looked at his watch. ‘Time to go inside,’ he said. He turned away up the steps, ushering Aunt

Eustacia before him – but before he did so he looked at me and Daisy significantly through his monocle, and I knew that he meant for us to keep watch.

The columned and softly carpeted stone foyer was confusingly full of people. There was a charwoman sweeping up more petals from the earlier wedding, a woman in a smart grey skirt suit hurrying past us, clutching some documents to her chest, a clerk-like man pinning papers to a large noticeboard and another standing at the entrance of an office, looking doubtfully at us as we entered.

‘Eleven o’clock, is it?’ he asked. ‘Mountfitchet and Livedon? I am Mr Tempest, the registrar.’

Then a figure detached itself from the shadow of a pillar and stepped towards us. It gave me rather a shock. He was an old man, round-shouldered and a little hunched, with greyish skin and a very worn brown suit. How had I missed him?

‘Mountfitchet!’ said the man in a voice just as grey as he was. ‘Pardon me for waiting inside, but I was early.’

‘Sir!’ cried Uncle Felix, striding over to him and clapping him on the back. I half expected dust to float up off his jacket. ‘Thank you for coming! Please meet my fiancée. Lucy, this is the Old Man.’

Daisy nudged me hard, an expression of delight on her face. Bertie rolled his eyes at us.

‘That’s the Old Man!’ she hissed at me. ‘He’s famous!’
‘I’ve never heard of him!’ I whispered back.

‘*Exactly!*’ said Daisy. ‘Only the most important people have heard of him! He works with Uncle Felix, Hazel. Or, should I say, Uncle Felix works for *him*.’

It is difficult to talk about Uncle Felix’s work. *He* never does, for a start. And it does seem ridiculous to write in black and white that I think he is *a spy*. But I suppose our adventures would seem quite ridiculous to most people, and I know that they are quite real.

That was not the only surprise we were to have, though. The woman who had been sweeping the floor put down her broom against the wall and untied her apron. I saw that her dress, though not particularly well fitting, was nicer than I had first assumed, and although she looked very round and unprepossessing, her eyes were sharp and her chin had a determined set to it.

I tensed. Was *this* the woman we had been asked to watch for?

‘Lucy,’ she said. ‘I fear I am a little early.’

‘Oh!’ said Miss Livedon, laughing. ‘Miss Sperry! Very good!’

‘I try,’ said the woman, dusting her dress down efficiently. ‘I noticed the Old Man ten minutes ago, though I don’t think he saw me.’

The registrar, Mr Tempest, was staring at Miss Sperry and the Old Man with his mouth hanging open. Uncle

Felix turned the full force of his most charming smile on him, twinkling his blue eyes.

‘As you’ll see, the party is all here,’ he said. ‘Shall we begin?’

‘I—’ said Mr Tempest weakly.

Ethel handed Miss Livedon her bouquet, and she moved to stand next to Uncle Felix, her hand on his arm. They both stared at the registrar, and he wilted before them.

‘If the bride and groom come into my office,’ he muttered, ‘we can take care of the preliminaries. I assume you have your identification documents with you? And the two witnesses? I will need you after the bride and groom.’

Uncle Felix gestured at the Old Man and Miss Sperry.

‘And I believe you are going to be the best man, sir?’ Mr Tempest asked Bertie.

Bertie gulped and nodded. He had been unusually quiet all morning, and I saw now how very nervous he was.

‘Marvellous. Then the ceremony can begin at eleven, as scheduled. Your final guest is already waiting in the Collins Room, by the way.’

‘What final guest?’ asked Uncle Felix sharply. ‘This is the wedding party in its entirety. The two bridesmaids, my aunt, my best man, my fiancée’s school friend and her colleague, and my own colleague. We are not expecting anyone else.’

Mr Tempest had clearly had enough.

‘The lady was very clear that she was here for the eleven o’clock ceremony,’ he said stiffly. ‘We are a public building, not a members’ club, sir. We do not refuse entry to anyone. She is waiting in the Collins Room where the ceremony will be held, as I said. You may go and see her if you would like.’

‘*Daisy*,’ said Uncle Felix. ‘*Hazel*.’

We understood at once. As Uncle Felix and Miss Livedon went into the registrar’s office to do whatever mysterious thing brides and grooms have to do before a wedding, and Aunt Eustacia, Bertie, the Old Man, Ethel and Miss Sperry made awkward grown-up small talk in the foyer, Daisy and I went rushing into the ceremony room.

And there, just as Mr Tempest had said, was a woman already sitting in one of the guest chairs.

Again, I had a moment of panic: *was* this the mysterious woman Uncle Felix had asked us to guard against? But a single calmer glance told me that she could not be. She was younger than fifty, younger even than Miss Livedon and Ethel – and although you might make yourself older with a disguise, you cannot look much *younger* without something giving you away. And – most importantly – her nose was small and snub, not big. I know perfectly well that no matter how good you are at disguises, you cannot make your nose significantly

shorter than it is. This woman was not the person we were looking for.

But who *was* she?

I looked at her with my detective eyes. She had walked here – her shoes were still wet with melted snow. Her dress was well cut and expensive, but a little old. She wore no rings on her fingers, but she was holding a small reticule, clutching it close to her chest.

Daisy and I glanced at each other. She gave the tiniest of nods to me, and I knew that we were agreed: this was not our mysterious woman, but it *was* a mystery that we must solve as quickly as we could.

She stepped towards the woman, and I followed.

It is funny to see Daisy at work. When she is not being watched, she moves like a burglar. But when she wants to convince people she is not a threat she skips about like a sweet little girl, and this is how she walked now. She tripped over to the woman's chair, a vision in white and blue, and plopped down next to her with a happy sigh. I moved in on the other side, so she was pinned between us.

The woman jumped, and made a small noise of surprise.

'Goodness!' she said. 'Hello!'

'*Hello!*' said Daisy, giving a charming smile and a blue-eyed stare very similar to Uncle Felix's a few minutes before. 'What's your name?'

‘I’m – I’m Miss Foster,’ said the woman, blinking nervously. ‘And who are—’

‘Are *you* here for the wedding too?’

‘Oh – yes . . .’ said Miss Foster hesitantly. ‘But . . .’

‘Are you friends with the bride or the groom?’ I asked.

‘Oh, the bride,’ said Miss Foster after a pause. ‘School, you know. We sat next to each other in Latin. Lily was always a bookish girl. It seems so far away now!’

She glanced around nervously and tightened her fingers on her handbag. I saw Daisy watching it like a cat.

‘Where is everyone?’ Miss Foster burst out. ‘I was sure there would be others – this is most odd!’

‘Oh, they’ll be on their way,’ said Daisy smoothly. ‘They’ll be waiting for – what *is* his name? You know, old—’

‘Oh, Uncle Mark!’ cried Miss Foster, smiling for the first time. ‘Yes, I remember, L never could *stand* how slow he is!’

‘Uncle Mark,’ said Daisy. ‘Of course.’

I had a moment of uncertainty. The names Lily and Uncle Mark meant nothing to me – but what if this really was one of Miss Livedon’s friends, who knew her under another one of her many names? What if everything was perfectly understandable? But then—

‘Just think,’ said Daisy. ‘In half an hour she’ll be quite a different person!’

‘Mrs Harcourt,’ sighed Miss Foster. ‘Mrs Gerard Harcourt. Oh, it does seem such a long time since we were all at dear old Deepdean together!’

‘But *we’re* at Deepdean!’ I cried.

Miss Foster lit up. ‘Never!’ she gasped. ‘Oh, has it changed? Is Miss Lappet still there?’

Daisy launched into a swift, easy conversation about lessons and mistresses and House and bunbreak – and gave me a meaningful glance while she did so. We finally had a last name – Harcourt – one that I, and clearly Daisy too, had never heard before. This woman was not here for Uncle Felix and Miss Livedon’s wedding, after all. So why was she here?

Miss Foster kept talking (she missed school terribly, and it sounded that she had come down in the world since she had left Deepdean – she was now secretary to a horrid businessman who made her work at weekends and holidays). ‘The Clemences were always so good to me!’ she kept on saying. ‘We all had such good fun in the hols! L was so wild, of course, running away and so on, but Mr and Mrs Clemence always forgave her.’

Daisy cleared her throat significantly, and I said, ‘Excuse me. I must just use the—’

I hurried out of the Collins Room and back into the corridor that led to the registry office foyer. I went up to the board I had seen the clerk pinning a piece of paper to.

‘Hullo, Hazel!’ said Bertie, a nervous wobble in his voice – I guessed from the thought of being Uncle Felix’s best man. ‘Where are you off to in such a hurry?’

‘Oh,’ I said, trying to seem calm and ordinary. ‘I’m just looking at the noticeboard. Daisy wanted me to make sure of something.’

‘Hmm,’ said Bertie, and I thanked everything that he was too preoccupied to really consider how odd this sounded.

I peered at the board, and saw a list of names and the date *1st January 1936*.

10 a.m.: Roger Thomas Bowen and Annie
Bradley

11 a.m.: Felix Henry Charles Seldom
Mountfitchet and Lucy Felicity Livedon

12 p.m.: Gerard Harcourt and Lily Victoria
Clemence

It was odd. It made my fingers tingle. Was Miss Foster simply confused about the timings of the two weddings? Or was someone telling a lie?

I hurried back to the Collins Room. As I stepped through the door, Daisy said, ‘But, goodness, don’t you think we ought to clear out of here? The eleven o’clock wedding will take place in twelve minutes!’

Miss Foster looked bewildered. ‘Of course I shall stay,’ she said. ‘The eleven o’clock is Lily and Gerard’s wedding!’

‘I’m afraid it isn’t,’ I said. ‘I went to look just now. Their wedding is at twelve. The eleven o’clock is Felix Mountfitchet and Lucy Livedon.’

‘But . . .’ Miss Foster cried. ‘But – oh, what a mix-up! I did wonder – but then the invitation arrived in the post, and it most *definitely* said eleven o’clock. Perhaps . . .’

Miss Foster, I thought, as I came back to where she and Daisy were sitting, seemed like the sort of person who did not finish her thoughts or sentences properly. It was most frustrating – or, I wondered suddenly, perhaps it was deliberate. Was she on her guard as much as we were? How did we know she was telling the truth?

‘Invitation?’ asked Daisy.

‘Oh yes, here, look,’ said Miss Foster – and at last her fingers moved on her little reticule and she clicked it open. We leaned forward. I caught a glimpse of the shadowed insides of the bag, with powder compact and lipstick, and plenty of pencils and paper – and two other things. One was a tiny green glass bottle and the other was something that glistened in the room’s electric lights. It was as long as my hand, silver and sharp. Surely it could not be . . . a knife?

But before I could lean forward further and make sure of it, Miss Foster drew a bit of card out and shut the reticule again with a snap.

‘See here!’ she said. ‘Eleven o’clock sharp at St Pancras Registry Office.’

We both looked. Miss Foster was holding out a pretty cream invitation, handwritten in green ink. It said:



‘The noticeboard was wrong, of course; that’s what Lily said in her letter,’ Miss Foster went on distractedly. ‘She told me that there had been some mix-up, but eleven o’clock was quite definitely the time— Oh, I don’t understand it!’

‘The noticeboard was wrong?’ asked Daisy, giving her best kind look.

‘Yes, you see, I saw it last week. I came in to run an errand for Mr Thompson – his office is only a few minutes away, and he needed me to work all the way up to Christmas this year – and I just happened to glance over at the board in the foyer. And Lily’s name *leaped* out at

me. I enquired and they gave me her London address – lucky, or I should have written to her in Scotland, you know. I wrote to her asking if I might be allowed to come. She wrote back – so thoughtful; I haven’t seen her for years – and enclosed this invitation. And here I am. But I simply don’t understand it! Perhaps— Oh, I don’t understand *at all!*’

‘Excuse us for a moment,’ said Daisy smoothly. ‘Hazel and I will go and see if we can discover what has happened. You stay there.’

‘Thank you!’ said Miss Foster gratefully, clinging to her handbag. Her lip wobbled a little, I saw – she really was nervous. But again I wondered. Could we believe her story? Or was there more to this than there seemed?

We slipped out of the Collins Room and huddled in the corridor.

‘Emergency Detective Society meeting!’ hissed Daisy. ‘We have less than ten minutes to solve this case. So, quickly, *talk*. Can we believe her?’

‘I don’t know, Daisy. But I saw inside her bag, and I think she had a knife!’ I said.

‘It did look like one, didn’t it?’ agreed Daisy. ‘And that bottle – could it be poison . . . or ink? That invitation is interesting, isn’t it? Handwritten, which is very suggestive.’

‘Why?’ I asked. ‘Oh! Because—’

‘Because there’s no way of knowing how many other people were sent the invitation, or even whether it’s real,’ said Daisy. ‘You might handwrite invitations to a hundred people, or one. Which suggests four possibilities. Watson, list them.’

‘Either she was sent an invitation with the wrong time by mistake,’ I said, ‘or she was sent the invitation with the wrong time on purpose. Or, she wrote out the invitation herself and made a mistake with the time, or she wrote the wrong time on purpose.’

‘If the first,’ said Daisy, nodding, ‘then there is nothing to worry about. If the second, third or fourth, then we most certainly do need to worry. All right. Say it’s *the second* – which, I have to say, seems a distinct possibility. After all, she said Lily claimed that the noticeboard at the registry office – the one that says this other wedding’s meant to start to twelve – was wrong, when we know it isn’t. So, who might want to send Miss Foster the wrong invitation, and why?’

‘Well, the bride – like you’ve just said, she told Miss Foster in her letter that the wedding was definitely at eleven. You might write the time down wrong just once, if you weren’t concentrating, but she did it twice, and that has to have been on purpose. Or perhaps it was the groom, pretending to be his fiancée – or another guest – wanting Miss Foster to miss the wedding!’ I said. As soon as I did, I knew that was wrong. ‘But it can’t be.

She's here already, so all she needs to do is wait until twelve. Why would anyone want her to arrive at the wedding *early*?'

'If she wrote it herself, that might make rather more sense,' said Daisy. 'It gives her a reason to arrive at the registry office before the rest of the wedding party. And – well. You saw inside her handbag. Once we are all in the Collins Room for Uncle Felix and Miss Livedon's ceremony, she'd be quite free to wander about the rest of the registry office alone. What if she wants to lie in wait for the bride or groom, and use the knife or the bottle on them?'

'It's possible,' I said. 'We don't *know* she's the bride's friend, do we? We only have her word for it. We don't know anything about her at all!'

'No we don't,' said Daisy. 'She might be anyone. She might be a – a jilted lover! She might be this Gerard person's secret wife! She might be blackmailing them!'

Daisy, I thought, was stretching probability – but I did agree with her that we could not simply believe Miss Foster's story.

'We need to find out who these Gerard and Lily people are,' said Daisy determinedly.

'What are you doing?' asked a voice. We looked round. It was Ethel, Miss Livedon's friend. She was clutching Miss Livedon's bouquet of flowers, and there was a worried look on her face.