



THE FOUNTAIN PLAYS

Dorothy L. Sayers

'Yes,' said Mr Spiller, in a satisfied tone, 'I must say I like a bit of ornamental water. Gives a finish to the place.'

'The Versailles touch,' agreed Ronald Proudfoot.

Mr Spiller glanced sharply at him, as though suspecting sarcasm, but his lean face expressed nothing whatsoever. Mr Spiller was never quite at his ease in the company of his daughter's fiancé, though he was proud of the girl's achievement. With all his (to Mr Spiller) unamiable qualities, Ronald Proudfoot was a perfect gentleman, and Betty was completely wrapped up in him.

'The only thing it wants,' continued Mr Spiller, 'to my mind, that is, is Opening Up. To make a Vista, so to say. You don't get the Effect with these bushes on all four sides.'

'Oh, I don't know, Mr Spiller,' objected Mrs Digby in her mild voice. 'Don't you think it makes rather a fascinating surprise? You come along the path, never dreaming there's anything behind those lilacs, and then you turn the corner and come suddenly upon it. I'm sure, when you brought me down to see it this afternoon, it quite took my breath away.'

'There's that, of course,' admitted Mr Spiller. It occurred to him, not for the first time, that there was something very attractive about Mrs Digby's silvery personality. She had distinction, too. A widow and widower of the sensible time of life, with a bit of money on both sides, might do worse than settle down comfortably in a pleasant house with half an acre of garden and a bit of ornamental water.

'And it's so pretty and secluded,' went on Mrs Digby, 'with these glorious rhododendrons. Look how pretty they are, all sprayed with the water - like fairy jewels - and the rustic seat against those dark cypresses at the back. Really Italian. And the scent of the lilac is so marvellous!'

Mr Spiller knew that the cypresses were, in fact, yews, but he did not correct her. A little ignorance was becoming in a woman. He glanced from the cotoneasters at one side of the fountain to the rhododendrons on the other, their rainbow flower-trusses sparkling with diamond drops.

'I wasn't thinking of touching the rhododendrons or the cotoneasters,' he said. 'I only thought of cutting through that great hedge of lilac, so as to make a vista from the house. But the ladies must always have the last word, mustn't they - er - Ronald?' (He never could bring out Proudfoot's Christian name naturally.) 'If you like it as it is, Mrs Digby, that settles it. The lilacs shall stay.'

'It's too flattering of you,' said Mrs Digby, 'but you mustn't think of altering your plans for me. I haven't any right to interfere with your beautiful garden.'

'Indeed you have,' said Mr Spiller. 'I defer to your taste entirely. You have spoken for the lilacs, and henceforward they are sacred.'

'I shall be afraid to give an opinion on anything, after that,' said Mrs Digby, shaking her head. 'But whatever you decide to do, I'm sure it will be lovely. It was a marvellous idea to think of putting the fountain there. It makes all the difference to the garden.'

Mr Spiller thought she was quite right. And indeed, though the fountain was rather flattered by the name of 'ornamental water', consisting as it did of a marble basin set in the centre of a pool about four feet square, it made a brave show, with its plume of

dancing water, fifteen feet high, towering over the smaller shrubs and almost overtopping the tall lilacs. And its cooling splash and tinkle soothed the ear on this pleasant day of early summer.

‘Costs a bit to run, doesn’t it?’ demanded Mr Gooch. He had been silent up till now, and Mrs Digby felt that his remark betrayed a rather sordid outlook on life. Indeed, from the first moment of meeting Mr Gooch, she had pronounced him decidedly common, and wondered that he should be on such intimate terms with her host.

‘No, no,’ replied Mr Spiller. ‘No, it’s not expensive. You see, it uses the same water over and over again. Most ingenious. The fountains in Trafalgar Square* work on the same principle, I believe. Of course, I had to pay a bit to have it put in, but I think it’s worth the money.’

‘Yes, indeed,’ said Mrs Digby

‘I always said you were a warm man*, Spiller,’ said Mr Gooch, with his vulgar laugh. ‘Wish I was in your shoes. A snug spot, that’s what I call this place. Snug.’

‘I’m not a millionaire,’ answered Mr Spiller, rather shortly. ‘But things might be worse in these times. Of course,’ he added, more cheerfully, ‘one has to be careful. I turn the fountain off at night, for instance, to save leakage and waste.’

‘I’ll swear you do, you damned old miser,’ said Mr Gooch offensively.

Mr Spiller was saved replying by the sounding of a gong in the distance.

‘Ah! there’s dinner,’ he announced, with a certain relief in his tone. The party wound their way out between the lilacs, and paced gently up the long crazy pavement, past the herbaceous borders and the two long beds of raw little ticketed roses, to the glorified villa which Mr Spiller had christened ‘The Pleasaunce’.

It seemed to Mrs Digby that there was a slightly strained atmosphere about dinner, though Betty, pretty as a picture and very much in love with Ronald Proudfoot, made a perfectly charming little hostess. The jarring note was sounded by Mr Gooch. He ate too noisily, drank far too freely, got on Proudfoot’s nerves and behaved to Mr Spiller with a kind of veiled insolence which was embarrassing and disagreeable to listen to. She wondered again where he had come from, and why Mr Spiller put up with him. She knew little about him, except that from time to time he turned up on a visit to ‘The Pleasaunce’, usually staying there about a month and being, apparently, well supplied with cash. She had an idea that he was some kind of commission agent, though she could not recall any distinct statement on this point. Mr Spiller had settled down in the village about three years previously, and she had always liked him. Though not, in any sense of the word, a cultivated man, he was kind, generous and unassuming, and his devotion to Betty had something very lovable about it. Mr Gooch had started coming about a year later. Mrs Digby said to herself that if ever she was in a position to lay down the law at ‘The Pleasaunce’ - and she had begun to think matters were tending that way - her influence would be directed to getting rid of Mr Gooch.

‘How about a spot of bridge?’ suggested Ronald Proudfoot, when coffee had been served. It was nice, reflected Mrs Digby, to have coffee brought in by the manservant. Masters was really a very well-trained butler, though he did combine the office with that of chauffeur. One would be comfortable at ‘The Pleasaunce’. From the dining-room window she could see the neat garage housing the Wolseley saloon on the ground floor, with a room for the chauffeur above it, and topped off by a handsome gilded weather-vane aglitter in the last rays of the sun. A good cook, a smart parlourmaid and everything done exactly as one could wish - if she were to marry Mr Spiller she would be able, for the first time in her life, to afford a personal maid as well. There would be plenty of room in the house, and of course, when Betty was married.

Betty, she thought, was not over-pleased that Ronald had suggested bridge. Bridge is not a game that lends itself to the expression of tender feeling, and it would perhaps have looked better if Ronald had enticed Betty out to sit in the lilac-scented dusk under the yew-hedge by the fountain. Mrs Digby was sometimes afraid that Betty was the more in love of the two. But if Ronald wanted anything he had to have it, of course, and personally,

Mrs Digby enjoyed nothing better than a quiet rubber. Besides, the arrangement had the advantage that it got rid of Mr Gooch. 'Don't play bridge,' Mr Gooch was wont to say. 'Never had time to learn. We didn't play bridge where I was brought up.' He repeated the remark now, and followed it up with a contemptuous snort directed at Mr Spiller.

'Never too late to begin,' said the latter pacifically.

'Not me!' retorted Mr Gooch. 'I'm going to have a turn in the garden. Where's that fellow Masters? Tell him to take the whisky and soda down to the fountain. The decanter, mind - one drink's no good to yours truly*.' He plunged a thick hand into the box of Coronas on the side-table, took out a handful of cigars and passed out through the French window of the library on to the terrace. Mr Spiller rang the bell and gave the order without comment, and presently they saw Masters pad down the long crazy path between the rose-beds and the herbaceous borders, bearing the whisky and soda on a tray.

The other four played on till 10.30, when a rubber coming to an end, Mrs Digby rose and said it was time she went home. Her host gallantly offered to accompany her. 'These two young people can look after themselves for a moment,' he added, with a conspiratorial smile.

'The young can look after themselves better than the old, these days.' She laughed a little shyly, and raised no objection when Mr Spiller drew her hand into his arm as they walked the couple of hundred yards to her cottage. She hesitated a moment whether to ask him in, but decided that a sweet decorum suited her style best.

She stretched out a soft, beringed hand to him over the top of the little white gate. His pressure lingered - he would have kissed the hand, so insidious was the scent of the red and white hawthorns in her trim garden, but before he had summoned up the courage, she had withdrawn it from his clasp and was gone.

Mr Spiller, opening his own front door in an agreeable dream, encountered Masters.

'Where is everybody, Masters?'

'Mr Proudfoot left five or ten minutes since, sir, and Miss Elizabeth has retired.'

'Oh!' Mr Spiller was a little startled. The new generation, he thought sadly, did not make love like the old. He hoped there was nothing wrong. Another irritating thought presented itself.

'Has Mr Gooch come in?'

'I could not say, sir. Shall I go and see?'

'No, never mind.' If Gooch had been sozzling himself up with whisky since dinner-time, it was just as well Masters should keep away from him. You never knew. Masters was one of these soft-spoken beggars, but he might take advantage. Better not to trust servants, anyhow.

'You can cut along to bed. I'll lock up.'

'Very good, sir.'

'Oh, by the way, is the fountain turned off?'

'Yes, sir. I turned it off myself, sir, at half-past ten, seeing that you were engaged, sir.'

'Quite right. Good-night, Masters.'

'Good-night, sir.'

He heard the man go out by the back and cross the paved court to the garage. Thoughtfully he bolted both entrances, and returned to the library. The whisky decanter was not in its usual place - no doubt it was still with Gooch in the garden - but he mixed himself a small brandy and soda, and drank it. He supposed he must now face the tiresome business of getting Gooch up to bed. Then, suddenly, he realized that the encounter would take place here and not in the garden. Gooch was coming in through the French window. He was drunk, but not, Mr Spiller observed with relief, incapably so.

`Well?' said Gooch.

`Well?' retorted Mr Spiller.

`Had a good time with the accommodating widow, eh? Enjoyed yourself? Lucky old hound, aren't you? Fallen soft in your old age, eh?'

`There, that'll do,' said Mr Spiller.

`Oh, will it? That's good. That's rich. That'll do, eh? Think I'm Masters, talking to me like that?' Mr Gooch gave a thick chuckle. `Well, I'm not Masters, I'm master here. Get that into your head. I'm master and you damn well know it.'

`All right,' replied Mr Spiller meekly, `but buzz off to bed now, there's a good fellow. It's getting late and I'm tired.'

`You'll be tireder before I've done with you.' Mr Gooch thrust both hands into his pockets and stood - a bulky and threatening figure - swaying rather dangerously. `I'm short of cash,' he added. `Had a bad week - cleaned me out. Time you stumped up a bit more.'

`Nonsense,' said Mr Spiller, with some spirit. `I pay you your allowance as we agreed, and let you come and stay here whenever you like, and that's all you get from me.'

`Oh, is it? Getting a bit above yourself, aren't you, Number Bleeding 4132?'

`Hush!' said Mr Spiller, glancing hastily round as though the furniture had ears and tongues.

`Hush! hush!' repeated Mr Gooch mockingly. `You're in a good position to dictate terms, aren't you, 4132? Hush! The servants might hear! Betty might hear! Betty's young man might hear. Hah!

Betty's young man - he'd be particularly pleased to know her father was an escaped jail-bird, wouldn't he? Liable at any moment to be hauled back to work out his ten years' hard* for forgery? And when I think,' added Mr Gooch, `that a man like me, that was only in for a short stretch and worked it out good and proper, is dependent on the charity - ha, ha! - of my dear friend 4132, while he's rolling in wealth -

`I'm not rolling in wealth, Sam,' said Mr Spiller, `and you know darn well I'm not. But I don't want any trouble. I'll do what I can, if you'll promise faithfully this time that you won't ask for any more of these big sums, because my income won't stand it.'

`Oh, I'll promise that all right,' agreed Mr Gooch cheerfully. `You give me five thousand down -

Mr Spiller uttered a strangled exclamation.

`Five thousand? How do you suppose I'm to lay hands on five thousand all at once? Don't be an idiot, Sam. I'll give you a cheque for five hundred-

`Five thousand,' insisted Mr Gooch, `or up goes the monkey.'

`But I haven't got it,' objected Mr Spiller.

`Then you'd bloody well better find it,' returned Mr Gooch.

`How do you expect me to find all that?'

`That's your look-out. You oughtn't to be so damned extravagant. Spending good money, that you ought to be giving me, on fountains and stuff. Now, it's no good kicking, Mr Respectable 4132 - I'm the man on top and you're for it, my lad, if you don't look after me properly. See?'

Mr Spiller saw it only too clearly. He saw, as he had seen indeed for some time, that his friend Gooch had him by the short hairs. He expostulated again feebly, and Gooch replied with a laugh and an offensive reference to Mrs Digby.

Mr Spiller did not realize that he had struck very hard. He hardly realized that he had struck at all. He thought he had aimed a blow, and that Gooch had dodged it and

tripped over the leg of the occasional table. But he was not very clear in his mind, except on one point. Gooch was dead.

He had not fainted; he was not stunned. He was dead. He must have caught the brass curb of the fender as he fell. There was no blood, but Mr Spiller, exploring the inert head with anxious fingers, found a spot above the temple where the bone yielded to pressure like a cracked egg-shell. The noise of the fall had been thunderous. Kneeling there on the library floor, Mr Spiller waited for the inevitable cry and footsteps from upstairs.

Nothing happened. He remembered - with difficulty, for his mind seemed to be working slowly and stiffly - that above the library there was only the long drawing-room, and over that the spare-room and bathrooms. No inhabited bedroom looked out on that side of the house.

A slow, grinding, grating noise startled him. He whisked round hastily. The old-fashioned grandfather clock, wheezing as the hammer rose into action, struck eleven. He wiped the sweat from his forehead, got up and poured himself out another, and a stiffer, brandy.

The drink did him good. It seemed to take the brake off his mind, and the wheels span energetically. An extraordinary clarity took the place of his previous confusion.

He had murdered Gooch. He had not exactly intended to do so, but he had done it. It had not felt to him like murder, but there was not the slightest doubt what the police would think about it. And once he was in the hands of the police - Mr Spiller shuddered. They would almost certainly want to take his finger-prints, and would be surprised to recognize a bunch of old friends.

Masters had heard him say that he would wait up for Gooch.

Masters knew that everybody else had gone to bed. Masters would undoubtedly guess something. But stop!

Could Masters prove that he himself had gone to bed? Yes, probably he could. Somebody would have heard him cross the court and seen the light go up over the garage. One could not hope to throw suspicion on Masters - besides, the man hardly deserved that. But the mere idea had started Mr Spiller's brain on a new and attractive line of thought.

What he really wanted was an alibi. If he could only confuse the police as to the time at which Gooch had died. If Gooch could be made to seem alive after he was dead . . . somehow . . .

He cast his thoughts back over stories he had read on holiday, dealing with this very matter. You dressed up as the dead man and impersonated him. You telephoned in his name. In the hearing of the butler, you spoke to the dead man as though he were alive. You made a gramophone record of his voice and played it. You hid the body, and thereafter sent a forged letter from some distant place.

He paused for a moment. Forgery - but he did not want to start that old game over again. And all these things were too elaborate, or else impracticable at that time of night.

And then it came to him suddenly that he was a fool. Gooch must not be made to live later, but to die earlier. He should die before 10.30, at the time when Mr Spiller, under the eyes of three observers, had been playing bridge.

So far, the idea was sound and even, in its broad outline, obvious. But now one had to come down to detail. How could he establish the time? Was there anything that had happened at 10.30?

He helped himself to another drink, and then, quite suddenly, as though lit by a floodlight, he saw his whole plan, picked out vividly, complete, with every join and angle clear-cut.

He glanced at his watch; the hands stood at twenty minutes past eleven. He had the night before him.

He fetched an electric torch from the hall and stepped boldly out of the French window. Close beside it, against the wall of the house, were two taps, one ending in a nozzle for the garden hose, the other controlling the fountain at the bottom of the garden. This latter he turned on, and then, without troubling to muffle his footsteps, followed the crazy-paved path down to the lilac hedge, and round by the bed of the cotoneasters. The sky, despite the beauty of the early evening, had now turned very dark, and he could scarcely see the tall column of pale water above the dark shrubbery, but he heard its comforting splash and ripple, and as he stepped upon the surrounding grass he felt the blown spray upon his face. The beam of the torch showed him the garden seat beneath the yews, and the tray, as he had expected, standing upon it. The whisky decanter was about half full. He emptied the greater part of its contents into the basin, wrapping the neck of the decanter in his handkerchief, so as to leave no fingerprints. Then, returning to the other side of the lilacs, he satisfied himself that the spray of the fountain was invisible from house or garden.

The next part of the performance he did not care about. It was risky; it might be heard; in fact, he wanted it to be heard if necessary - but it was a risk. He licked his dry lips and called the dead man by name:

`Gooch! Gooch!'

No answer, except the splash of the fountain, sounding to his anxious ear abnormally loud in the stillness. He glanced round, almost as though he expected the corpse to stalk awfully out upon him from the darkness, its head hanging and its dark mouth dropping open to show the pale gleam of its dentures. Then, pulling himself together, he walked briskly back up the path and, when he reached the house again, listened. There was no movement, no sound but the ticking of the clock. He shut the library door gently. From now on there must be no noise.

There was a pair of galoshes in the cloak-room near the pantry. He put them on and slipped like a shadow through the French window again; then round the house into the courtyard. He glanced up at the garage; there was no light in the upper story and he breathed a sigh of relief, for Masters was apt sometimes to be wakeful. Groping his way to an outhouse, he switched the torch on. His wife had been an invalid for some years before her death, and he had brought her wheeled chair with him to `The Pleasaunce', having a dim, sentimental reluctance to sell the thing. He was thankful for that, now; thankful, too, that he had purchased it from a good maker and that it ran so lightly and silently on its pneumatic tyres. He found the bicycle pump and blew the tyres up hard and, for further precaution, administered a drop of oil here and there. Then, with infinite precaution, he wheeled the chair round to the library window. How fortunate that he had put down stone flags and crazy paving everywhere, so that no wheel-tracks could show.

The job of getting the body through the window and into the chair took it out of him. Gooch had been a heavy man, and he himself was not in good training. But it was done at last. Resisting the impulse to run, he pushed his burden gently and steadily along the narrow strip of paving. He could not see very well, and he was afraid to flash his torch too often. A slip off the path into the herbaceous border would be fatal; he set his teeth and kept his gaze fixed steadily ahead of him. He felt as though, if he looked back at the house, he would see the upper windows thronged with staring white faces. The impulse to turn his head was almost irresistible, but he determined that he would not turn it.

At length he was round the edge of the lilacs and hidden from the house. The sweat was running down his face and the most ticklish part of his task was still to do. If he broke his heart in the effort, he must carry the body over the plot of lawn. No wheel-marks or heel-marks or signs of dragging must be left for the police to see. He braced himself for the effort.

It was done. The corpse of Gooch lay there by the fountain, the bruise upon the temple carefully adjusted upon the sharp stone edge of the pool, one hand dragging in the water, the limbs disposed as naturally as possible, to look as though the man had stumbled and fallen. Over it, from head to foot, the water of the fountain sprayed, swaying and bending in the night wind. Mr Spiller looked upon his work and saw that it was good. The journey back with the lightened chair was easy. When he had returned the vehicle to

the outhouse and passed for the last time through the library window, he felt as though the burden of years had been rolled from his back.

His back! He had remembered to take off his dinner-jacket while stooping in the spray of the fountain, and only his shirt was drenched. That he could dispose of in the linen-basket, but the seat of his trousers gave him some uneasiness. He mopped at himself as best he could with his handkerchief. Then he made his calculations. If he left the fountain to play for an hour or so it would, he thought, produce the desired effect. Controlling his devouring impatience, he sat down and mixed himself a final brandy.

At one o'clock he rose, turned off the fountain, shut the library window with no more and no less than the usual noise and force, and went with firm footsteps up to bed.

Inspector Frampton was, to Mr Spiller's delight, a highly intelligent officer. He picked up the clues thrown to him with the eagerness of a trained terrier. The dead man was last seen alive by Masters after dinner - 8.30 - just so. After which, the rest of the party had played bridge together till 10.30. Mr Spiller had then gone out with Mrs Digby. Just after he left, Masters had turned off the fountain. Mr Proudfoot had left at 10.40 and Miss Spiller and the maids had then retired. Mr Spiller had come in again at 10.45 or 10.50, and inquired for Mr Gooch. After this, Masters had gone across to the garage, leaving Mr Spiller to lock up. Later on, Mr Spiller had gone down the garden to look for Mr Gooch. He had gone no farther than the lilac hedge, and there calling to him and getting no answer, had concluded that his guest had already come in and gone to bed. The housemaid fancied she had heard him calling Mr Gooch. She placed this episode at about half-past eleven - certainly not later. Mr Spiller had subsequently sat up reading in the library till one o'clock, when he had shut the window and gone to bed also.

The body, when found by the gardener at 6.30 a.m., was still wet with the spray from the fountain, which had also soaked the grass beneath it. Since the fountain had been turned off at 10.30, this meant that Gooch must have lain there for an appreciable period before that. In view of the large quantity of whisky that he had drunk, it seemed probable that he had had a heart-attack, or had drunkenly stumbled, and, in falling, had struck his head on the edge of the pool. All these considerations fixed the time of death at from 9.30 to 10 o'clock - an opinion with which the doctor, though declining to commit himself within an hour or so, concurred, and the coroner entered a verdict of accidental death.

Only the man who has been for years the helpless victim of blackmail could fully enter into Mr Spiller's feelings. Compunction played no part in them - the relief was far too great. To be rid of the daily irritation of Gooch's presence, of his insatiable demands for money, of the perpetual menace of his drunken malice - these boons were well worth a murder. And, Mr Spiller insisted to himself as he sat musing on the rustic seat by the fountain, it had not really been murder. He determined to call on Mrs Digby that afternoon. He could ask her to marry him now without haunting fear for the future. The scent of the lilac was intoxicating.

‘Excuse me, sir,’ said Masters.

Mr Spiller, withdrawing his meditative gaze from the spouting water, looked inquiringly at the man-servant, who stood in a respectful attitude beside him.

‘If it is convenient to you, sir, I should wish to have my bedroom changed. I should wish to sleep indoors.’

‘Oh?’ said Mr Spiller. ‘Why that, Masters?’

‘I am subject to be a light sleeper, sir, ever since the war, and I find the creaking of the weather-vane very disturbing.’

‘It creaks, does it?’

‘Yes, sir. On the night that Mr Gooch sustained his unfortunate accident, sir, the wind changed at a quarter past eleven. The creaking woke me out of my first sleep, sir, and disturbed me very much.’

A coldness gripped Mr Spiller at the pit of the stomach. The servant's eyes, in that moment, reminded him curiously of Gooch. He had never noticed any resemblance before.

`It's a curious thing, sir, if I may say so, that, with the wind shifting as it did at 11.15, Mr Gooch's body should have become sprayed by the fountain. Up till 11.15 the spray was falling on the other side, sir. The appearance presented was as though the body had been placed in position subsequently to 11.15, sir, and the fountain turned on again.'

`Very strange,' said Mr Spiller. On the other side of the lilac hedge, he heard the voices of Betty and Ronald Proudfoot, chattering as they paced to and fro between the herbaceous borders. They seemed to be happy together. The whole house seemed happier, now that Gooch was gone.

`Very strange indeed, sir. I may add that, after hearing the inspector's observations, I took the precaution to dry your dress-trousers in the linen-cupboard in the bathroom.'

`Oh, yes,' said Mr Spiller.

`I shall not, of course, mention the change of wind to the authorities, sir, and now that the inquest is over, it is not likely to occur to anybody, unless their attention should be drawn to it. I think, sir, all things being taken into consideration, you might find it worth your while to retain me permanently in your service at shall we say double my present wage to begin with?'

Mr Spiller opened his mouth to say, `Go to Hell,' but his voice failed him. He bowed his head.

`I am much obliged to you, sir,' said Masters, and withdrew on silent feet.

Mr Spiller looked at the fountain, with its tall water wavering and bending in the wind.

`Ingenious,' he muttered automatically, `and it really costs nothing to run. It uses the same water over and over again.'