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# The Man with the Sack



*Margery Allingham*

ALBERT DEAR,

We are going to have a quiet family party at home here for the holiday, just ourselves and the dear village. It would be *such fun* to have you with us. There is a train at 10.45 from Liverpool Street which will get you to Chelmsworth in time for us to pick you up for lunch on Christmas Eve. You really must *not* refuse me. Sheila is being rather difficult and I have the Welkins coming. Ada Welkin is a dear woman. Her jewellery is such a responsibility in a house. She *will* bring it. Sheila has invited such an undesirable boy, the son in the Peters crash, absolutely penniless, my dear, and probably quite desperate. As her mother I

am naturally anxious. Remember I rely on you.

Affectionately yours,

MAE TURRETT

P.S. Don't bring a car unless you must. The Welkins seem to be bringing two.

Mr Albert Campion, whom most people described as the celebrated amateur criminologist, and who used to refer to himself somewhat sadly as a universal uncle, read the letter a second time before he expressed himself vulgarly but explicitly and pitched it into the waste-paper basket. Then, sitting down at the bureau in the corner of the breakfast-room, he pulled a sheet of notepaper towards him.

'My Dear Mae,' he wrote briefly, 'I can't manage it. You must forgive me. My love to Sheila and George.

Yours ever,

ALBERT.

P.S. My sympathy in your predicament. I think I can put you on to just the man you need: P. Richards, 13 Acacia Border, Chiswick. He is late of the Metropolitan Police and, like myself, is clean, honest and presentable. Your guests' valuables will be perfectly safe while he is in the house and you will find his fee very reasonable.'

He folded the note, sealed it, and addressed it to Lady Turrett, Pharaoh's Court, Pharaoh's Field, Suffolk.

'In other words, my dear Mae,' he said aloud, as he set it on the mantelpiece, 'if you want a private dick in the house, employ one. We are not high-hat, but we have our pride.'

He wandered back to the breakfast-table and the rest of his correspondence. There was another personal letter under the pile of greeting cards sent off a week too soon by earnest citizens who had taken the Postmaster-General's annual warning a shade too seriously, a large blue envelope addressed in a near-printing hand which proclaimed that the writer had gone to her first school in the early nineteen-twenties.

Mr Champion tore it open and a cry from Sheila Turrett's heart fell out.

My Darling Albert,

Please come for Christmas. It's going to be poisonous. Mother has some queer ideas in her head and the Welkins are frightful. Mike is a dear. At least I like him and you will too. He is Mike Peters, the son of the Ripley Peters who had to go to jail when the firm crashed. But it's not Mike's fault, is it? After all, a good many fathers ought to go to jail only they don't get

caught. I don't mean George, of course, bless him (you ought to come if only for his sake. He's like a depression leaving the Azores. It's the thought of the Welkins, poor pet). I don't like to ask you to waste your time on our troubles, but Ada Welkin is *lousy* with diamonds and Mother seems to think that Mike might pinch them, his father having been to jail. Darling, if you are faintly decent do come and back us up. After all, it is Christmas.

Yours always (if you come),

Sheila.

P.S. I'm in love with Mike.

For a moment or so Mr Campion sat regarding the letter and its pathetic postscript. Then, rather regretfully, but comforted by a deep sense of virtue, he crossed the room and, tearing up the note he had written to Lady Turrett, settled himself to compose another.

On Christmas Eve the weather decided to be seasonable; a freezing overhead fog turned the city into night and the illuminated shop fronts had the traditional festive appearance even in the morning. It was more than just cold. The damp, soot-laden atmosphere soaked into the bones

relentlessly and Mr Champion's recollection of Pharaoh's Court, rising gaunt and bleak amid three hundred acres of ploughed clay and barren salting, all as flat as the estuary beyond, was not enhanced by the chill.

The thought of Sheila and her father cheered him a little, almost but not quite offsetting the prospect of Lady Mae in anxious mood. Buttoning himself into his thickest overcoat, he hoped for the best.

The railway station was a happy pandemonium. Everybody who could not visit the East Coast for the holiday was, it seemed, sending presents there, and Mr Champion, reminded of the custom, glanced anxiously at his suitcase, wondering if the box of cigars for George was too large or the casket of perfume for Mae too modest, if Sheila was still young enough to eat chocolates, and if there would be hordes of unexpected children who would hang round his room wistfully, their mute glances resting upon his barren luggage.

He caught the train with ease, no great feat since it was three-quarters of an hour late, and was sitting in his corner idly watching the excited throng on the platform when he caught sight of Charlie Spring. He recognised the face instantly, but the name came to him slowly from the siftings of his memory.

Jail had done Mr Spring a certain amount of good, Mr Champion reflected as his glance took in the other man's square shoulders and developed chest. He had been a



weedy wreck six months ago standing in the big dock at the Old Bailey, the light from the roof shining down upon his small features and his low forehead, beneath which there peered out the stupidest eyes in the world.

At the moment he seemed very pleased with himself, a bad omen for the rest of the community, but Mr Campion was not interested. It was Christmas and he had troubles of his own.

However, from force of habit he made a careful mental note of the man and observed that he had been 'out' for some little time, since he had lost all trace of jail shyness, that temporary fit of nerves which even the most experienced exhibit for a week or so after their release. He saw also that Mr Spring looked about him with the same peculiar brainless cunning which he had exhibited in the dock.

He boarded the train a little lower down and Mr Campion frowned. There was something about Charlie Spring which he had known and which now eluded him. He tried to remember the last and only time he had seen him. He himself had been in court as an expert witness and had heard Mr Spring sentenced for breaking and entering just before his own case had been called. He remembered that it was breaking and entering and he remembered the flat official voice of the police detective who gave evidence.

But there was something else, something definite and personal which kept bobbing about in the back of his mind, escaping him completely whenever he tried to pin it down. It worried him vaguely, as such things do, all the way to Chelmsworth.

Charlie left the train at Ipswich in the company of one hundred and fifty joyous fellow travellers. Mr Campion spotted him as he passed the window, walking swiftly, his head bent and a large new fibre suitcase in his hand.

It occurred to Campion that the man was not dressed in character. He seemed to remember him as a dilapidated but somewhat gaudy figure in a dirty check suit and a pink shirt, whereas at the moment his newish navy greatcoat was a model of sobriety and unobtrusiveness. Still, it was no sartorial peculiarity that haunted his memory. It was something odd about the man, some idiosyncrasy, something slightly funny.

Still faintly irritated, Mr Campion travelled a further ten miles to Chelmsworth. Few country railway stations present a rustic picturesqueness, even in summer, but at any time in the year Chelmsworth was remarkable for its windswept desolation. Mr Campion alighted on to a narrow slab of concrete, artificially raised above the level of the small town in the valley, and drew a draught of heady rain and brine-soaked air into his lungs. He was experiencing the first shock of finding it not unattractive

when there was a clatter of brogues on the concrete and a small russet-clad figure appeared before him. He was aware of honey-brown eyes, red cheeks, white teeth, and a stray curl of red hair escaping from a rakish little tweed cap in which a sprig of holly had been pinned.

‘Bless you,’ said Sheila Turrett fervently. ‘Come on. We’re hours late for lunch, they’ll all be champing like boarding-house pests.’

She linked her arm through his and dragged him along.

‘You’re more than a hero to come. I am so grateful and so is George. Perhaps it’ll start being Christmas now you’re here, which it hasn’t been so far in spite of the weather. Isn’t it glorious?’

Mr Campion was forced to admit that there was a certain exhilaration in the air, a certain indefinable charm in the grey-brown shadows chasing in endless succession over the flat landscape.

‘There’ll be snow tonight.’ The girl glanced up at the featherbed sky. ‘Isn’t it grand? Christmas always makes me feel so excited. I’ve got you a present. Remember to bring one for me?’

‘I’m your guest,’ said Mr Campion with dignity. ‘I have a small packet of plain chocolate for you on Christmas morning, but I wished it to be a surprise.’

Sheila climbed into the car. ‘Anything will be welcome except diamonds,’ she said cheerfully. ‘Ada Welkin’s

getting diamonds, twelve thousand pounds' worth, all to hang round a neck that would disgrace a crocodile. I'm sorry to sound so catty, but we've had these diamonds all through every meal since she came down.'

Mr Campion clambered into the car beside her.

'Dear me,' he said. 'I had hoped for a merry Christmas, peace and goodwill and all that. Village children bursting their little lungs and everybody else's eardrums in their attempts at religious song, while I listened replete with vast quantities of indigestible food.'

Miss Turrett laughed. 'You're going to get your dear little village kids all right,' she said. 'Two hundred and fifty of 'em. Not even Ada Welkin could dissuade Mother from the Pharaoh's Court annual Christmas Eve party. You'll have just time to sleep off your lunch, swallow a cup of tea, and then it's all hands in the music-room. There's the mothers to entertain, too, of course.'

Mr Campion stirred and sighed gently as he adjusted his spectacles.

'I remember now,' he murmured. 'George said something about it once. It's a traditional function, isn't it?'

'More or less.' Sheila spoke absently. 'Mother revived it with modern improvements some years ago. They have a tea and a Christmas tree and a Santa Claus to hand round the presents.'

The prospect seemed to depress her and she relapsed

into gloomy silence as the little car shot over the dry, windswept roads.

Mr Campion regarded her covertly. She had grown into a very pretty girl indeed, he decided, but he hoped the 'son in the Peters crash' was worth the worry he saw in her forehead.

'What about the young gentleman with the erring father?' he ventured diffidently. 'Is he at Pharaoh's Court now?'

'Mike?' She brightened visibly. 'Oh yes, rather. He's been there for the best part of a week. George honestly likes him and I thought for one heavenly moment that he was going to cut the ice with Mother, but that was before the Welkins came. Since then, of course, it hasn't been so easy. They came a day early, too, which is typical of them. They've been here two days already. The son is the nastiest, the old man runs him close and Ada is ghastly.'

'Horrid for them,' said Mr Campion mildly.

Sheila did not smile.

'You'll spot it at once when you see Ada,' she said, 'so I may as well tell you. They're fantastically rich and Mother has been goat-touting. It's got to be faced.'

'Goat-touting?'

Sheila nodded earnestly.

'Yes. Lots of society women do it. You must have seen the little ads in the personal columns: "Lady of title will chaperone young girl or arrange parties for an older woman."

Or “Lady X. would entertain suitable guest for the London season.” In other words, Lady X. will tout around any socially ambitious goat in exchange for a nice large, ladylike fee. It’s horrid, but I’m afraid that is how Mother got hold of Ada in the first place. She had some pretty heavy bridge losses at one time. George doesn’t know a thing about it, of course, poor darling – and mustn’t. He’d be so shocked. I don’t know how he accounts for the Welkins.’

Mr Campion said nothing. It was like Mae Turrett, he reflected, to visit her sins upon her family. Sheila was hurrying on.

‘We’ve never seen the others before,’ she said breathlessly. ‘Mother gave two parties for Ada in the season and they had a box at the Opera to show some of the diamonds. I couldn’t understand why they wanted to drag the menfolk into it until they got here. Then it was rather disgustingly plain.’

Mr Campion pricked up his ears.

‘So nice for the dear children to get to know each other?’ he suggested.

Miss Turrett blushed fiercely. ‘Something like that,’ she said briefly and added after a pause, ‘Have you ever met the sort of young man who’s been thrust into a responsible position in a business because, and only because, he’s Poppa’s son? A lordly, blasé sulky young man who’s been kow-towed to by subordinates who are fifty times as

intelligent as he is himself? The sort of young man you want to kick on sight?’

Mr Campion sighed deeply. ‘I have.’

Sheila negotiated a right-angle turn. Her forehead was wrinkled and her eyes thoughtful.

‘This’ll show you the sort of man Kenneth Welkin is,’ she said. ‘It’s so petty and stupid that I’m almost ashamed to mention it, but it does show you. We’ve had a rather difficult time amusing the Welkins. They don’t ride or shoot or read, so this morning, when Mike and I were putting the final touches to the decorations, we asked Kenneth to help us. There was a stupid business over some mistletoe. Kenneth had been laying down the law about where it was to hang and we were a bit tired of him already when he started a lot of silly horseplay. I don’t mind being kissed under the mistletoe, of course, but – well, it’s the way you do these things, isn’t it?’

She stamped on the accelerator to emphasise her point, and Mr Campion, not a nervous man, clutched the side of the car.

‘Sorry,’ said Sheila and went on with her story. ‘I tried to wriggle away after a bit, and when he wouldn’t let me go Mike suddenly lost his temper and told him to behave himself or he’d damned well knock his head off. It was awfully melodramatic and stupid, but it might have passed off and been forgotten if Kenneth hadn’t made a scene.’

First he said he wouldn't be talked to like that, and then he made a reference to Mike's father, which was unforgivable. I thought they were going to have a fight. Then, right in the middle of it, Mother fluttered in with a Santa Claus costume. She looked at Mike and said, "You'd better try it on, dear. I want you to be most realistic this afternoon." Before he could reply, Kenneth butted in. He looked like a spoilt kid, all pink and furious. "I didn't know you were going to be Father Christmas," he said.'

Miss Turrett paused for breath, her eyes wide.

'Well, can you imagine anything so idiotic?' she said. 'Mike had offered to do the job when he first came down because he wanted to make himself useful. Like everyone else, he regarded it as a fatigue. It never dawned on him that anyone would *want* to do it. Mother was surprised, too, I think. However, she just laughed and said, "You must fight it out between you" and fluttered away again, leaving us all three standing there. Kenneth picked up the costume. "It's from Harridge's," he said. "My mother was with Lady Mae when she ordered it. I thought it was fixed up then that I was to wear it."'

Mr Champion laughed. He felt very old.

'I suppose Master Michael stepped aside like a little gent and Master Kenneth appears as St Nicholas?' he murmured.

'Well no, not exactly' Sheila sounded a little embarrassed. 'Mike was still angry, you see, because Kenneth



really had been infernally casual. He suddenly decided to be obstinate. Mother had asked him to do the job, he said, and he was going to do it. I thought they were going to have an open row about it, which would have been quite too absurd, but at that moment the most idiotic thing of all happened. Old Mr Welkin, who had been prowling about listening as usual, came in and told Kenneth he was to 'give way' to Mike – literally, in so many words! It all sounds perfectly mad now I've told it to you, yet Mike is really rather a darling.'

Mr Campion detected a certain wistfulness in her final phrase and frowned.

Pharaoh's Court looked unexpectedly mellow and inviting as they came up the drive some minutes later. The old house had captured the spirit of the season and Mr Campion stepped out of a cold grey world into an enormous entrance hall where the blaze from the nine-foot hearth flickered on the glossy leaves of the ivy and holly festooned along the carved beams of the ceiling.

George Turrett, grey-haired and cherubic, was waiting for them. He grasped the visitor's hand with fervour. 'So glad you've come,' he murmured. 'Devilish glad to see you, Campion.'

His extreme earnestness was apparent and Sheila put an arm round his neck.