

EDGAR & SHAMUS GO GOLDEN
Twelve Tales of Murder, Mystery, and Master Detection
from the Golden Age of Mystery and Beyond

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The Invisible Band

Art Taylor

Lord Peter was scooping another oyster from its shell when I stepped his way. He stood at a bistro table with Harriet Vane, who had popped a round of cucumber toast into her mouth.

Correction: “Gherkin croute.” That was the preferred term—salvaged from some ’20s-era menu. (The 1920s, just to be clear.)

“Excited for the big weekend?” I asked, notebook in hand, camera around my neck. “Feeling good about your chances?”

Lord Peter adjusted his monocle, squinted at my name tag. I’d checked his out too—one of three monocles in the room so far, already blurring together.

“I say, it’s Dr. Watson.” He gave a prim nod. “I presume Mr. Holmes won’t be far behind? Or is he getting a head start on recovering Miss Paget’s jewels?”

His accent was, frankly, atrocious—high-pitched and drawling.

The “Heiress’s Hijacked Heirlooms”—that was what the press release had said. Gloria, the sales and marketing manager at the Hotel Clifford, leaned heavily on alliteration. I was surprised she hadn’t tried to rename it the Chateau Clifford for the weekend.

The Clifford’s small ballroom was all babble and bustle (to add my own alliteration), everyone meeting and greeting, enjoying their own appetizers, tipping back champagne. The champagne was in plastic flutes instead of the “crystal chalices on silver servers” (from the “history” in the press release), and there was no “seven-man band setting a stylishly syncopated tempo”—only smooth jazz piped through the speaker system—but Gloria worked the room like a pro, all smiles, upbeat as always.

I’d already chatted with several contestants—Hercule Poirot (the first monocle), Miss Marple (knitting needles sticking out of her bag), Charlie Chan (white hat, arching mustache, sharp goatee), and a father-and-son team with Richard and Ellery Queen, whom I wouldn’t have known at all without those name tags. (I was quickly realizing the limitations of my crash-course Googling “Golden Age Detectives.”) On the opposite side of the room from Gloria, a magician was trying to dazzle with card tricks. Hired entertainment, I’d assumed. Turned out he was a contestant too: the Great Merlini. I made a note to Google him again later.

But I hadn’t seen any Sherlock, and you’d think he’d stand out in a crowd.

I shook my head at Lord Peter. “Haven’t seen my better half—not yet at least. But I’m not one of the players. I thought Gloria had let everyone know.”

“We checked in late,” Harriet Vane said. “Haven’t really talked to anyone yet. The traffic was tough the last hour, and I was starving, so we went straight for the food.”

The bones from a couple of lambchops sat on her plate. A scoop of jellied shrimp stood untouched. The menu had called them prawns in aspic, I recalled—more of the theme.

I held up my notebook. “Reporter,” I said. “Covering all this for the *Gazette*—the local paper. You’re from out of town then? What drew you to enter?”

“My wife is a big fan of *Masterpiece Mystery*,” Lord Peter said, picking at another oyster. He’d dropped the British accent—thankfully.

“The books, too.” She poked him in the side. “I’m a big reader. He’s the one who only watches the shows.”

“They help me sleep.”

“Sometimes halfway through.” Harriet Vane smiled. “I lured him with the prize money.”

That had become the constant refrain. Everyone was focused on the five thousand dollars up for grabs as part of the Clifford’s hundredth anniversary celebration, even if the hotel was trying to highlight its history of elegance and luxury.

Gloria had come up with the plans—an avid fan herself of classic mystery fiction, she told me, but a good marketing opportunity too. Centennial Celebration had become Golden Age Anniversary, and Gloria’s pitch had concocted an elaborate backstory about heiress Virginia Paget’s diamonds having been stolen at an elegant 1920s soiree. (Those “silver chalices” and that “stylishly syncopated” band and even a small cast of suspects: “Virginia’s ne’er-do-well fiancé, mesmerized by her money, and well-known as a womanizer” or “her younger sister, jealous to have never been in the limelight herself” or “some other sinister sneak.”)

The contestants had registered as iconic characters from the Golden Age of Detection, tasked with solving the crime—some elaborate mix of Escape Room adventure and “How to Host a Murder” dinner party. As Gloria had explained it, clues would be sprinkled scavenger-hunt style at a steady pace throughout the weekend. A lavish Sunday brunch at the end, celebrating whoever had presented the solution quickest.

Marketing opportunity and revenue generator too. Each participant had to sign up for a full three-night package—welcome reception, daily breakfast delivered to your room, and that brunch included. Beyond those, everything was extra: more meals, lots of drinks, souvenirs, all of it.

“Do you know when we’ll get the first clue?” Lord Peter asked.

“I told him it was probably in the welcome packet,” Harriet said.

The welcome packet was right, and I’d already caught a glimpse from some other participants:

*Miss Paget’s bluebird tweeted
Some first words—they’re the clue.
Yesterday they seemed clear
Though today...what a stew!*

But Gloria had told me explicitly that I shouldn’t help anyone, and I aimed to keep it that way.

“Check with Gloria,” I said, scanning the crowd. “There she is.” I pointed her out, talking to a man in priest’s garb, collar and robe both. Another name tag to check out, another thing to follow up on. Father Dowling, was it? My parents had been fans of the program, but...

“Good show,” Lord Peter said, picking up his plate to head over—and picking up that terrible accent again too. It took me a minute to catch that “good show” wasn’t echoing my own thoughts about TV.

I started to head to another interview—an overweight man in a three-piece suit who’d settled down on a chair by himself, his hand wrapped around a foaming pint of beer. Monocle number 3 sat beside him.

Then I spotted Sherlock.

He stood in the corner, hiding behind a life-sized cutout of a woman in a yellow dress patterned with rhinestones and beadwork—Virginia Paget, we’d been told, which had disappointed some of the guests. They’d been expecting hired actors, not a cardboard decoration.

Sherlock had nailed the trademark look: deerstalker hat, Inverness cape, even a stylish pipe. But he still wasn’t what I’d expected: barely three and a half feet tall, and his pipe was blowing soap bubbles.

“Hello.” I leaned down. “I like your hat and your coat.”

“It’s a cape,” he told me. “Like Superman’s.”

“Superman?” I said. “You’re a superhero instead of a detective?”

“The game’s afoot,” he said, enunciating each word. And then a forlorn mumble: “My parents told me to say that.”

“It’ll be a solid feature,” my editor had said. “Good community angle.”

“Marketing gimmick,” I’d told her.

“Have fun with it, and the readers will too,” she’d replied. “Local landmark. Centennial celebration.”

My editor was prone to alliteration too.

“So a puff piece,” I said—more resignation than question.

And later, a hint of desperation in Gloria’s eagerness to welcome me aboard. My editor had been right about the hotel’s desire for community support, and the Hotel Clifford likely needed it. Celebrating its hundredth year, the Clifford had clearly seen better days.

“You can pick a character too,” Gloria had said. “But not one of the big ones maybe?”

“Keep me on the sidelines,” I’d said. “My job’s to write it all up.”

She percolated on that for a minute. “How about Watson then?”

“Wouldn’t he be teamed up with Sherlock?”

Gloria had rolled her eyes at that—which I hadn’t understood at the time.

At the start of the reception, before Peter & Harriet arrived, she’d introduced me as Watson, emphasizing my “generous celebration of our big weekend!”

She had expectations about my article too—but other details drew my own eye.

Though the lobby and the restaurant and lounge had been spiffed for the anniversary—brass rails smartly polished, the fountain under the atrium gleaming and gurgling happily—the accommodations generally hadn’t aged well. The carpet was worn in places, the leather on the club chairs was cracked—*authentic* and *weathered* Gloria might’ve said, but I’d simply tried to angle my photographs away from sore spots.

And though that restaurant and lounge promised those same luxuries of old—extravagant lunch buffet, elegant afternoon tea, a vibrant happy hour—the place was sadly understaffed. Long waits at meals, haphazard service. The bellman who’d greeted me when I checked in was also passing appetizers at the event—and as it turned out, he’d be back the next morning, delivering that breakfast to my room: a croissant, orange juice, and coffee.

The croissant and the coffee were cold, the orange juice warm, but I tipped him anyway. Frankly, he looked exhausted.

“All hands on deck,” Gloria told me when I asked later about staffing for the centennial weekend. “We want to make this an event for the ages—the *Golden Ages*.”

Upbeat *and* on brand.

A puff piece on a marketing gimmick? Or was the real story about how an icon had faded, glory days gone, a sad bid to recapture the past? A glass case near the front desk displayed pictures from those better days, a small write-up about the hotel's distinguished history. No one seemed to pay it much attention.

Gloria had told me that participants had been urged to inhabit their own characters fully for over the weekend—speech and mannerisms too—but as with Lord Peter's bad accent and then dropped accent, Thursday night's welcome reception revealed the truth: treasure hunters indulging a kind of upper-crust cosplay, a clichéd phrase trotted out, a stray quote. Several contestants had stopped short of even that low bar, Sherlock's team among them, letting their son dress up instead of them, spoon-feeding him dialogue.

And then another story presented itself—when Miss Marple announced Friday evening that her own jewelry had been stolen.

Friday flurry, I'd written in my notebook at one point—Gloria's alliteration clearly contagious. The detectives puzzled through clues, rushed and hurried to each next one, took breaks between times, especially since some steps had built-in delays.

The “bluebird tweeted” poem led to the Hotel Clifford's twitter feed; the first words of each tweet from the day before needing to be rearranged to form a message pointing toward the next riddle.

The detectives also had to solve a crossword featuring the titles of crime novels available to borrow from the hotel's reading room—*And Then There Were None*, *The Tiger in Smoke*, *The Poisoned Chocolates Case*, *Miss Pym Disposes*, and several more, supposedly Virginia Paget's favorites. Specific letters had been circled throughout, an anagram that spelled out Elevator Two.

The “Suggestions” box near Elevator Two was unlatched, and inside, all the suggestion slips were printed with another poem, supposedly written by Paget herself.

Light you seek and heat I'd furnish

Unused til when? Find something burnished.

That meant the fireplace in the lobby—gas logs lit each afternoon at three for afternoon tea—and a shiny metal box was promptly placed atop the mantle at the same time for the next stage, envelopes inside with the follow-up clue.

It was amusing to watch the contestants trying to casually check out the box, so no one else might catch what they were doing—at least until Miss Marple herself hadn't been tall enough to reach the hidden envelope.

“Can't *someone* help me?”—despair and irritation.

Other participants took a different approach. The overweight man from the night before—Nero Wolfe, I discovered—took up residence in the lobby, reading a book until the lounge opened and he ordered another beer. Meanwhile, he sent out a younger man—the single name “Archie” on his tag—to fetch clues back for him. And the Great Merlini paid no mind to any of it, concentrating instead on pulling items out of a hat, playing out an array of card tricks. He had a regular audience, many of the other players stopping to watch his tricks, and he'd been there nearly nonstop, much of the morning, all afternoon,

well into the evening, even continuing the tricks while he took his meals at a small coffee table.

Sherlock, meanwhile, had found his own games—hitching rides on the bellman’s cart, the cape fluttering behind him and bubbles flowing from the pipe, no parents in sight. To his credit, that bellman showed an inexhaustible patience—bellman, valet, room service, and now babysitter too: those cart rides, plus coins in the fountain and trips up and down the elevator. Add cleaner to his job duties too, since someone probably had to wipe up the residue from those bubbles. (Sherlock’s parents didn’t dress up for any parts—and didn’t do much actual parenting either. Sherlock was a free-range child.)

I caught people throughout the day for quick interviews, posed photographs—community angles in mind, how everyone was enjoying their visit, their downtime, gathering shout-outs to various shops, the local art gallery, the nearby park.

Dinner was downtime, many of the detectives settling in groups in the lobby lounge and the hotel restaurant, Wolfe stuck in his same spot, Merlini circulating through the crowd—only half walls separating lounge and restaurant and lobby, so everyone was in full view: Ellery Queen and his father, Nick and Nora Charles, Tommy and Tuppence, Perry Mason and Della with Charlie Chan, several others.

Miss Marple was sitting alone and so kindly faced that I offered to join her, which I immediately regretted.

She picked at her food, a scrap of torn leather on my chair picked at my arm, and our mini-interview turned into a litany of complaints about the hotel and the area. Her room was too small, it faced the wrong way for morning sunlight, and the drapes were insufficient and inferior. The juice at breakfast was warm and the croissants were cold (I didn’t point out I could empathize), and real butter would’ve been better than margarine. This game they were playing wasn’t friendly to older people. What was Twitter anyway? And why put that box so high? The nearby park needed *serious* landscaping attention, and then the housekeeping practices at the hotel, the quality of the help. Frankly, if she hadn’t been able to lean heavily into a cup of Earl Grey, and speaking of, where *was* our waiter? She needed more water and...a flutter of fingers, waving down “Jerome, Jerome.”

Turned out Jerome was not only bellman, valet, room service, and babysitter, but now waiter too—and fortunately prompt with that water. Several tables away, I saw another waitress watching us, glaring really, a stern shake of the head. Pity clearly.

I felt pity too—for myself—and grateful when the Great Merlini stopped at the table to do a card trick. (Miss Marple shooed him off with another complaint: “I’ve had quite enough of your silliness.”) I was grateful again when she finally headed up to her room.

And then surprised when she returned almost immediately.

She burst from the elevator and toward Gloria, ever on duty at the front desk. More complaints, I assumed, until the word “thief” echoed across the lobby, and everyone’s attention turned her way. I headed over—followed by many of the detectives and other curious guests too.

“It’s probably misplaced,” Gloria said. “I’ll phone housekeeping.”

“No, no, we must call the police,” Miss Marple said—and then the word “thief” again, with some pointed glances at the crowd of detectives gathering.

Gathering and offering assistance, doing their detectively duties—questions suddenly piling one after the other. Where did Miss Marple last see the ring? What kind of ring was it? Where had she kept it? When did it go missing? Was it a wedding band?

“Please.” Miss Marple sniffed, stiffened. “I am steadfastly *unmarried*. It had belonged to my mother.”

“Spinster is the word, old dear,” I heard someone mutter behind me—his voice dripping with disdain—and turned to see that third monocle again. Not Lord Peter, not Poirot—and where was his name tag?

“Your mother,” said the priest. Not Father Dowling, I’d clarified since. Father *Brown*. “An heirloom then!” He turned to Gloria, “Is this part of the game?”

Gloria shook her head.

Poirot pushed his way to the front of the small crowd, pulling on the ends of his mustache. “Make way,” he said, “for my little gray cells. With method and logic one can accomplish anything!” The phrase rolled oddly off his Southern twang.

“Not logical deduction,” said a tall, thin man with horn-rimmed glasses, “any more than the flash of intuition, but the shoddy path between.” Albert Campion on that name tag.

“It was likely spies,” said a woman already at the front, and her partner nodded. Tommy and Tuppence, another pair of Christie characters.

But the Christie connections didn’t broker any good feelings.

“I don’t trust any of you,” Miss Marple said, bluntly. “In fact, I’ll bet one of *you* stole it to distract me from winning this weekend.”

“Almost anyone is capable of a crime under certain circumstances,” Perry Mason added dryly, with a grim twist to his lips. But the mood had shifted, shutting down camaraderie in most every direction.

I’d stood on the sidelines, listening, and as the crowd dispersed, I grabbed an armchair with a good view, trying to compile a list of who was where.

Near the front desk, Gloria kept reassuring Miss Marple, even as she dutifully called the police.

Some of the detectives who’d crowded with questions now gathered in clusters to chat about what had happened. Others retreated to the lounge or the restaurant to continue drinks or dinner, keeping their distance.

What caught my attention more, however, were the ones who hadn’t shown any interest in the theft but had kept their seats the whole time. I’d been glancing their way during all the hullabaloo, and their reactions—or lack of—interested me the most, Miss Marple’s accusations ringing still.

Nero Wolfe hadn’t budged an inch, a fresh tankard of beer foaming in front of him. His Archie was nowhere to be seen, but beside him, Charlie Chan had a beer of his own. He wiped a line of froth from the edges of his mustache.

The Great Merlini had kept his table too at the center of the lounge, slowly resuming his tricks as others returned.

Sherlock’s parents had watched from a seat they’d claimed near the fountain, leaving their cocktails only briefly to call their son back from the crowd. (Ignored again, Sherlock Jr. dangled his fingers in the water, glancing back and forth from Jerome waiting tables to the unused bellman’s cart by the front desk—wistful for mischief, clearly.)

Nearby, Nick and Nora Charles had been diving into their own overfull martinis. They didn’t have a child to take care of, but wasn’t there something conspiratorial in their

whispering? Their glances in Miss Marple's direction didn't seem concerned—or friendly.

Finally, the police arrived, took Miss Marple aside for a conversation, then headed up the elevator—everyone watching but no one approaching this time. I didn't bother to follow either. I knew the officer, Adam Fenwick, from a short stint covering the police beat for the paper.

I caught Adam later in the lobby, standing by a potted plant, writing in his own notebook.

“So, how are things in your world of bumbling incompetence?” I asked.

He lowered his pen. “Excuse me?”

“All these famous detectives,” I said. “From the stories I've read, the police usually have no idea what they're doing.”

“Hrmp.” He waved a hand in the air. “That's what the lady there thinks.” Miss Marple had perched herself in a club chair, knitting—or rather, undoing some knitting. No one had offered to join her.

“Maybe you should tell her to solve the crime herself?”

“I was tempted to tell her to do something else to her own self.” Adam's face was a deadpan. “She told me she'd known someone very much like me back at St. Mary's, and he was equally worthless apparently.”

“St. Mary Mead,” I said—proving some info had stuck. “Any progress on finding the ring?”

“Not much to go on—and she's hardly any help. Where did you keep the ring, ma'am? On my finger, she tells me. So you think it might have dropped off your finger? No, because I laid it down in my room. I thought it was on your finger, ma'am? Well I take it off when I'm not wearing it—which...don't get me started on the circular logic there. And was that the last time you saw the ring, ma'am? Well, I can't remember...” He'd been mimicking Miss Marple's voice—high-pitched, bird-like, like a bird pecking really. “All she knows: someone took it.”

“Who does she think that someone is?”

“She's convinced one of the other players did it—players? Is that the word? She doesn't want them anywhere near her.”

“And pass up on assistance from the best and the brightest detectives in the world?” I smiled.

“They're cutthroat, that's what I heard. Hoarding clues. Every man for himself—woman, too. She hasn't ruled out the hotel staff either. Everyone's a suspect—and best I can determine, everyone would have a motive.”

“At least there's no butler in the mix,” I said. “But what do you mean about motive?”

“That lady has tangled with everyone, seems like. Nothing but complaints since she arrived.” He ran through them, the same things she'd been telling me at dinner. “And she had trouble with the maid this afternoon,” Adam went on. “Miss Marple, as you call her—her name's Dolores Banning, by the way—left the hotel for a little sightseeing, walks for her health, fresh air. She comes back to the room, the maid's making up the bed, but *not* changing the sheets. Ticked Banning off.”

“Only use your sheets once?”

More of that bird-like pecking. “I like to be pampered when I'm on vacation”—told

me that, told the maid too. Stood over her while she changed those sheets, all aflutter, I'm sure, watching her like..." Bird-like expression now—nose forward, eyes scrunched. "Maid's still here, doing a second shift, waiting tables in the restaurant."

He gestured over toward the restaurant—the waitress I'd seen glaring at our table. What I'd taken for pity now seemed like something else.

"She's really flustered by all this. Said Banning was horrible, said Banning rushed her out before she could finish the rest of her housekeeping."

"Maybe the maid took revenge?"

"Miss Marple had the ring when the maid left, said she remembered taking it off afterward, remembered 'wringing her hands'"—another glance at the notes—"in consternation." She took it off then. I swear, you couldn't make these people up."

"Someone broke into the room afterwards?"

"No sign of the door having been jimmied. And no keys, all electronic key cards."

"Which narrows it down to someone with access, right?"

"You would think, but here's the trick: The system keeps track of who uses what keys on what doors. Security measures."

"And?"

"No one in or out of that room except Banning herself." Another sigh. "She dropped the damn thing somewhere, far as I can tell. Spindly fingers. And what are *we* supposed to do with that?"

Waiting for my breakfast to arrive Saturday morning, I pulled aside the curtains of my room and saw a Rolls Royce backing into a section of street cordoned off at the front of the hotel—a line of other cars already in place.

I remembered the story of Virginia Paget's party from the press release—"sparkling sedans delivering impeccably attired guests: Rolls Royces and Pierce-Arrows and a sunshine-yellow Roamer Roadster."

The press release had promised a car show as part of the weekend fun. "Donated by a local car club," Gloria explained. "They *want* to show them off. It's not costing us a penny!"

Detectives were already beginning to wander between the cars—admiring them? More likely on the hunt for the next clue. Lord Peter and Harriet Vane appeared to be in deep conversation as they leaned over a sleek roadster, and a few feet behind them, Hercule Poirot stood in the middle of the sidewalk—waiting for something? More likely eavesdropping on his rivals. Coincidentally, both Lord Peter and Poirot were polishing their monocles.

My breakfast never arrived, so I canceled room service (voicemail, no one answered) and grabbed to-go from the restaurant. Ahead of me in line, Charlie Chan ordered a coratado and a croissant. I'd gotten my coffee and a Danish when I heard a voice behind me.

"Watson. Mr. Watson, a moment."

It took me a moment to remember who I was.

I turned finally, and Father Dowling panted to a stop behind me.

Father *Brown*, I corrected myself again—that was the character. All my Googling had been like cramming for an exam, scanning through online articles, a couple of anthologies I'd picked up at the library.

"I'm glad I found you," he told me. "I received a clue this morning, and—"

"I'm not playing—ineligible really." I waved my notebook. Gloria's caution not to help.

"Oh, no, I don't mean about the official contest—well, not technically." Father Brown tugged at his collar, snug against his Adam's apple. "Damned nuisance," he said. "No, I'm talking about Miss Marple's ring—whether you think it is indeed part of the show here? Whether it's only *meant* to look like a real crime? I figured you would know for sure."

A crime? Or lost? "They called the police," I said. "Actual police, not playacting."

Father Brown squinted his eyes, shook his head. "That's so...odd. It has to be."

"Why do you say that?"

"A clue was delivered to me this morning, but..." Father Brown held up a piece of paper. "It's not like the other clues. And I didn't earn it—which seems against the rules."

Even at a glance, the paper was clearly different. Other game pieces had been professionally decorated somehow—the embossed invitation, the clue above the fireplace with its edges lightly burnt as if rescued from the fire itself. But this was a simple sheet from a hotel notepad, the message handwritten, smudged and but not like it was smudged on purpose.

"I would've asked someone with the hotel," Father Brown went on, "but the rules say no assistance from the staff. I didn't want to disqualify myself."

The lobby was mostly empty, but people had been passing by us on their way out to the cars—hotel guests, other detectives. Albert Campion gave us a hard glance, curious, prying even, then moved on.

"May I see it?" I said—motioning Father Brown to an empty sofa.

He followed, handed it over.

Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned.

I don't know how to atone and make amends.

It was anger made me do it.

Shouldn't people be treated better?

"It doesn't rhyme," I said. "That's another difference. No rhyme, no code. How is this a clue?"

Father Brown pointed to *sinned* and *amends*. "That sort of rhymes, doesn't it?"

"Accidental, I think," I said. "How'd you get this?"

"Slipped under my door this morning."

"Who knows which room you're in?"

He shrugged.

"No call to action," I said. "Nothing to figure out, nothing to do." Could it be part of the game?

I glanced toward the desk, wondering if Gloria was there, if I should simply ask her myself—leaving Father Brown out of it. But someone else was on duty, on the phone, and I didn't see her anywhere else in the lobby.

Father Brown tapped the note. "'Shouldn't people be treated better?'" he read. "That's why I thought of Miss Marple and her ring. She hasn't exactly treated anyone well."

"I heard she's been...snippy. With the staff."

"With everyone. She's been trying to play her part—always hearkening back to something she'd seen in St. Mary Mead and what she knows about human nature, but..." He

shook his head. “But when she accused Nora Charles of cheating on Nick, and then what she said about Mr. Chan and Mr. Wolfe and obesity as an indication of inferior intellect, and all those side comments about good parenting...”

Suddenly the disinterest of those people from the night before made greater sense. But was it also a hint toward motive?

“So someone could’ve stolen the ring to spite her? And then...remorse? Those lines about sins and making amends?”

“You still don’t think it’s part of the game?”

“I don’t,” I said. But it could well become part of my story. “Okay for me to hang on to it? Check it out?”

“As long as you let me know what you find out.”

I promised I would.

As Father Brown and I crossed the lobby toward the car show, he flipped a coin in the fountain. “Any luck I can get.” He laughed.

He’d already shared with me the official next clue, almost definitely pointing to the car show:

Miss Paget’s Journeys

Steer your way toward the secret—

Adventure at every turn.

But which the right direction?

Find the page and you will learn.

Various detectives were already traveling from car to car, puzzling out the riddle. I took a few photos and caught sight of Adam Fenwick talking to Perry Mason—follow-up interrogations? My own search was aimed elsewhere—for Miss Marple herself.

As it turned out, I found her in the small gift shop off the lobby—only room for a few people amidst its mix of Hotel Clifford-branded knickknacks, local jewelry, and travel necessities: toothpaste, aspirin, phone chargers.

The clerk stared at her phone. Miss Marple was holding up a book from a small travel section, riffing through the pages, like she expected the next clue to drop out.

Find the page and you will learn? Adventure? Directions? Maybe the cars *were* a distraction, and she was on the right path.

As I walked up, she turned and snapped at a man hovering nearby—the third monocle, as it turned out.

“Mr. Vance, are you spying on me again?”

“Sorry, old thing.” He tipped his hat. “Only passing through.”

“Old thing!” Miss Marple huffed, but the man was gone. “He needs a kick in the pants.”

I moved closer. “He looks a little like...Lord Peter, is it?”

“Philo Vance,” she said. “Honestly, I never liked either of them. Affectation. Pompousness. Now Harriet Vane, she’s a different story entirely, I’d—”

“I was wondering,” I said, “if the police have learned anything more about your missing ring?”

“What they *call* the police.” She tsk-tsked, then raised herself up, imperially. “Mr. Watson, you should bring the power of the press to bear on the matter.”

“I’ll do my best to get them in line.” (In my mind, I was already asking Adam’s forgiveness.) “Do you have a moment?”

“Oh, yes, I’d appreciate that.”

The gift store clerk didn’t notice us leave. As we made our way to a couch in the lobby, Miss Marple touched a passing waitress lightly on the arm, and asked for a cup of Earl Grey. “Not too warm, please, but not too cool either.”

I thought I heard a sigh as the waitress moved off. The words from the note to Father Brown resonated: *Shouldn’t people be treated better?*

“Can you tell me about the ring?”

“It was a silver band, slim and delicate. My mother’s ring—small fingers, like mine—with a pavé setting. That’s a row of small diamonds embedded along the entire band. The police asked the value, but I haven’t had it appraised. It’s *sentimental* value more than anything.”

“Of course,” I said. “And you were wearing it yesterday when…” I let the sentence hang.

“Afternoon, yes. I came back and found the room in complete shambles.”

“Shambles? As if someone had broken in?”

“The break-in must have come later. No, I mean the housekeeping—that *attempt* at housekeeping. That woman had sprayed the bathroom counter, letting chemicals dry on its own, as if that was cleaning. Misting my toiletry bag in the process, since she hadn’t bothered to move it aside. The room service tray from breakfast had been moved from the dresser to the end of the bed—not only unsanitary but actually in the way, since she was tugging the old sheets into place at the same time and—”

“How did you know they were the old sheets?” I asked.

She lowered her chin and pursed her lips. “I am a *noticing* kind of person, Dr. Watson. Some of my eyeshadow was, unfortunately, still on the pillowcase.”

“So you had her do it correctly?”

“I watched her, yes—fresh sheets at least—but she was so sloppy tucking the corners, I finally shooed her out completely, job undone, and did it myself. Had to wipe up the counter too, using a good hand towel, and that meant requesting more linens, which took forever…Speaking of, where is that girl with my tea? Even talking about this, my nerves need calming again and—” She waved her hand in the air. “Jerome!” she said. “Jerome!”

Jerome was pushing an empty cart across the lobby, Sherlock swinging from the top bar like a monkey, the whole thing swaying side to side. They detoured our way.

Miss Marple leaned in, a conspiratorial whisper. “This establishment is in trouble from the front desk to the backstairs. He’s one of the few you can count on.”

As Jerome pulled closer, Sherlock eyed us warily, as if in danger of losing his playmate.

Miss Marple smiled. “Do be a dear, Jerome, and check on the tea I ordered. You know how I like it.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Jerome said and steered off in a new direction, Sherlock casting more glances back our way.

“Patience of Job, and tormented like Job, but always a please and a thank you—and that’s the exception. You’ve heard about the hotel’s financial difficulties, haven’t you? And the reviews? Yelp and Trip Advisor positively *disparage* the place. This whole weekend is a publicity stunt, people playing dress-up, no respect for the books them-

selves.”

Respect for the books themselves? I didn't remember Miss Marple being quite so severe, but mostly, I'd only known the woman on the PBS shows. Had *she* been so mean? Something else seemed out of character. This modern-day Marple—who claimed to know nothing about Twitter—was suddenly hip to Yelp and Trip Advisor. Perhaps she was more technologically savvy than she let on.

“You were talking about the housekeeper. Was that the last time you saw the ring?”

“I had the ring on after she left. It was taken from my room while I was at dinner.”

“I understood that no one had entered your room. The hotel keeps track of the key cards?”

She eyed me suspiciously. “I don't know who you've been talking with, but technology can be bypassed.”

“So, you do think the housekeeper, then, or someone on staff?”

“Incompetence isn't necessarily evil,” she said. “No, one of the detectives was trying to disrupt my attention, and I know which.”

“You do?”

“The Great Merlini,” she said. “Sleight of hand, tricks of the trade. It was before you joined me for dinner. He showed me a card trick and spirited away my key somehow, used it to steal my ring.”

Merlini had been working the crowd, and I'd seen him standing in the restaurant when Miss Marple reported the theft. Had he disappeared in between times? Could he have swiped the key?

“But wait,” I said. “You went back to your room after dinner. You must have had a key then.”

She waved that off. “He returned it to my bag—when he stopped by the table under the guise of doing another trick. But it must have been him—who else had I been in contact with?”

I remembered him stopping by—how long had he been there? Could she be right?

Miss Marple leaned in. “Of course, you can't print any of this until the police prove it. Libel.”

The waitress was coming across the lobby with a cup and saucer and a small pot of tea on a silver tray. Jerome must have worked his magic.

Dutifully, I called Adam and asked about Merlini.

“Impossible,” he said. “She told us the same thing, so I checked it out. Witnesses say Merlini didn't leave the lounge at all, not until long after the old lady reported the ring gone.”

When I caught up with Miss Marple later and asked her about that, she had another quick explanation.

“Don't believe any alibis,” she said. “They could all be in on it, plotting against me.”

“You don't think much of any of them then?” I asked.

“I always believe the worst,” she said, a sigh of resignation. “The sad thing is, one is usually justified in doing so.”

Miss Marple had been wrong about the “journeys” clue—all those travel books. One of the car collectors had been enlisted to deliver the clue: a map from the glovebox, with another challenge—a lengthy one—requiring coordinates to be plotted and a route to be discovered, and a four-digit code to be found...and where was *that* supposed to lead?

Several participants returned to their rooms to puzzle it out, while others gathered in the lobby. I continued my interviews—How was the hunt going? What will you do with the money if you win?—while slipping in other questions: Where were you when you heard the news about the actual theft? What do you think happened? What do you think of Miss Marple?

“I was joking about the spies, of course,” said Tuppence with a dimpled smile. “At the time I thought it was part of the game. But honestly, don’t you imagine she lost it somewhere?”

“No,” said Tommy. “It was the maid definitely. And don’t give me grief like I’m saying the butler did it. She had”—counting out on his fingers—“motive, opportunity, means. Or wait, is *means* the first *m*?”

“My uncle had sent me running down the next clue,” Archie Goodwin said. “Wolfe, I mean. But don’t tell him, I went to a bar down the street, ordered a burger and fries, watched a basketball game. Honestly, when my uncle invited me for the weekend, I thought this was going to be a vacation. I didn’t know he was expecting me to do all the work.”

Ellery Queen was in a similar situation with his dad.

“I’m not really playing,” he told me. “Not my thing really. More my dad’s. But I think he’s having fun.”

“Isn’t it supposed to be the opposite in the books? The son doing all the solving?” I’d mostly watched the old TV show, but still.

“I’m not much of a reader,” he said.

“I was having a daiquiri with Della when I heard her outburst in the lobby,” said Perry Mason. “Mr. Chan was with us too. Frankly, I wouldn’t trust her on the witness stand myself. But it doesn’t matter what she says, I *know* what happened to the ring.”

“You do?” I asked—startled by the statement, his casualness about the news.

“Of course I do,” he said. “But I can’t say now. It wouldn’t be good drama without a last-minute reveal, would it?”

“Oh, hush,” Della said, laughing. “He’s playing with you. He doesn’t know anything.”

Truth was, no one knew much of anything—and no one had much empathy with Miss Marple herself.

“Man never born who can tell what woman will, or will not, do,” Charlie Chan told me. “Would not surprise if Miss Marple manufacture theft to distract us all.”

Everyone suspected everyone—suspected or worse.

“She’s a witch,” said Nora Charles.

“And you spell that,” Nick slurred, “with a *b*.”

“Miss Marple’s become a fan favorite,” I told Gloria later in her office. “Any progress on finding her ring?”

“Our guests expect quality service,” Gloria said, sitting up a little taller behind her desk, like she was stepping to a podium. “The Hotel Clifford is committed to providing

for our guests, their comfort, and their safety to—”

“Got it.” I waved her off. “PR to the core.”

She loosened her stance, leaned forward, cupping her face in her hands.

“Between us, the whole thing’s turned out to be a mess. On top of the complaints, Miss Marple is now threatening to sue, which—we can’t be held responsible, of course. Terms, conditions, and limits of liability posted everywhere. By statute. Still, it’s not a good look, our big celebration weekend—not good press, but who am I talking to, right?” A gesture my way. “And no, I can’t let you interview the maid.”

“You’re trying to keep her quiet?”

“Not at all. She’s not here anymore. She was so upset by all this, she quit.”

“Not the best weekend for that either.”

“This is *not* for publication.” She leveled an eye at me—cautionary. I waved a vague hand in the air that she took for agreement. “Not that you haven’t already noticed, but we’re short-staffed in all directions. Everybody working extra shifts, taking extra duties, everyone overworked, overwhelmed. I’m getting like five hours of sleep, tops. If we get through the weekend without a staff revolt, we’ll be lucky. Lucky to have any staff *left* to revolt.”

“Does this mean my breakfast delivery will be late again?”

“I’ll bring it myself tomorrow,” she said. “And pick up the tray afterwards too. But please...go easy on us in your story, okay?”

Miss Paget Prefers

“Which cognac?”

“Only the *creme de la creme*,” said the Tsar, appropriately.

Which (he reflected) gives us two of the three.

Were all of the clues designed to call attention to some aspect of the hotel? Or even to boost revenue? I’d lost track of where we were in the hunt, but that latest clue brought everyone to the lounge again.

One by one the detectives had come in, the first of them striving to for their same discretion as they ordered their Brandy Alexanders and stole glances at the cocktail napkin beneath. But quickly, as Jerome (was he everywhere?) began making the drinks by the trayful, the mood eased, everyone settling into conversation and relaxation.

Or almost everyone. Miss Marple was her same bristly self.

“A most *unnecessary* ingredient to my taste,” I heard her tell Jerome. “You of all people should’ve known better than to serve me *cream*.”

Neither Nero Wolfe nor the Great Merlini seemed to have ordered the necessary cocktail. Merlini was focused on levitating a pie plate in the air, and Nero Wolfe was still wearing fresh spots in the leather as he lifted pint after pint of beer. His Archie had returned to service, but he was having a beer too—clearly done with the clues.

At a corner table, young Sherlock twirled his deerstalker cap aimlessly. His parents were paying more attention to each other and to their own Brandy Alexanders (already half gone) than to their son. At least he was sitting still for a change.

At the next table, Father Brown took the first sips of his own drink. He read his napkin, opened it, closed it, and opened it once more.

I was talking with Lord Peter and Harriet again, and I’d caught a glimpse of the napkin

at their table, silver printing on the blue cotton.

The Hotel hides a riddle

Hidden in plain view.

Go back to the beginning middle.

Skip forward: 3, 1, 2.

“Do you think she even had a ring at all?” Harriet said. “I mean, did anyone ever see it?”

“She’s in it for the insurance,” Lord Peter said. As it turned out, that was his real-life line of work.

Across the room, Miss Marple sat primly, as if nothing was wrong—except for her drink maybe, which she’d hardly touched. Her hand rested on the arm of her chair, her fingers thin, the skin shriveled. A small band of white perhaps where a ring had been? Or would it have been her other hand?

Abruptly, she stood up and left, a furtive glance behind her. Something was up.

“Excuse me,” I told Peter and Harriet, rising to follow.

Miss Marple crossed the lobby, heading toward the front desk, best I could tell. She gave an occasional glance to each side as she went, and then caught sight of me behind her. Abruptly, she shifted direction toward the elevators.

Clearly, I wasn’t fit for detective work, at least not tailing someone. Had something on the napkin prompted her this way?

Gloria Stinson was manning the desk again, typing on her keyboard.

“Three, one, two?” I said, leaning against the counter. “I’m assuming that wasn’t a typo.”

Gloria’s cheeks dimpled when she smiled. She shook a finger at me. “You’re not supposed to help anyone. And I can’t give out any hints.”

“No one will get anything from me.” I pulled my finger across my lips. “But I caught sight of the clue—fun to try to figure out the puzzles.”

“It’s not a typo,” she said. “But that’s all I can say.”

But her eyes had darted to the side, I’d caught that. Reflex? Or intentional?

The display case about the early days of the Clifford. Back to the beginning? The photographs in the case surrounded the small panel with a history of the hotel—the middle?

Philo Vance stared into the case, adjusting his monocle. Had he been following Miss Marple too?

I turned to investigate further—then caught sight of Gloria’s expression. Her eyes tightened, puzzlement in them—her attention elsewhere.

I followed her gaze. Father Brown was standing by the fountain at the center of the lobby, admiring it, gazing into the spray of the water as if he was reflecting on something.

At several tables around the fountain, people were finishing drinks and dinner. Like them, I wouldn’t have thought anything of a guest admiring the décor—except for Gloria’s reaction, that is, and what she said next.

“He shouldn’t be doing that yet,” Gloria said. The word *yet* stood out. She started to come around the front desk, but before she did, Father Brown had walked over.

“The lost diamonds,” he whispered, trying to keep Philo Vance out of earshot. “What

do you do again when you find them? And should I let everyone else know too?"

The answer to the last question was no.

"Let's let everyone play through," Gloria said. She'd lowered her own voice, talking to Father Brown as if he might be asking for more towels or had lost the key to his room.

Philo Vance had cut his eyes our way a couple of times. I quickly walked his way.

"Catching up on some history?"—raising my voice a bit to cover up whatever Gloria was telling Father Brown.

"Passing the time, old boy, a little light reading." He acted like he'd been caught—same as he'd done in the gift shop. I kept up the small talk, admiring the photos, and scanning through the history panel in the case's center.

Go back to the middle, 3, 1, 2.

I found the sentence—awkward at best: *Our history envelops under each room...*—then skipped through the words.

Envelop(e)s under room desk hold keys.

What key would each detective find there? An actual key? Or a code? It didn't matter now.

I clapped Vance lightly on the shoulder, told him to have a good evening, and then stepped toward the fountain as casually as I could, finding a free table and taking a seat.

The base of the fountain was a little over a foot high, tilework in a mosaic of tans and browns. The fountain in the middle had two copper tiers. Water cascaded gently from a spout at the top and trickled down. The pool itself was crystal clear, but that round curtain of falling water kept an even flow, rippling the surface. Coins were scattered throughout the bottom, and I pulled one from my pocket, flipped it in myself, watched it sink. It landed at an angle—but angled against what?

It wouldn't be hard for Victoria Paget's diamonds to be scattered down there—the pretend diamonds, I meant. Hidden in plain sight.

Or a thin band of silver with a row of diamonds. Nealy invisible itself amongst the dimes and nickels.

When he was done with Gloria, Father Brown came over.

"Did you talk with Gloria about your cocktail napkin?" I asked.

He shrugged. "She asked how I'd solved the case, and I told her."

I remembered how he'd folded and unfolded it. "Did you open the napkin and show her?"

"She'd already know the clues, wouldn't she?"

Which meant he hadn't—and I could only imagine how puzzled she must have been by their conversation.

"Okay if I take a look?" I said. "Since you've already won."

He handed it over. I opened it, and inside was a second message, the same handwriting as the note slipped under Father Brown's door.

I wish my conscience was clear—clear as where it's waiting

It. Not them. It.

The truth came together—some of it at least. The ring, the guilt, the atonement, the covering up. I wasn't sure about the ring, exactly how it was stolen, but the rest made sense—the attempt to confess and to cover up at the same time.

I handed the napkin back. “Keep this between us?”

“Like you said, I’ve already won.” He gestured back toward the restaurant. “Another Brandy Alexander? My treat.”

We sat and talked about...nothing really, or rather, anything *except* the hunt and the fountain and the diamonds—or any theft. It took a while to get our drinks—the staff already short, and some had already clocked out, apparently. No Jerome in sight to help us out.

Gradually, others began to leave the lounge, many of the detectives still clutching their cocktail napkins. Over the course of the evening, several of them passed by the display case—a sudden interest in history. But no one checked out the fountain. No one appeared to know the case had been solved.

I’d hoped to catch at least one of the people I needed to talk to—but even as I saw him, I wasn’t sure how to make my approach, and I let him pass without stopping him.

His parents were with him, after all.

Despite Gloria’s promise of a personally delivered breakfast, I hustled down to the restaurant first thing Sunday.

The lobby was quiet that early in the morning—a lonely custodian vacuuming by the elevators, no bellman on duty, and the front desk unmanned too. (I assumed Gloria or someone else was in the back, ready to jump to duty.)

Nick and Nora were the only people in the restaurant, pointedly not speaking to one another, which made me wonder if Miss Marple had known something after all. Or maybe they were hungover and in urgent need of eggs.

After I’d gotten my coffee and bagel, I caught sight of Sherlock Jr. slumped on a bench near the valet stand, his deerstalker cap angled sideways on his head.

“Aren’t you a little young to be down here on your own?” I asked, joining him.

“Mom and Dad are still asleep.” He was pushing his foot against an empty luggage cart. “I know my way around. My mom keeps forgetting which stairway goes where.”

“No Jerome this morning?”

A snort. “This game is taking too long. I want it to be over.”

He was a different child this morning from the one who’d been riding that luggage cart with such abandon. I remembered the way he’d run his fingers through the water in the fountain, the looks he’d given Miss Marple and me when she’d called Jerome about his tea—and then too the way he’d hidden behind the Virginia Paget cutout that first night.

“Want to tell me how you stole Miss Marple’s ring?”

He cut me a side-eye. Who knew a child his age could master that kind of look?

“I didn’t steal anything.”

I arched an eyebrow in return—trying to match him expression for expression. “You know it’s not nice to lie, right? Of course, I could wait and ask Jerome when he gets here.”

Jerome had known, of course, but he didn’t want to get the boy in trouble. That was why he’d been piggybacking on the clues, sending messages Father Brown’s way—mercy, forgiveness, resolution. A man of the cloth would give that, wouldn’t he?

“Jerome didn’t take it either!” Sherlock sat up—his eyes wide now. “No one did. She *gave* it to us.”

Excuses, I'd expected, but not this. "She *gave* it to you? Why would she do that?"

"Jerome brought her tea. I knocked on the door. She opened it, and she was mad."

"Mad at you?"

"Mad at the tray."

He must have seen the incomprehension in my face. He met my eye, slowed down his speech, trying to make sure I could keep up.

"Jerome gave her the tea," he said. "She gave him the tray. It had a dirty cup and a plate. The ring was on the tray."

The breakfast tray—the one the maid had left on the bed when Miss Marple had rushed her away. Adam had talked about her wringing her hands "in consternation," taking off the ring. And Jerome knew how she liked her tea.

Was it a mistake then? An accident?

"People give him tips," Sherlock went on. His frown told me I was, perhaps, too dumb to live. "That's how he makes money. But it was a penny tip, and those go in the fountain."

"So you didn't steal it at all? Jerome told you all this?"

He rolled his eyes. "He doesn't even know I saw the ring. But I see lots of things. When people give him dollars, he puts them in his pocket. Pennies aren't worth anything. They're just for luck."

"But the ring *was* worth something," I said. "A lot, in fact."

"Uh-uh." He shook his head. "Or he wouldn't throw it in the fountain."

"Excuse me." A man had come in the front entrance, his wife behind him—guests arriving. "May I borrow this?" He tapped the luggage cart in front of Sherlock.

"We're not using it," I told him. He pulled it out the door, while his wife went to the front desk. Gloria was indeed the one who came up from the back—late nights, early mornings, always.

"Miss Marple wasn't very nice. Maybe he didn't like her very much." *Shouldn't people be treated better?*

And where *was* Jerome? Simply his day off? Had he quit like the maid? Or was it a guilty conscience that had kept him away?

Sherlock was still shaking his head.

"Jerome *did* like her. He liked her *because* she wasn't nice. He told me that."

Maybe I *was* dumb.

"*That* doesn't make any sense."

Sherlock sighed, dramatically—sighs and side-eyes all part of his repertoire. "Grown-ups don't make any sense," he said.

"So... Explain it to me."

"Jerome wasn't happy," Sherlock went on, "but he couldn't say anything. They didn't hear him."

"They?"

He moved his hands around, gesturing to the hotel itself—the faded icon, the marketing gimmick, the shoestring staff, everyone overworked.

"They didn't see him, that's what he said. But they saw the lady. Jerome said when *she* wasn't happy, they *had* to hear her. And maybe things would change."

"So, he liked her complaining," I said, "and you think he threw the ring in there to have her complain more?"

“They’d have to fix things then, wouldn’t they?” He slumped back onto the bench. “But it didn’t work. If it had, maybe he and I could’ve played more.”

Nick and Nora had left the restaurant, but others had gone in: Tommy and Tuppence, Perry and Della. Philo Vance and Father Brown were each sitting alone. A lone waitress moved slowly from table to table.

“Do you know where the ring is? Exactly, I mean—where it is in the fountain?”

“I’ve been watching it to make sure it’s still there.”

“Want to get the coin back? Help Jerome?”

Sherlock sat up, all attention.

I pulled out a coin, explained what I wanted. “How’s your aim?”

“Really good.” He was beaming.

He took the coin and headed for the fountain.

After that, things went very quickly—and between Sherlock Jr. and Father Brown, the official announcement of the Mystery Weekend’s Winner was undercut twice.

Sherlock overdramatized his part in the play. He sauntered toward the fountain. He held up the coin and examined both sides repeatedly. After he flipped it, he peered theatrically into the water.

“What’s that?” His voice echoed through the lobby, and already some of the breakfasting detectives were turning his way. “That’s not a coin.”

Gloria, who’d finished checking in the couple, rushed over from the front desk—echoes of the night before?—but Father Brown beat her to the fountain.

“Did the boy find the diamonds too?” he asked, his whisper loud enough this time to set off its own flurry of confusion and excitement and questions from the other detectives.

“The mystery’s been solved?” and “The contest is over?” and “Why didn’t someone tell us?”

Gloria hurried through a speech she clearly hadn’t fully rehearsed.

“Oh! Yes! Congratulations! Father Brown discovered them first...last night, he proved himself, um, a...master detective of all...a master of deduction...and charting all the clues...” She plunged her hand awkwardly into the fountain, moved her fingers side to side, retrieved a pair of small gems and held them high. They looked like plastic. “The diamonds are submerged in the water—in plain sight but nearly invisible to—”

“No.” Sherlock was standing on the fountain now. “I meant the ring. There.” He pointed.

I leaned over to examine it myself, casual bystander. “Miss Marple’s ring?” I asked, nonchalantly—hoping that no one noticed Sherlock nodding my way, eager for approval.

More questions from the crowd—“Where?” and “How?” and “Who put it there?” They pushed against the edge of the fountain to get a look, even as a larger crowd spilled out of the elevator: Poirot and Charlie Chan, Ellery Queen and his father.

Gloria’s fluster doubled again as she shoved her arm deeper into the fountain, toward where Sherlock pointed, and retrieved the ring to cheers from the crowd.

“What on earth?” Miss Marple said, and behind her stood Sherlock’s parents—the same kind of question creasing their brows. No one had noticed that they’d joined the fray.

“Your ring.” Gloria’s hand was dripping as she presented it to Miss Marple. “This young man found it.”

“What?” Sherlock’s dad said.

“Oh, my word,” said his mother, hugging him closer.

“Like the real Sherlock,” I said.

Meanwhile, Miss Marple held up the ring, inspecting it as if it might be a fake—still more peeved than pleased, even as she slipped it on her finger.

“How did it get *there*? That’s my question. And who is *responsible*?”

Justice needed to be served, that was another point she kept making. Questions needed to be answered, especially when she heard the diamonds were in the fountain too. Had her personal jewelry been conscripted into the game?

She was affronted when Charlie Chan asked whether the ring might not have slipped off her “oh so slender” fingers. And she turned suspicious side-eyes Sherlock’s way too, as if he might have stolen it himself—small comments about responsibility and irresponsibility and immaturity and shouldn’t someone have been keeping closer watch?

Any other parents might’ve taken offense. Sherlock’s parents—not surprisingly, given what I’d seen of them—simply didn’t notice. But in a nice twist, the reason they didn’t notice was because they were so focused on Sherlock himself, giving all their smiles and pride and attention his way.

Miss Marple eventually headed back to the elevator, mumbling about improper parenting and the hotel’s poor service and promising to follow up with the authorities. I couldn’t wait to hear Adam Fenwick’s report.

“Brunch will begin at ten thirty,” Gloria reminded everyone, raising her voice to be heard, pushing through. “We’ll explain more then, and present Father Brown the grand prize.”

I’d heard there would be Bloody Marys on the brunch menu. I hoped they’d spike hers with a little extra vodka.

As the crowd dispersed, Gloria leaned down to Sherlock, still framed by adoring parents.

“I think we’ll come up with a special prize for you.”

“Will Jerome be coming back now?” Sherlock asked.

Gloria looked at me—puzzled.

“Jerome?” she said. “The bellman?”

I cleared my throat. “Bellman and barman and more,” I said. “He and Sherlock have become fast friends.”

“Could he come eat with us too?” Sherlock asked. “He’s worked awfully hard.”

“Oh, honey,” Gloria said. “I wish he was here—we could use him—but it’s his *one* day off.”

Sherlock’s eyes lit up. “Maybe he could come play then!”

“Elliott,” his mother said—the first I’d heard his real name. “I don’t think...”

But really, wouldn’t it be a good idea? What Jerome had done with the ring had caused nothing but trouble—a fool’s decision, likely spur of the moment—but he’d clearly regretted it. And he had indeed worked hard.

“Maybe you could invite him to brunch,” I said. “It might be a good part of my story getting them together—good photo too. Stellar service to even your, um, petite patrons?”

I don't know if Gloria picked up on my alliteration, but her smile told me she approved of the idea.

"I'll give him a call now."