CHAPTER 1

Mrs Bantry was dreaming. Her sweet peas had just taken a First at the flower show. The vicar, dressed in cassock and surplice, was giving out the prizes in church. His wife wandered past, dressed in a bathing-suit, but as is the blessed habit of dreams this fact did not arouse the disapproval of the parish in the way it would assuredly have done in real life . . .

Mrs Bantry was enjoying her dream a good deal. She usually did enjoy those early-morning dreams that were terminated by the arrival of early-morning tea. Somewhere in her inner consciousness was an awareness of the usual early-morning noises of the household. The rattle of the curtain-rings on the stairs as the housemaid drew them, the noises of the second housemaid's dustpan and brush in the passage outside. In the distance the heavy noise of the front-door bolt being drawn back.

Another day was beginning. In the meantime she must extract as much pleasure as possible from the flower show—for already its dream-like quality was becoming apparent . . .

Below her was the noise of the big wooden shutters in

the drawing-room being opened. She heard it, yet did not hear it. For quite half an hour longer the usual household noises would go on, discreet, subdued, not disturbing because they were so familiar. They would culminate in a swift, controlled sound of footsteps along the passage, the rustle of a print dress, the subdued chink of tea-things as the tray was deposited on the table outside, then the soft knock and the entry of Mary to draw the curtains.

In her sleep Mrs Bantry frowned. Something disturbing was penetrating through to the dream state, something out of its time. Footsteps along the passage, footsteps that were too hurried and too soon. Her ears listened unconsciously for the chink of china, but there was no chink of china.

The knock came at the door. Automatically from the depths of her dreams Mrs Bantry said: 'Come in.' The door opened—now there would be the chink of curtain-rings as the curtains were drawn back.

But there was no chink of curtain-rings. Out of the dim green light Mary's voice came—breathless, hysterical: 'Oh, ma'am, oh, ma'am, *there's a body in the library*.'

And then with a hysterical burst of sobs she rushed out of the room again.

Mrs Bantry sat up in bed.

Either her dream had taken a very odd turn or else—or else Mary had really rushed into the room and had said (incredible! fantastic!) that there was a body in the library.

'Impossible,' said Mrs Bantry to herself. 'I must have been dreaming.'

But even as she said it, she felt more and more certain that she had not been dreaming, that Mary, her superior self-controlled Mary, had actually uttered those fantastic words.

Mrs Bantry reflected a minute and then applied an urgent conjugal elbow to her sleeping spouse.

'Arthur, Arthur, wake up.'

Colonel Bantry grunted, muttered, and rolled over on his side.

'Wake up, Arthur. Did you hear what she said?'

'Very likely,' said Colonel Bantry indistinctly. 'I quite agree with you, Dolly,' and promptly went to sleep again.

Mrs Bantry shook him.

'You've got to listen. Mary came in and said that there was a body in the library.'

'Eh, what?'

'A *body* in the *library*.'

'Who said so?'

'Mary.'

Colonel Bantry collected his scattered faculties and proceeded to deal with the situation. He said:

'Nonsense, old girl; you've been dreaming.'

'No, I haven't. I thought so, too, at first. But I haven't. She really came in and said so.'

'Mary came in and said there was a body in the library?'

'Yes.'

'But there couldn't be,' said Colonel Bantry.

'No—no, I suppose not,' said Mrs Bantry doubtfully.

Rallying, she went on:

'But then why did Mary say there was?'

'She can't have.'

'She did.'

'You must have imagined it.'

'I didn't imagine it.'

Colonel Bantry was by now thoroughly awake and prepared to deal with the situation on its merits. He said kindly:

'You've been dreaming, Dolly, that's what it is. It's that detective story you were reading—*The Clue of the Broken Match*. You know—Lord Edgbaston finds a beautiful blonde dead on the library hearthrug. Bodies are always being found in libraries in books. I've never known a case in real life.'

'Perhaps you will now,' said Mrs Bantry. 'Anyway, Arthur, you've got to get up and see.'

'But really, Dolly, it *must* have been a dream. Dreams often do seem wonderfully vivid when you first wake up. You feel quite sure they're true.'

'I was having quite a different sort of dream—about a flower show and the vicar's wife in a bathing-dress—something like that.'

With a sudden burst of energy Mrs Bantry jumped out of bed and pulled back the curtains. The light of a fine autumn day flooded the room.

'I did *not* dream it,' said Mrs Bantry firmly. 'Get up at once, Arthur, and go downstairs and see about it.'

'You want me to go downstairs and ask if there's a body in the library? I shall look a damned fool.'

'You needn't ask anything,' said Mrs Bantry. 'If there *is* a body—and of course it's just possible that Mary's gone

mad and thinks she sees things that aren't there—well, somebody will tell you soon enough. *You* won't have to say a word.'

Grumbling, Colonel Bantry wrapped himself in his dressing-gown and left the room. He went along the passage and down the staircase. At the foot of it was a little knot of huddled servants; some of them were sobbing. The butler stepped forward impressively.

'I'm glad you have come, sir. I have directed that nothing should be done until you came. Will it be in order for me to ring up the police, sir?'

'Ring 'em up about what?'

The butler cast a reproachful glance over his shoulder at the tall young woman who was weeping hysterically on the cook's shoulder.

'I understood, sir, that Mary had already informed you. She said she had done so.'

Mary gasped out:

'I was so upset I don't know what I said. It all came over me again and my legs gave way and my inside turned over. Finding it like that—oh, oh, oh!'

She subsided again on to Mrs Eccles, who said: 'There, there, my dear,' with some relish.

'Mary is naturally somewhat upset, sir, having been the one to make the gruesome discovery,' explained the butler. 'She went into the library as usual, to draw the curtains, and—and almost stumbled over the body.'

'Do you mean to tell me,' demanded Colonel Bantry, 'that there's a dead body in my library—*my* library?'

The butler coughed.

'Perhaps, sir, you would like to see for yourself.'

'Hallo, 'allo, 'allo. Police station here. Yes, who's speaking?'

Police-Constable Palk was buttoning up his tunic with one hand while the other held the receiver.

'Yes, yes, Gossington Hall. Yes? Oh, good-morning, sir.' Police-Constable Palk's tone underwent a slight modification. It became less impatiently official, recognizing the generous patron of the police sports and the principal magistrate of the district.

'Yes, sir? What can I do for you?—I'm sorry, sir, I didn't quite catch—a *body*, did you say?—yes?—yes, if you please, sir—that's right, sir—young woman not known to you, you say?—quite, sir. Yes, you can leave it all to me.'

Police-Constable Palk replaced the receiver, uttered a long-drawn whistle and proceeded to dial his superior officer's number.

Mrs Palk looked in from the kitchen whence proceeded an appetizing smell of frying bacon.

'What is it?'

'Rummest thing you ever heard of,' replied her husband. 'Body of a young woman found up at the Hall. In the Colonel's library.'

'Murdered?'

'Strangled, so he says.'

'Who was she?'

'The Colonel says he doesn't know her from Adam.'

'Then what was she doing in 'is library?'

Police-Constable Palk silenced her with a reproachful glance and spoke officially into the telephone.

'Inspector Slack? Police-Constable Palk here. A report has just come in that the body of a young woman was discovered this morning at seven-fifteen—'

Miss Marple's telephone rang when she was dressing. The sound of it flurried her a little. It was an unusual hour for her telephone to ring. So well ordered was her prim spinster's life that unforeseen telephone calls were a source of vivid conjecture.

'Dear me,' said Miss Marple, surveying the ringing instrument with perplexity. 'I wonder who that can be?'

Nine o'clock to nine-thirty was the recognized time for the village to make friendly calls to neighbours. Plans for the day, invitations and so on were always issued then. The butcher had been known to ring up just before nine if some crisis in the meat trade had occurred. At intervals during the day spasmodic calls might occur, though it was considered bad form to ring after nine-thirty at night. It was true that Miss Marple's nephew, a writer, and therefore erratic, had been known to ring up at the most peculiar times, once as late as ten minutes to midnight. But whatever Raymond West's eccentricities, early rising was not one of them. Neither he nor anyone of Miss Marple's acquaintance would be likely to ring up before eight in the morning. Actually a quarter to eight.

Too early even for a telegram, since the post office did not open until eight.

'It must be,' Miss Marple decided, 'a wrong number.'

Having decided this, she advanced to the impatient instrument and quelled its clamour by picking up the receiver. 'Yes?' she said.

'Is that you, Jane?'

Miss Marple was much surprised.

'Yes, it's Jane. You're up very early, Dolly.'

Mrs Bantry's voice came breathless and agitated over the wires.

'The most awful thing has happened.'

'Oh, my dear.'

'We've just found a body in the library.'

For a moment Miss Marple thought her friend had gone mad.

'You've found a *what*?'

'I know. One doesn't believe it, does one? I mean, I thought they only happened in books. I had to argue for hours with Arthur this morning before he'd even go down and see.'

Miss Marple tried to collect herself. She demanded breathlessly: 'But whose body is it?'

'It's a blonde.'

'A what?'

'A blonde. A beautiful blonde—like books again. None of us have ever seen her before. She's just lying there in the library, dead. That's why you've got to come up at once.'

'You want *me* to come up?'

'Yes, I'm sending the car down for you.'

Miss Marple said doubtfully:

'Of course, dear, if you think I can be of any comfort to you—'

'Oh, I don't want comfort. But you're so good at bodies.'

'Oh no, indeed. My little successes have been mostly theoretical.'

'But you're very good at murders. She's been murdered, you see, strangled. What I feel is that if one has got to have a murder actually happening in one's house, one might as well enjoy it, if you know what I mean. That's why I want you to come and help me find out who did it and unravel the mystery and all that. It really *is* rather thrilling, isn't it?'

'Well, of course, my dear, if I can be of any *help* to you.'

'Splendid! Arthur's being rather difficult. He seems to think I shouldn't enjoy myself about it at all. Of course, I do know it's very sad and all that, but then I don't know the girl—and when you've seen her you'll understand what I mean when I say she doesn't look *real* at all.'

A little breathless, Miss Marple alighted from the Bantrys' car, the door of which was held open for her by the chauffeur.

Colonel Bantry came out on the steps, and looked a little surprised.

'Miss Marple?—er—very pleased to see you.'

'Your wife telephoned to me,' explained Miss Marple.

'Capital, capital. She ought to have someone with her. She'll crack up otherwise. She's putting a good face on things at the moment, but you know what it is—'

At this moment Mrs Bantry appeared, and exclaimed:

'Do go back into the dining-room and eat your breakfast, Arthur. Your bacon will get cold.'

'I thought it might be the Inspector arriving,' explained Colonel Bantry.

'He'll be here soon enough,' said Mrs Bantry. 'That's why it's important to get your breakfast first. You need it.'

'So do you. Much better come and eat something. Dolly—'

'I'll come in a minute,' said Mrs Bantry. 'Go on, Arthur.'

Colonel Bantry was shooed back into the dining-room like a recalcitrant hen.

'*Now!*' said Mrs Bantry with an intonation of triumph. 'Come on.'

She led the way rapidly along the long corridor to the east of the house. Outside the library door Constable Palk stood on guard. He intercepted Mrs Bantry with a show of authority.

'I'm afraid nobody is allowed in, madam. Inspector's orders.'

'Nonsense, Palk,' said Mrs Bantry. 'You know Miss Marple perfectly well.'

Constable Palk admitted to knowing Miss Marple.

'It's very important that she should see the body,' said Mrs Bantry. 'Don't be stupid, Palk. After all, it's *my* library, isn't it?'

Constable Palk gave way. His habit of giving in to the gentry was lifelong. The Inspector, he reflected, need never know about it.

'Nothing must be touched or handled in any way,' he warned the ladies.

'Of course not,' said Mrs Bantry impatiently. 'We know *that*. You can come in and watch, if you like.'

Constable Palk availed himself of this permission. It had been his intention, anyway.

Mrs Bantry bore her friend triumphantly across the library to the big old-fashioned fireplace. She said, with a dramatic sense of climax: 'There!'

Miss Marple understood then just what her friend had meant when she said the dead girl wasn't real. The library was a room very typical of its owners. It was large and shabby and untidy. It had big sagging arm-chairs, and pipes and books and estate papers laid out on the big table. There were one or two good old family portraits on the walls, and some bad Victorian water-colours, and some would-be-funny hunting scenes. There was a big vase of Michaelmas daisies in the corner. The whole room was dim and mellow and casual. It spoke of long occupation and familiar use and of links with tradition.

And across the old bearskin hearthrug there was sprawled something new and crude and melodramatic.

The flamboyant figure of a girl. A girl with unnaturally fair hair dressed up off her face in elaborate curls and rings. Her thin body was dressed in a backless evening-dress of white spangled satin. The face was heavily made-up, the powder standing out grotesquely on its blue swollen surface, the mascara of the lashes lying thickly on the distorted cheeks, the scarlet of the lips looking like a gash. The finger-nails were enamelled in a deep blood-red and so were the toenails in their cheap silver sandal shoes. It was a cheap, tawdry, flamboyant figure—most

incongruous in the solid old-fashioned comfort of Colonel Bantry's library.

Mrs Bantry said in a low voice:

'You see what I mean? It just isn't *true*!'

The old lady by her side nodded her head. She looked down long and thoughtfully at the huddled figure.

She said at last in a gentle voice:

'She's very young.'

'Yes—yes—I suppose she is.' Mrs Bantry seemed almost surprised—like one making a discovery.

Miss Marple bent down. She did not touch the girl. She looked at the fingers that clutched frantically at the front of the girl's dress, as though she had clawed it in her last frantic struggle for breath.

There was the sound of a car scrunching on the gravel outside. Constable Palk said with urgency:

'That'll be the Inspector . . .'

True to his ingrained belief that the gentry didn't let you down, Mrs Bantry immediately moved to the door. Miss Marple followed her. Mrs Bantry said:

'That'll be all right, Palk.'

Constable Palk was immensely relieved.

Hastily downing the last fragments of toast and marmalade with a drink of coffee, Colonel Bantry hurried out into the hall and was relieved to see Colonel Melchett, the Chief Constable of the county, descending from a car with Inspector Slack in attendance. Melchett was a friend of the Colonel's. Slack he had never much taken to—an energetic

man who belied his name and who accompanied his bustling manner with a good deal of disregard for the feelings of anyone he did not consider important.

'Morning, Bantry,' said the Chief Constable. 'Thought I'd better come along myself. This seems an extraordinary business.'

'It's—it's—' Colonel Bantry struggled to express himself. 'It's *incredible—fantastic!*'

'No idea who the woman is?'

'Not the slightest. Never set eyes on her in my life.'

'Butler know anything?' asked Inspector Slack.

'Lorrimer is just as taken aback as I am.'

'Ah,' said Inspector Slack. 'I wonder.'

Colonel Bantry said:

'There's breakfast in the dining-room, Melchett, if you'd like anything?'

'No, no—better get on with the job. Haydock ought to be here any minute now—ah, here he is.'

Another car drew up and big, broad-shouldered Doctor Haydock, who was also the police surgeon, got out. A second police car had disgorged two plain-clothes men, one with a camera.

'All set—eh?' said the Chief Constable. 'Right. We'll go along. In the library, Slack tells me.'

Colonel Bantry groaned.

'It's incredible! You know, when my wife insisted this morning that the housemaid had come in and said there was a body in the library, I just wouldn't believe her.'

'No, no, I can quite understand that. Hope your missus isn't too badly upset by it all?'

'She's been wonderful—really wonderful. She's got old Miss Marple up here with her—from the village, you know.'

'Miss Marple?' The Chief Constable stiffened. 'Why did she send for her?'

'Oh, a woman wants another woman—don't you think so?'

Colonel Melchett said with a slight chuckle:

'If you ask me, your wife's going to try her hand at a little amateur detecting. Miss Marple's quite the local sleuth. Put it over us properly once, didn't she, Slack?'

Inspector Slack said: 'That was different.'

'Different from what?'

'That was a local case, that was, sir. The old lady knows everything that goes on in the village, that's true enough. But she'll be out of her depth here.'

Melchett said dryly: 'You don't know very much about it yourself yet, Slack.'

'Ah, you wait, sir. It won't take me long to get down to it.'

In the dining-room Mrs Bantry and Miss Marple, in their turn, were partaking of breakfast.

After waiting on her guest, Mrs Bantry said urgently:

'Well, Jane?'

Miss Marple looked up at her, slightly bewildered.

Mrs Bantry said hopefully:

'Doesn't it *remind* you of anything?'

For Miss Marple had attained fame by her ability to link up trivial village happenings with graver problems in such a way as to throw light upon the latter.

'No,' said Miss Marple thoughtfully, 'I can't say that it does—not at the moment. I was reminded a little of Mrs Chetty's youngest—Edie, you know—but I think that was just because this poor girl bit her nails and her front teeth stuck out a little. Nothing more than that. And, of course,' went on Miss Marple, pursuing the parallel further, 'Edie was fond of what I call cheap finery, too.'

'You mean her dress?' said Mrs Bantry.

'Yes, a very tawdry satin—poor quality.'

Mrs Bantry said:

'I know. One of those nasty little shops where everything is a guinea.' She went on hopefully:

'Let me see, what happened to Mrs Chetty's Edie?'

'She's just gone into her second place—and doing very well, I believe.'

Mrs Bantry felt slightly disappointed. The village parallel didn't seem to be exactly hopeful.

'What I can't make out,' said Mrs Bantry, 'is what she could possibly be doing in Arthur's study. The window was forced, Palk tells me. She might have come down here with a burglar and then they quarrelled—but that seems such nonsense, doesn't it?'

'She was hardly dressed for burglary,' said Miss Marple thoughtfully.

'No, she was dressed for dancing—or a party of some kind. But there's nothing of that kind down here—or anywhere near.'

'N-n-o,' said Miss Marple doubtfully.

Mrs Bantry pounced.

'Something's in your mind, Jane.'

'Well, I was just wondering—'

'Yes?'

'Basil Blake.'

Mrs Bantry cried impulsively: 'Oh, no!' and added as though in explanation, 'I know his mother.'

The two women looked at each other.

Miss Marple sighed and shook her head.

'I quite understand how you feel about it.'

'Selina Blake is the nicest woman imaginable. Her herbaceous borders are simply marvellous—they make me green with envy. And she's frightfully generous with cuttings.'

Miss Marple, passing over these claims to consideration on the part of Mrs Blake, said:

'All the same, you know, there has been a lot of *talk*.'

'Oh, I know—I know. And of course Arthur goes simply livid when he hears Basil Blake mentioned. He was really *very* rude to Arthur, and since then Arthur won't hear a good word for him. He's got that silly slighting way of talking that these boys have nowadays—sneering at people sticking up for their school or the Empire or that sort of thing. And then, of course, the *clothes* he wears!

'People say,' continued Mrs Bantry, 'that it doesn't matter what you wear in the country. I never heard such nonsense. It's just in the country that everyone notices.' She paused, and added wistfully: 'He was an adorable baby in his bath.'

'There was a lovely picture of the Cheviot murderer as a baby in the paper last Sunday,' said Miss Marple.

'Oh, but Jane, you don't think *he*—'

'No, no, dear. I didn't mean that at all. That would

indeed be jumping to conclusions. I was just trying to account for the young woman's presence down here. St Mary Mead is such an unlikely place. And then it seemed to me that the only possible explanation was Basil Blake. He *does* have parties. People came down from London and from the studios—you remember last July? Shouting and singing—the most *terrible* noise—everyone very drunk, I'm afraid—and the mess and the broken glass next morning simply unbelievable—so old Mrs Berry told me—and a young woman asleep in the bath with practically *nothing on*!'

Mrs Bantry said indulgently:

'I suppose they were film people.'

'Very likely. And then—what I expect you've heard—several weekends lately he's brought down a young woman with him—a platinum blonde.'

Mrs Bantry exclaimed:

'You don't think it's *this* one?'

'Well—I wondered. Of course, I've never seen her close to—only just getting in and out of the car—and once in the cottage garden when she was sunbathing with just some shorts and a brassière. I never really saw her *face*. And all these girls with their make-up and their hair and their nails look so alike.'

'Yes. Still, it *might* be. It's an idea, Jane.'