

A Pluperfect Murder

Jane loves murder mysteries. Personally, I don't get them at all. But I thought I'd try a short story in that genre, to see if I could make it work. I'll let you be the judge.

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pluperfect plu-per-fect [verb tense with 'had'] Expresses an action completed in the past. *"He had thought seriously about the implications of what he was doing"*

Bob and I had finished dinner an hour or two ago, and after a walk around the lake, we were sitting in the living room enjoying a glass of wine. I'm not a wine fancier by any means, but I knew that Bob liked it, so I usually kept a bottle or two on hand. He was planted comfortably on the sofa, allowing his long legs to stretch out languorously in front of him. He looked at me and smiled.

"So, Ken, have you given any thought to what we talked about last time?"

Bob and I go way back. We often met over dinner to discuss current events, or books we'd been reading. At least, we did whenever Bob could convince his wife to let him escape for an evening.

Recently we'd both become Dorothy Sayer fans, having discovered a mutual interest in old British murder mysteries. You know the type ... the sort of story where a group of people meet over the weekend at a stately manor somewhere in England, and someone dies violently, and one of the guests just happens to be a detective ...

We discovered that we both liked the stories because it was a challenge to figure out who the murderer was before it was revealed in the last chapter. But as with all types of stories like that, the problem was that you could always figure out who the guilty party was.

I answered him. *"I certainly have, Bob, and I'm pretty sure I have a solution!"*

Bob perked up at that. The last time we'd met over dinner, we'd been talking about how the perpetrators in these stories weren't very smart. They always acted impulsively, and left clues all over the place. We decided we'd try to go one better and come up with the perfect murder. We'd both spent the last week thinking about it.

"So you think you can commit murder and get away with it? I have to admit, I wasn't able to come up with any ideas. So tell me how you'd do it!" He finished his glass of wine, and I poured him another.

"Well, you know the basic problem. If you want to kill someone you know, you're not likely to get away with it unless you're pretty clever." We'd set some rules. The murderer had to know his victim, have a motive, and actually carry out the act in person. And be above suspicion. That was the hard part.

"So? How would you do it?"

"Let me set the stage first, all right? Suppose, for instance that I decided to kill you. Obviously we can rule out a knife or gun ... there's no way I'd get away with that."

Bob interjected, *“No, and bashing me over the head with a rock would be just as bad. I thought about electrocution, but couldn’t see any way to make it work.”* He took another sip of wine and continued, *“OK. So what’s your motive?”*

“Well, again, suppose that I was still harbouring a lot of anger at how you’d taken Cathy away from me ...”

Bob winced. *“Ken, that was a long time ago, and ...”*

“I know, Bob. But just suppose.” Four years ago, I’d been engaged to Cathy Underhill. We were to have been married in June of that year. But I’d introduced her to Bob one evening, and one thing had led to another, and almost before I knew it, Cathy had broken our engagement and declared that she was in love with Bob. They’d been married that autumn. I hadn’t gone to the wedding.

“I thought you were over that, Ken. You know how bad I felt ...”

“I know, Bob. Don’t worry about it, OK? We’re just supposing. It’s a game. Just play along, all right?”

Bob was still looking a little uneasy. *“All right, so I guess you could have a motive. Good thing you’re a friend!”* He laughed.

“So, if I had in fact decided that I wanted to do away with you, I would have to do it in a way that would leave me completely beyond suspicion.” I smiled. *“Any kind of physical violence wouldn’t work. No way to make it look accidental, at least in a way that would keep anyone from suspecting me.”*

“So you’re not going to whack me over the head with those fireplace tongs,” he pointed at the hearth across the room, *“or shoot me with a gun you’ve secretly purchased.”*

We both laughed. He knew I’d never owned a gun, and wouldn’t know how to use one if I did. Bob was really getting into this now. His momentary uneasiness had disappeared.

“But I suppose you could push me down the stairs, and say that I tripped.” He thought for a moment. *“No, that wouldn’t work. There’s a motive, and you would be under suspicion. And there’s no guarantee a fall would actually kill me ...”* He stopped to think, while I continued.

“But poison, on the other hand ...” I let that thought linger in the air for a moment before I continued. *“Poison would do the trick quite nicely, don’t you think?”*

Bob looked puzzled. *“But that would be a give-away, wouldn’t it? The cause of death would be obvious, and I’m not about to poison myself, so you would be the immediate suspect ...”*

He thought about it for a moment, and then he got it. *“Ahh, of course. Something natural. Something I might have ingested not on purpose, but accidentally ... perhaps something in the meal that was spoiled ... botulism, maybe?”* He thought some more. Bob really was enjoying this. As was I. *“But no, too slow, And again, there’d be no guarantee that I’d actually die.”*

He was stumped. *“How would you do it, Ken? How could I accidentally consume something deadly, without you dying as well ... which would certainly put you above suspicion!”* He laughed.

I thought he would figure it out. But I saw that I would have to help him.

"It would really be quite easy, Bob. Something poisonous, like, say, a mushroom."

"But I wouldn't necessarily die, would I? And how would you explain not getting sick yourself?"

I took another sip of my wine. I really didn't like the stuff much, but it was helping to settle my stomach, for the moment.

"Well, Bob, This is what I could have done. 'Destroying Angel' mushrooms are quite common around here, did you know that? And they resemble button mushrooms very closely, at least to a non-expert like me."

I paused for a moment. *"The active toxin is amatoxin. It causes cramps and delirium a few hours after ingesting them, and unconsciousness shortly thereafter. As little as half a mushroom can be fatal in five hours, if not treated."*

Bob was looking a little uneasy again. Perhaps he was remembering the mushrooms we'd had with dinner several hours ago. He loved mushrooms. He'd eaten a lot of them.

"But you couldn't just let me get sick and die. You'd take me to the hospital. If you didn't do that, you'd definitely be a suspect!" He was looking more confident now. *"So your perfect murder wouldn't work, Ken. And there's no way you'd poison yourself ..."*

I looked at him with a twinkle in my eye and smiled. *"But I could. If I made sure to eat just a little bit of mushroom, just enough to make me ill, but not enough to be fatal ... and we both passed out ... by the time I recovered enough to do something about helping you, it would be way too late. The hospital's over an hour from here. And I wouldn't really know what to tell them ... how long would it take them to figure out mushroom poisoning?"*

"That's ... pretty ingenious, Ken. It might work. And no-one would suspect you, since you'd gotten sick too." He grimaced. *"I guess you did it ... planned the perfect murder. I have to hand it to you ... you really thought that one out!"*

We both laughed. Bob stood up. "Well, I really should be going. I don't want to ..."

As he was bending over in agony, and as the spasms began to wrack his body, I managed to ignore the pain in my own stomach long enough to say quietly, "Cathy. I didn't forget."