

Dead Man's Chest

A Phryne Fisher
mystery

Kerry Greenwood



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Dedicated to that strangely inspiring person, Tom Lane.
With thanks to my fearless researchers Jean Greenwood,
David Greagg, Michael Warby, Jenny Pausacker, Ika Willis,
Tamzin and Meredith Phillips.

And in loving memory of Dennis Pryor, a perfect scholar.

*Fifteen men on a dead man's chest
Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum!
Drink and the devil had done for the rest
Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum!*

Robert Louis Stevenson
Treasure Island

CHAPTER ONE

*When I was at home I was in a better place;
but travellers must be content.*

William Shakespeare
As You Like It

Dot opened her eyes. Only because the Hispano-Suiza had, at last, stopped. It was a four-hour journey from Melbourne to Queenscliff, the holiday destination of the Hon Miss Fisher, her maid and companion Dot, her two adoptive daughters Jane and Ruth, and their dog Molly. Miss Fisher wanted to make it a three-hour journey and she drove like a demon. Only Phryne, Molly and Jane had really enjoyed the flashing panorama of fields, trees, cows, little towns, fist-waving motorists and shouting traffic policemen—Phryne because she loved speed and Jane because she was calculating how fast the car was going by counting seconds between milestones. She had been given a wristwatch for Christmas. Sometimes the car's speed had exceeded eighty miles an hour. Jane was impressed. Ruth, who wanted to be a cook if she survived this trek, was

feeling sick. She stared fixedly at the horizon and tried not to think of food. Dot had given up on courage and had just closed her eyes, crossed her maidenly breast and commended her soul to God. Molly had hung her head out the window and let the wind blow her ears inside out.

Dot saw that the car had arrived in the main street of a respectable little town. They were at the bottom of a steep hill. In the road three well-dressed youths were tormenting a dun-garee-clad boy carrying a basket of fish for which some cook was undoubtedly waiting. Impatiently.

Phryne was getting out of the car. Dot closed her eyes. Miss Fisher was about to happen to someone again. She hoped that Phryne wouldn't get blood on her shoes. That glacé kid was a beast to clean. Ruth took a deep breath of relief as her sickness subsided and grabbed Molly. Jane wondered whether there would be any interesting injuries.

Phryne walked up to the group. Nice flannels, white shirts, blazers of a well-known and expensive public school. They had surrounded the young man and were pushing him from side to side, hoping that he would drop the basket so they could kick the fish all over the road and get the poor boy into trouble. Oafs, thought Phryne, disgusted. I just don't seem to be able to get away from oafs.

'Play time's over, chaps,' she said in a clear, authoritative voice. 'It's tea time, and Nanny's getting cross.'

'Who're you?' grunted an oaf with short blond hair, giving the fisherboy another shove.

'Phryne Fisher. Who are you?'

The curly-headed oaf was struck with an inconvenient memory when he heard that tone. He suddenly recalled a Maori storyteller from his childhood. One of their heroes had addressed an enemy: 'What name shall I put on the cup I shall

make from your skull?' It had always made him shudder. He shuddered now, and began to back away.

'Kiwi, what's the matter with you?' snarled the blond.

'I never liked you, Fraser,' said Kiwi. 'Come on, Jolyon. This is a beastly sort of game.'

'Moral courage,' observed Phryne. 'How proud your school will be when I tell them how their alumni spend their holidays. Surfing? Good game of tennis? Torturing the peasantry?'

Fraser glared and retained his grip on the fisherboy's arm, twisting it behind his back. He winced but still did not speak.

'Let him go now,' said Phryne. 'Fun's over.'

'Oh, Lord,' whispered Jolyon, stout and red-faced. 'I know her.'

'Why, who is she then?' Fraser bared his teeth.

'She's the Hon Miss Fisher,' muttered the boy. 'Like she said. My mother's been angling for an invitation to one of her parties. She's rich. And famous.'

'So? Your mater's a climber.'

'Kiwi's right,' said Jolyon with considerable dignity. 'I never liked you either. How about a game of billiards, Kiwi?'

'Let that boy go right now,' said Phryne, who had arrived somehow behind Fraser without him noticing that she had moved. 'Or you will be really, really sorry.'

He hesitated. Phryne, who was preparing to kick his feet out from under him and dance on his chest in her heavy driving shoes, observed the movement and caught his arm, putting him in the identical arm-lock but with a lot more skill.

'Not so fast. Those fish will have spoiled. Dig into those pockets, fellows, how much have you got?'

Such was her suasion that they assembled seven shillings and eight pence halfpenny and handed them over to Dot, who had left the car and was standing by to assist in any way, from

yelling for the police to belting the nearest head with the tyre lever she held in her hand. She made Jolyon feel even worse. She was a plain young woman with a bun and a firmly fixed hat with orange geraniums in it. She looked so respectable!

Phryne released Fraser, shoving him away, and put a hand on the fisherboy's shoulder.

'Just a moment. We'll give you a lift to avoid any little recurrence of trouble. And boys, I'm going to be here for weeks, and if I see any of you so much as look sideways at an innocent man, woman, child or dog, expect retribution to set in with unusual accuracy and force. You hear me?'

They nodded, hangdog, beaten. Phryne took the victim by the shoulder and marched him to the car. Molly, excited by his delightful aroma of fish, licked his face. Ruth moved over to accommodate him. The big car moved off. Molly paused to bark scornfully at the three schoolboys standing amazed in the middle of the street.

The fisherboy, who was fairly sure that he was hallucinating, clutched his basket.

'I have to go to Mercer Street,' said the driver, an angel from heaven who had, doubtless for reasons of camouflage, appeared as a very well-dressed young woman. 'Turn left?'

'That would be right,' he said, finding his voice. All his aches suddenly made themselves felt. 'T'ank you, t'ank you, Missus! I thought I was gone and done for, so I did.'

'West of Ireland,' she commented. 'Gaeltacht?'

'Galway.' He was beyond amazement. Angels knew most things and, of course, they did go everywhere. 'Here's your house, Missus.' He pointed to a tall building a good height above the sea, unlit and shuttered.

'Thanks. If you have any more trouble with those louts, you come and tell me. What's your name?'

‘Michael, Missus Fisher. Michael Callaghan. T’anks,’ he repeated. As soon as the door was opened, he took his basket and alighted. He clawed off his flat cap and bowed. Phryne smiled at him. He was a wiry, red-headed boy with creamy Celtic skin much weathered at the wrists and neck. He gave her another clumsy bow and vanished, running, down the hill.

‘Well,’ said Phryne, ‘that was stimulating. Is this the right house? It is. I have the key and the owner’s note. No one appears to be at home,’ she added, as the doorbell pealed in an empty space. ‘Odd. What did Mr Thomas say, Dot?’

Dot unfolded the note. ‘He says that his married couple will look after the divine Miss Fisher . . . I’ll leave out a bit . . . their name is Johnson and they seem very reliable.’

Phryne got the door open at last. She stepped into the hall.

‘I think he was mistaken about that,’ she commented.

The house was of a pleasant, if familiar, design. Two storeys: a long hallway into the main rooms, kitchen and bathroom at the back, up the stairs to bedrooms. The floor was unswept. Leaves and sand had blown in under the door. Ruth, who read a lot of Gothic romances, released Molly with shaking hands.

Molly ran barking down the hallway and into the kitchen, a place she could always find.

‘Dot, keep the girls here while I go and see if there is any reason to worry,’ said Phryne in a low voice. Dot nodded and herded the two young women into a search of the parlour and the withdrawing room.

Phryne, who sometimes hated the way her mind worked, walked down the unlit hall into the world beyond the green baize door, dreading what she might find. Corpses, perhaps? There was no smell except for the sea and an overlay of dust. Molly was barking hysterically—but that’s dogs for you, she

thought. Their solution to any problem was to give it a good barking.

The house was dusty, unloved and uncleaned, but not for very long. No trailing cobwebs caressed her face as she opened the door into the kitchen, the butler's pantry, the scullery. The house was making the usual creaks and groans of an old house but they were exaggerated by the still air. Phryne wished she had her little gun in her hand, though any peril must be long gone by now. She had left the gun in the car.

She was relieved to find nothing more frightful than an open back door. Beyond, the kitchen garden looked dry but not desiccated. A strong scent of herbs came to her. That mint bed could do with watering. Now, what had happened here?

The kitchen table was bare. The dishes from the last meal served here had been washed up and put away. The floor was damp because the ice in the ice chest had melted because the door had been left open. There was no betraying butter by which she could estimate anything by observing the depth to which the parsley had sunk. The sink was dry. The cupboards were void of anything, even salt, even tea. The kitchen had been looted. Cheap cutlery in the drawer, but the owner would not leave silver in a holiday house. There were plates, cups and glasses, and there was table linen in the linen press. The butler's cupboard, however, was empty of even a sniff of cooking sherry.

Molly came in from the garden grinning and panting. She had not found anything alarming.

Off the kitchen were the servants' quarters. These usually comprised a bedroom, a bathroom and a sitting room. They were quite empty except for a stripped bed, a wicker armchair which was unravelling quietly in the dusty sunlight, and some litter on the floor: a few crumpled papers, a bathing shoe, a

scatter of coins and a broken shoelace. All the signs of a hasty—but thorough—departure. Phryne could see the man, sitting on the side of that bed, tugging angrily at a bootlace and swearing as it snapped in that charming way shoelaces have when one is in a hurry. No blood. No signs of violence.

She returned to the hall, where Dot was looking worried.

‘There’s a few things missing, Miss,’ she said.

‘And from the kitchen, which is quite empty. Mr Thomas’s married couple seem to have left abruptly, pausing only for a spot of pillage.’

‘There’s sheets and blankets and so on upstairs,’ said Dot. ‘But some ornaments and a painting are missing. You can tell from marks in the dust. What do you want to do, Miss?’

‘I’m not having you housekeep while we loll around,’ said Phryne. ‘Oh, for my Mr and Mrs Butler! Tell you what. Let’s bring the things in—I notice that our trunks are here—and settle in for the night, and tomorrow we can find some servants.’

‘I don’t reckon we’ll find anyone free in the season,’ said Dot. ‘But I don’t mind, Miss. Nice house like this.’

Phryne looked at Dot affectionately. She was mousy and quiet where Phryne was bold, devout where Phryne was outrageous, and good girl was written all the way through her, like Castlemaine through Castlemaine Rock. And Phryne relied on her as she relied on her own right hand.

‘Good. Well, girls?’

‘Nothing scary,’ said Jane, who disliked Ruth’s emotionalism and never read novels. ‘Have they gone, Miss Phryne?’

‘Yes, and taken a lot of little souvenirs to remember poor Mr Thomas by.’

‘Are we staying?’ asked Ruth.

‘What do you think?’

‘I say yes,’ said Ruth, her courage much restored by not being expected to drive in that frightful vehicle anymore. Leaving would mean getting back into the Hispano-Suiza and Ruth was presently contemplating walking home to St Kilda rather than doing that.

‘So do I,’ agreed Jane. ‘I wonder if the neighbours saw the truck?’

‘The truck, Jane?’ asked Phryne, who was getting peckish.

‘They must have had a truck to take all the things they stole.’

‘Good observation. Let’s ask them. You two carry up your own things then make up beds, and Dot can come with me. You’ll be all right on your own?’ she asked, seeing a shadow on Ruth’s plump cheek.

‘Of course,’ said Jane flatly, and led the way to the luggage.

‘I might just close and lock the back door,’ said Phryne. ‘Come and have a look at the kitchen, Dot. And where’s that note? Mr Thomas said something about the neighbours.’

Assisted by Molly, the girls opened the first trunk and began to haul their own belongings up the stairs. Dot walked into the kitchen and stared.

‘They’ve even taken the tea,’ she said, shocked. ‘And the condiments, and the flour—look, there’s been a whole sack here. And if it wasn’t them, Miss, who did?’

‘Perhaps someone who needed the flour more than we do,’ said Phryne absently. ‘The back gate might be open, too.’ She led the way into a rather bijou little herb garden.

‘Only been a couple of days without water,’ remarked Dot.

The back gate, a heavy wooden construction topped hospitably with broken glass, stood ajar. Phryne shut and latched it.

‘Flour,’ she said, noticing traces of white powder on the gravel.

‘I don’t like this,’ said Dot quietly.

‘No, on consideration, Dot dear, I don’t like it either—but whatever has happened has already happened. Let’s call on the . . . what’s their name?’

Dot consulted the note.

‘He says that the lady on the left is a Miss Rose Sélavy, she isn’t here all the time and he doesn’t know her, and the lady on the right is a nice Mrs Mason, who will be delighted to introduce you to the worthies of Queenscliff.’

‘Then let’s go and call on nice Mrs Mason, and see if she can spare someone to summon the constabulary.’

Mrs Mason, when they gained admittance to the spacious house next door, did not seem conspicuously nice. She was large, pink, suicidally blonde, bristling and suspicious, but it did not take Phryne long to divine the cause.

‘And I suppose you know Mr Thomas well?’ she asked, keeping her visitors standing in the hall, which was not polite.

‘Not at all,’ said Phryne promptly. ‘Only met him once, at a big party. He said he had a house to lend and I accepted.’

Mrs Mason relaxed, smiled and ushered them into the parlour.

Dot exchanged a glance with Phryne. Nice Mrs Mason, apparently, had hopes of a closer relationship with nice Mr Thomas.

The sun parlour was spotless and comfortable, furnished with cane chairs and possibly just a thought too many wicker whatnots. A small maid came in with tea on a trolley, an innovation of which Phryne approved. The weight of the average tray of teapot, milk jug, hot-water jug, sugar basin, slop basin,

strainer, and cups and saucers was far too much for any young woman. Not to mention what looked like a rather good pound cake, a succulent fruitcake and a mound of freshly made scones. Phryne was hungry.

She allowed Dot to explain the situation as she made a healthy attack on the cake and loaded a scone or two with plum jam and cream. Mrs Mason, now relieved of her fears for her nice Mr Thomas's affections, exclaimed in horror.

'The Johnsons not back! I can't believe it! No warning! No letter! That is not like them, really it isn't,' she said, raising her plump pink hands. Now that she was being nice Mrs Mason, she had a pleasant, educated, alto voice. 'And the kitchen empty?'

'Not a crumb,' said Phryne, taking over the conversation so that Dot could have her turn at the cake. 'These scones are first rate, Mrs Mason.'

'Thank you—my cook is very good,' said Mrs Mason distractedly. 'I really can't imagine what might have happened! The Johnsons were on a week's leave—they should have been back yesterday! But first things first. We shall telephone that nice Constable Dawson. Then we shall telephone Miss Miller, who has the employment agency. She might have a few people on her books, but really, this far into the season, I fear all the good people will be taken. But there might have been a cancellation,' said Mrs Mason bravely. 'Then of course you will dine with me tonight, and tomorrow the tradesmen will call as usual and you can order replacements. And you say that your daughters are still in the house and not a bite to eat? I shall order a hamper to be sent over immediately. And a bone for the doggie, of course.'

She bustled away. Phryne poured herself another cup of tea.

'I know what you are thinking,' she said to Dot, who was nibbling her second slice of cake.

‘Yes, Miss?’

‘You are thinking that I attract mysteries,’ said Phryne, a little uneasily. She had promised everyone a nice holiday by the sea and absolutely no murders. Though the Johnsons might be alive and well and living on damper (made from Mr Thomas’s flour) on Swan Island, of course.

Dot swallowed and considered.

‘Well, yes, Miss, you do. But I don’t reckon this was anyways your fault,’ she said generously, much restored by tea and pound cake, her favourite. ‘We just walked straight into this one.’

‘Thank you, Dot. Have a scone? They’re very good.’

‘Thanks,’ said Dot. ‘I will.’

They had made considerable inroads into the scones before Mrs Mason came back. She escorted a stout, self-possessed woman in an apron, who brought with her an appetising smell of onions and cucumber and mixed fruits. Mrs Mason introduced her with a small chuckle.

‘This is Mrs Cook, my cook.’

‘Cook by name and cook by profession,’ put in the round woman, inspecting the newcomers with interest. She had bright blue eyes, red cheeks, and the very clean hands of one who has been making pastry.

‘It’s fate,’ said Phryne, smiling. ‘My butler is called Mr Butler.’

‘Is he, dear? That’s fate for you. You say the Johnsons have not come back?’

‘They have not, leaving only a broken bootlace behind,’ Phryne replied.

‘I wouldn’t have thought it of them,’ said the cook slowly. ‘Seemed perfectly devoted to that Mr Thomas. Been with him a long time, too. And to steal the provisions—that I can’t believe.’

‘Nonetheless, a good-sized mouse would starve in that kitchen. Now, what are we to do?’

‘You’ll have to find someone else, dear, that’s true. I can lend you my scullery maid to get the new things settled in but she can’t cook for toffee.’

‘I thought of calling Miss Miller,’ suggested Mrs Mason deferentially. It was clear where power lay in this household. A good cook at holiday time must be worth her weight in diamonds.

‘She won’t have no one suitable,’ the cook assured her mistress. ‘Not this far into the season. I’ll ask around, Miss,’ she said to Phryne. ‘I’ve sent the boy over with a hamper which will feed you through breakfast tomorrow, then we shall see.’

‘Thank you,’ murmured Phryne.

‘And I’ve told him to light the pilot light for the hot water,’ said the cook. ‘You’ll be wanting a wash after all that traveling. You can hang on to the cheeky young monkey to do some of your lifting. If you can get any work out of him you’ll be doing well. It’s more than I can do.’

‘Thank you, Mrs Cook,’ said Mrs Mason. The cook smiled at Phryne and Dot and bobbed something which might pass for a curtsy.

‘Can’t leave my puff paste for long,’ she said, and went with a whisk of her apron.

‘She’s a character,’ said Mrs Mason admiringly.

‘She certainly is,’ agreed Phryne.

Returning to the house, Phryne found that the hamper had arrived and her household was gathered around the kitchen table watching Ruth make tea. She was managing it with a fine flourish. Mrs Butler taught her pupils well.

Jane was calculating how much the water would need to cool before she could drink the tea, and whether it was better

to put the milk in first or last in order to cool it most expeditiously.

A lanky boy lounged in the doorway. His cap was on the back of his head, a gasper was in his mouth, and he did not look like a representative of the great working class.

‘Girls, you deserve tea, so you shall have it. George, you haven’t done any work yet, so you will have to earn it,’ Phryne announced briskly. ‘Stub the smoke and start on the trunks, if you want anything to eat before these starving ladies scoff it all.’

‘My name ain’t George,’ he scowled. ‘It’s Eddie.’

‘George it will be until I see some progress. Come along! Policemen will be here any moment.’

‘P’lice?’ said George, awestruck. Phryne diagnosed an avid reader of shilling shockers.

‘Off you go, Sexton Blake,’ she told him. He gaped at her. No one had read his mind since that strange lady next door had got him in the street and told him he was destined to be a cop. He ground out the gasper and almost ran into the hall.

‘You’re very good,’ said Dot admiringly. ‘The cook said she couldn’t get a hand’s turn out of him.’

‘Just a matter of knowing where to apply the lever,’ said Phryne.